



ISSN: 2663-9033 (Online) | ISSN: 2616-6224 (Print)

Journal of Language Studies

Contents available at: <http://jls.tu.edu.iq>

Floating above the Stream: A Brechtian Reading of Edward

Bond's *Narrow Road to Deep North*

Dr. Amer Hamed Suliman*

Department of English, College of Education for Women, Tikrit University

Email. amerbano@gmail.com

Keywords:

- Brecht
- Rational Theatre
- Complex seeing
- Aggro-effects
- Colonialism

Article Info

Article history:

-Received: 12/8/2019

-Accepted: 20/9/2019

Available
online 10/10/2019

Abstract: Among British established dramatists, the most notable one whose theatrical works seem most related to Brechtian traditions is Edward Bond. Bond belonged to the first-wave generation of the 1960s and 1970s, who suffered from the dreadful outcome of the two World Wars. In his plays, one can notice some recurrent themes such as social injustice, persecution of minorities and lower classes, indictment of war and its proponents, disbelief in religion and authority, resentment of politicians and their hypocritical behaviour, etc. The paper, however, is limited to focus on exploring one of Edward Bond's most significant works; *Narrow Road to Deep North* and argue that it represents the playwrights' main attempt to use and develop forms of Brechtian complex seeing.

* Corresponding Author: Dr. Amer Hamed Suliman., E-Mail: amerbano@gmail.com.

Tel: +9647702526838. Affiliation: Tikrit University, College of Education for Women, Iraq

الطفو فوق التيار: قراءة برختية لمسرحية إدوارد بوند طريق ضيقة لأقصى الشمال

م.د. عامر حامد سليمان

قسم اللغة الانكليزية ، كلية التربية للبنات، جامعة نكرت

الخلاصة	<u>الكلمات الدالة:-</u>
من بين المسرحيين البريطانيين المعروفين ، يبرز إدوارد بوند كواحد من اهم كتاب مسرح برخت الملحمي . ينتمي بوند إلى الجيل الأول من الستينات والسبعينات ، الذين عانوا من النتائج المرعبة للحربين العالميتين. في مسرحياته ، يمكن للمرء أن يلاحظ بعض الموضوعات المتكررة مثل الظلم الاجتماعي ، واضطهاد الأقليات والطبقات الدنيا ، وتجريم الحرب ومؤيديها ، وعدم الوثوق بالدين والسلطة ، والاستياء من السياسيين وسلوكهم المنافق ، وما إلى ذلك. تقتصر المقالة بالتركيز على دراسة مسرحية طريق ضيق لأقصى الشمال كأحد أهم أعمال إدوارد بوند لتبرهن بان المسرحية تمثل محاولة الكاتب الرئيسية في استخدام وتطوير أشكال الرؤية البرختية المعقدة.	-برخت -مسرح -المعقول -الرؤية المعقدة -الاستعمار
	<u>معلومات البحث</u> <u>تاريخ البحث:</u> -الاستلام: 2019/8/12 -القبول: 2019/9/20 التوفر على الانترنت 2019/10/10

Introduction

Edward Bond was born in Holloway, London on July 18, 1934, to a working-class family. In 1940 he was evacuated to Cornwall, and later to his grandparents in the small village of Shippea Hill in the Finland countryside. Later he returned to London in 1946 and attended Crouch End Secondary Modern School, but he was not considered fit to take the eleven-plus examination, and he left school at the age of fifteen. In 1948, young Edward Bond saw a production of Donald Wolfit play *Macbeth* at the Bedford theatre, Camden. Bond's comment on the experience was as much political as aesthetic: "for the first time in my life... I met somebody who was actually talking about my problems, about the life I'd been living, the political society around me... there was just this feeling of total recognition. I knew all these people; they were in the street or in the newspapers..." (Bond, Drama 4). In 1953, he was called up for the obligatory two years' National Service, mostly spent in office work with the Allied Army of Occupation in Austria. The experience left an outstanding effect upon him; "there was a barren brutality," in the British Army, he states, that turned him into "a trained killer" (Ibid). According to Tony Coult, it was just this experience mixed of "sentimentalism, brutality and routine" that impresses politics in the head of Bond: "...That male break (the blitz) [...] seemed to strengthen and consolidate an acute sensitivity to his surroundings..." (11). And, moreover, recurrent in his works the resources of personages of military and representation of warlike moment of annihilation of the mankind.

After submitting two plays, Bond was asked to join the Writers' Group at the Royal Court Theatre in London in 1958. He accepted warmly and started to work in the workshop of the RC, doing exercises of Brechtian improvisation. In this respect William Gaskill, Director of the RC, stated:

And so Bond came along to the writers' group, and he used to be very quiet and sit in a corner and occasionally join in the improvisations...and we used to do a lot of work on what we called Brechtian improvisation: which was really based on those short didactic plays of Brecht. Bond did, in fact, write two short plays - one was rather Beckett like the other rather Brecht like in style (qtd in Hay and Roberts 8).

In 1962 Bond received his first encouragement from the Writers' Group by giving his first play *The Pop's Wedding* a "Sunday Night production without décor." His next two plays, *Saved* (1965) and *Early Morning* (1968), ran afoul of the official

censor, the Lord Chamberlain, for "blasphemy, violence and portrayal of royal personage," (qtd in Wintle 58) the two had few performances but they brought Edward Bond's name into theatrical prominence.

Edward Bond's Rational Theatre

Next to Arden, Bond is perhaps the most celebrated contemporary British playwright. For Tim Brassell, Bond is "Brecht's closest disciple in our contemporary theatre" (30). Like many of his generation, Bond starts his theatrical career under the influence of Beckett and Brecht. Despite the fact that he rejects to align himself with the Absurdists and writes: "I don't like the Absurdists. I'm an optimist. I believe in the survival of mankind. I don't believe in an *Endgame* or *Waiting for Godot*" (Holland 28).

Nevertheless, some of Bond's early contributions to the Writers' Group were identified to be "rather Beckett- like ... in style" (Hay and Roberts 8). Still, Bond acknowledges Brecht's direct impact and points out "perhaps the most important single event was the visit of the Berliner Ensemble" (Hay and Robert 16). Later, he modified his status and placed himself in a line of development that begins with Brecht and states "I have worked consciously - starting with Brecht but not ending there. Brecht's contribution to the creation of a Marxist theatre is enormous and lasting, but the work is not yet finished" (Bond, On Brecht 32). Thomas Cartelli claims that Bond's preference of Brecht over Beckett comes from his participation in what Alan Sinfield calls "the rise of Left culturism," (quoted in Spencer 474) and at the same time it is part of Bond's belief that the socialist dramatist should educate consciousness and to move the spectator towards concrete social action. Bond declares his interest is in the Epic Theatre; "the theatre of change, the only theatre that can analyze and explain our condition" (Stevenson 304).

Working in London after the Second World War, Bond became an autodidact and practitioner of the theatre, writing drama sketches before composing his first plays (Tuailon 3). According to Simon Trussler, war initiated a sense of division in Bond: "Being put into a strange environment created a division between feeling and the experience of things" (5). *Narrow Road to Deep North* (1968) was Bond's first critical success and was followed by important works such as *Black Mass* (1970) and *Lear* (1971). He labeled his theatre as a Rational Theatre because for him the function of art remains to "interpret the world and not merely mirror it" and by doing so it is

able to show "why things go wrong and how we could correct them" (Roberts 65). Jenny Spencer argues that this kind of art is of Brechtian order:

Like Brecht, however, Bond is concerned with orienting the audience toward action rather than consumption. As he states in a letter to Tony Coult "Theatre is a way of judging society and helping to change it; art must interpret the world and not merely mirror it, this realism is of a Brechtian order (125).

Since then Bond has experimented with different types of theatre and different genres, maintained a constant social and political engagement in his theatre as inspired by his own notion of the Rational Theatre, and come into opposition to the institutions of the British theatre scene (Chambers and Prior 28), and branched into work for and featuring young people (Davis 4). Bond remains a controversial and important figure in the contemporary British theatre scene, as well as enjoying a strong critical reputation in France and other countries (Tuailon 5).

For Spencer, *Narrow Road*, like all of Bond's work, "illustrates certain moral attitudes and their consequences, self-consciously inviting audience interpretation by making the search for knowledge itself an explicit theme" (110). That the audience is engaged in an interpretative project, and that this is an essential feature of good drama, is made explicit by Bond in his introductory essay on the Rational Theatre, in which he takes the case of Shakespeare to illustrate his argument that the dramatist is always engaged in an interpretative and reconciliatory task pertaining to the specific social problems of his time: "Had Shakespeare not spent his creative life desperately struggling to reconcile problems that obsessed him he could not have written with such intellectual strength and passionate beauty" (Bond ix). Bond reacts strongly against the idea that Shakespeare was an intellectually empty vessel, a mere creative conduit for the various ideas suggested by the drama of his plays. The theatre that Bond advocates is one which, like Brecht's, is epic and political in its very nature. The audience is implicated in an interpretative project which seeks to reconcile the social contrasts and contradictions of the period in which the play is being written. As such, when Bond presents the audience, as he does in *Narrow Road*, with a politically engaged tale of the British Empire in Edo Japan, the audience is engaged from the very start in a process of interpretation and social comment which is explicitly about the contemporary. The audience knows that Bond is not presenting a period piece, a

naturalistic evocation of a long since disappeared Japan, but rather a political parable, an allegory which presents contradictions that demand to be reconciled even when no reconciliation is forthcoming.

One of the models of complex seeing which will be analysed below is that of Raymond Williams, who noted that the Brechtian drama presents two or more contrasting ideas or interpretations and prevents them from ever being fully reconciled (Williams 12). The end of the act of complex seeing never arrives, as the final exegesis is always suspended between two or more dramatic contrasts. Bond's Rational Theatre is also one in which geniuses such as Shakespeare struggle to reconcile contradictions, but are bound by their own social and political circumstances to never soar high enough to look down on them from the required critical angle. Instead, what is presented in the Shakespearean comedy, or in the history play when the tyrant king is dead and order - at the close of the drama - is restored, is a kind of myth or lie, a false reconciliation which serves a dramatic process but which the audience, engaged in complex seeing, is able to see through. As Bond notes apropos of Shakespearean endings, "there are no supernatural answers to natural problems" and "as Shakespeare himself knew, the peace, the reconciliation that he created on the stage would not last an hour on the street" (Bond, Plays 2 xi). When Bond places, as he does, *Narrow Road* within the comedic genre, and then ends the play with an act of self-sacrifice which recalls the tragedy of *Othello* and a female embodiment of derangement on the stage which evokes the tragic end of Ophelia, he is therefore engaged in the Rational Theatre project of resisting the false or trite reconciliation of opposing forces. He is continuing the struggle that started with Shakespeare to make sense of complexity and to acknowledge that any reconciliation is at best a temporary fix.

For Bond, however, the most pernicious myth to which the Rational Theatre is opposed can be called the hegemony of the individual. In Shakespearean terms, this is the interpretative line which sees Shakespeare - and his great heroes like Hamlet and Lear - as somehow above and outside of time in their uniqueness, genius and creative force. This view of Shakespeare as transcending the social and political circumstances of his times and writing is one which Bond explicitly rejects in his understanding of the Rational Theatre. As Bond makes clear throughout his writings, "an individual only exists through society" and "the subject of all literature is society" (Ibid). The

individual rent from society becomes a ‘monster’, and the purpose of literature is to engage with society and make it ‘self-conscious’ (Ibid). This is the process of complex seeing as Bond reinterprets it for the Rational Theatre: the audience is turned back towards itself, not immersed in the transcendent individuals on stage, aware of the social context of the play and the mirror that it holds up to society, and how the playwright distorts that mirror and that image. Bond calls this deliberate awareness as *Aggro-effects* , analogous to Brecht’s *V-Effekte*, nevertheless Bond has clearly announced that “Brecht is the most important writer of his era,” and the alienation effect is a reaction against the "operatic style of German theatre"(Bond 86). But, for him, the British understanding is something else: “Alienation is vulnerable to the audience's decision about it. Sometimes it is necessary to emotionally commit the audience, which is why I have aggro-effects. Without this, the V-effect can deteriorate into an aesthetic style” (Bond, On Brecht 34-35).

As Bond puts it, aggro-effects are "moments where the known experience frays over into something which cannot be pinned down to very common usage, but is somehow suggestive of the experience"(Hay and Robert 50). According to Bond's concept, an aggro-effect comprises carefully choreographed moments or images that are deliberately disturbing or even puzzling to an audience. Spencer reaches a similar conclusion and writes down: “As opposed to Brecht’s alienation-effect, Bond once referred to them as ‘aggro-effects.’ Hallmarks of his distinctive style, these protracted moments of threatened or disturbingly explicit violence are remembered by the audience long after the performance” (137).

According to Janelle Reinelt, the impact of these moments on the audience’s perception of a character is that: "[aggro -effects] often allow a character to break rationality, forcing the spectator to confront the limits of logical characterization" (53). An example of Bond’s use of the ‘aggro-effect’ is the ‘curious buzzing’ made by the gang of youths as they exit after stoning the baby in *Saved* (Scene 6), and used in the play to underscore their inhuman behaviour.

Knowing this about Bond and his aesthetics of the theatre enables us to approach *Narrow Road* with a specific awareness of Bond's theatre as a social project, and to realise that in setting the play in a bygone Japan he is not evoking the Japanese past so much as finding a unique route into a critique of and engagement with the contemporary present. The audience's ability to hold these two elements in

parallel, to engage with the drama as a political parable and to look for allegory even at the point in which Bond withdraws it and makes it most elusive, is what constitutes complex seeing in the Brechtian sense in Bond's Rational Theatre.

Narrow Road was commissioned by the clergy for a city festival that took place in Coventry in 1968 (Spencer 108). It was Bond's first success in Britain, and the play was written in only three days (Ibid). Bond's previous work had been subject to the charges of violence, obscenity and obscurity (109). It may well be argued that all the same qualities are present in *Narrow Road*, but Spencer (Ibid) has identified humour on the one hand and the play's formal structure on the other as factors which redeemed Bond's work in the eyes of audience and critics, and meant it was more successful than previous works whilst not departing entirely from those precedents. As Spencer notices, "the immediate acceptance *Narrow Road* earned is attributable not simply to the play's comedy [...] or apparent simplicity [...] but rather to the form itself - recognised by reviewers as a political parable" (109). Nevertheless, interpretations of the play were far from coherent or unequivocal: they were in fact 'remarkably varied,' suggesting that Bond had not departed to a great extent from the obscurity and obfuscation which marked his previous work (Spencer 108). This is something which is in keeping with the Brechtian idea of remaining above the 'stream' of the narrative events: the audience is not able to immerse themselves, to come down on the side of one interpretation or another, and in this Brechtian space above the events themselves there flourishes the room for various interpretations made possible by complex seeing (Katafiasz 239).

As such, and as Spencer has noted, *Narrow Road* allowed Bond to establish himself, and be established by critics, as "an avant-garde (or experimental) artists and [...] a serious playwright with a single stroke" (109). Thus although critical views of the play differed in their interpretations of its meaning, *Narrow Road* had the effect of cementing Bond's reputation and reconciling the two ideas of the playwright as an experimental figure and as a leading cultural critic; one of the most important living playwrights in British theatre.

Complex Seeing in Bond's *Narrow Road to the Deep North*

Complex seeing is articulated by Brecht by way of a metaphor of the passage of events and dramatic action in a play as a flowing stream. If the play is the stream,

then the audience is better 'located' above rather than in the stream (Brecht 44). What Brecht means by this is complex and the subject of critical debate, but the metaphor most explicitly distinguishes between the idea of being immersed in the events of the drama on the one hand ('in' the stream) and observing the events of the drama flowing by ('above' the stream) without losing sense of oneself as spectator distinct from what is taking place on stage. Barth (191) has said of this process that "the metaphysical dimension may be removed and the observer become restricted, as it were, to a more limited perspective," but the choices that the audience are forced to make, the perspective they are obliged to take, is at the heart of the process of complex seeing. Brecht calls for the kinds of spectatorship which involve existing above the stream of events on stage and suggests that this kind of an audience is one which is more profitably able to engage with and learn from the drama unfolding in the play (Carney 20). Brecht privileges this audience as one which is both more expert and more detached from the events of the play. By contrast, the audience which exists in the stream, the audience which has fully immersed itself in the action of the play, is unable to bring the kind of critical apparatus to bear on the dramaturgy which is necessary for an expert act of spectation. For Brecht, whose plays carry with them a weight of socio-political critical import and engage explicitly with events and debates in the real world, the idea of the audience as seeking mere pleasure or escape 'into' the stream of events on stage is an inferior model of audience engagement when compared with the idea of critical expert detachment, and it is this latter kind of spectation which Brecht considers to be not merely seeing but *complex* seeing.

Brecht, having established complex seeing as a superior, detached and expert mode of spectation, is naturally implicated in the task of devising the dramatic devices which might bring about such a state in the audience. What emerges is the paradoxical task of creating a dramatic landscape which gestures away from itself, a dramatic presentation of events which do not draw the spectator in so far that he or she has lost awareness of him/herself (has not 'fallen into' the stream of events on stage) but remains detached, critical and therefore expert in his or her distance from the events. One such device explicitly mentioned by Brecht is the use of screens which provide visual and textual commentary on the play as it unfolds. According to Brecht, 'the use of screens imposes and facilitates a new style of acting,' and "this style of acting is the epic style" (Brecht 44). The reading of visual projections draws

the attention of the spectator away from the action on stage, and the commentary within the play (or parallel to it) provides a meta-theatrical element which ensures that the audience is one level removed from the world level of the events in the drama, and thereby remains 'above' the stream of the play. Again Brecht employs metaphorical language to position the spectator who is engaged in complex seeing, distinguishing between watching on the one hand and the dual process of 'smoking-and-watching' on the other (Ibid). The complex seer is the one who watches whilst smoking at the same time: this latter activity prevents him or her from ever losing the sense and awareness of themselves as individual members of a theatrical audience: "such an attitude on his part at once compels a better and clearer performance as it is hopeless to 'carry away' any man who is smoking and accordingly pretty well occupied with himself" (Ibid).

Formally, *Narrow Road* seeks to maintain this spectatorial distance by establishing itself as a political play with a message. Spencer sees in the play an explicit formal statement of political parable, one which "invites a particular interpretative stance from its audience - one attuned from the beginning to moral argument, and ready to make the quasi-allegorical series of substitutions that didactic literature often requires" (109). One may take issue with Spencer's claim that the play invites a specific set of substitutions by way of reference to its obscurity: it is far from clear what these substitutions should be, and the variety of critical responses to the play is evidence of the fact that a simple allegorical layering of meaning, whether intended or not by Bond, is not readily available to the audience. However, from the very opening of the play, the idea that the play is a fable or a moralising allegory is made clear from the tone. Basho begins by directly addressing the audience: "My name is Basho. I am, as you know, the great seventeenth century Japanese poet" (Bond 173). This gesture towards complicity with the audience - the shared knowledge that the speaker both is and obviously is not the seventeenth century poet Basho - establishes both the parable element in the play and the presence of Basho as its critical and moral centre. This is then both made explicit and satirised when Basho declares himself, shortly after, to have achieved enlightenment in that most facile of ways, namely by having realised that there was no enlightenment to be sought: "I saw there was nothing to learn in the deep north [...] You get enlightenment where you are" (Bond 176). In contrast with Kiro's earnestness here, the audience is afforded a

knowing laugh at the Eastern mysticism and the Western literary tradition which exploits it, (cf. T. S. Eliot's 'Little Gidding': "We shall not cease from exploration/And the end of all our exploring/Will be to arrive where we started/And know the place for the first time"). Audience members familiar with the Basho text referenced by the play's title will have entered the theatre at this intertextual level of remove; the presence of intertextual references and the knowing satirical asides that centre on the figure of Basho allow for a Brechtian complex seeing of the play from its very outset, as the audience is at least two levels removed from the action of earnest enlightenment-seekers like Kiro.

Spencer has noted that the search for enlightenment in the play is "enacted by the characters and mirrored in the audience," whilst being "both a serious theme and the subject of satire" (108). Significantly, the search for enlightenment is 'mirrored' in the audience; but it is not the same search. As Spencer also identifies, "what the audiences learn is not identical to what the characters do" (110), and indeed it is an essential aspect of the complex seeing in the plays that these two things are not the same. The presence of satire and dramatic farce prevents the audience from taking Kiro's profession of enlightenment-seeking at face value, nor from seeing his act of hari-kari at the end of the play in the terms of pathos and catharsis that mark the Aristotelian notion of the tragic (Schaper 132). Bond's is a redefined sense of catharsis, with Eddershaw citing Bond: "for me catharsis is a new idea that can change you, but to get to these new ideas is often a very emotional journey" (165). The tragic catharsis is often associated with violence -- one might recall the parallels between Othello's suicide and Kiro's at the end of *Narrow Road* -- but this dramatic tradition, as in Beckett, is inverted by Bond's introduction of comic elements alongside violent ones, when an audience might be most expecting tragedy. Indeed, Rademacher has argued that "the affinity between Bond's violence and the comic is central to the meaning of his early plays" (258). What defines Bond's idea of catharsis is not the purging of emotions through pity, as in Aristotle, but rather the linking of feeling and reason. As Eddershaw notes "he juxtaposes emotion and reason for dialectical effect" (165). As such, the audience always participates at a distance, the place in which the text world and the world of writerly irony intersect and engage with one another.

Bill Roper has seen this dual engagement as central to Bond's work, which "aims to change the audience and is political in its nature," but which has "sought to understand this person or self, focusing particularly on the mind and its relationship to the physical and social world" (125). Despite Bond's concern with political and social issues, it is both immediately obvious and noteworthy that the world he constructs in *Narrow Road* is not a naturalistic or historically accurate one. The anti-naturalism in the text explicitly engages with Brecht's own ideas about the role of politics and social commentary within drama; the play is always about more than the particular people and characters it describes, and indeed does not rely on them to be naturalistic or convincing (Rai 25).

In terms of setting, this anti-naturalism allows the location, the stage itself, to be read by the audience engaged in complex seeing. The backdrop for the play is in no sense fixed: instead, the audience reads the geographical and historical context into their own interpretation. Paul Willemen has said of Brecht's complex seeing that it involves "the reading of landscape within the diegesis as itself a layered set of discourses, as a text in its own right" (55). As such, the time period in *Narrow Road* is deliberately confused: Basho is a seventeenth century poet, yet the text seems to take place in a late nineteenth century British imperial context in which women wear crinoline dresses, to take but one example of anachronism in the play. There is verisimilitude and historical accuracy, therefore, but not too much. Indeed, what historical truth there is provides enough balance to the fictive and satirical process to allow for the straddling of two worlds that is characteristic of the audience's position within complex seeing. In other words, the audience is encouraged to immerse itself in the social and political reality only so far, and not far enough that they lose consciousness of their own. It is this dual awareness of the social and political realities of the text and of the contemporary world that enables the play to work as a political parable, and ensures that the audience is always invited to engage in a complex process of seeing in the Brechtian sense.

The ambiguities and obscurations of the text are in line with what Raymond Williams has noted of complex seeing in the Brechtian tradition, namely that it should present contradictions in the social life of the play but not reconcile or resolve them at the end of the play's action (Williams 12). In this sense, *Narrow Road* presents complex seeing in both the Brechtian and the Williamsian sense: the

audience is removed from the naturalistic interpretation of the events by satire and other destabilising dramatic devices, but nevertheless made to feel that a political parable with an allegorical interpretation is applicable. These two senses -- that the play presents farce and ironic knowingness on the one hand, and that it has a political meaning and message on the other -- are never quite reconciled by the ending of the play, which combines stark on-stage images of violence and madness. Spencer has noted that “Bond’s later parable plays take more seriously the demands of the form by providing within their structure a guide to audience interpretation and use” (110). This is perhaps a more explicitly complex form of seeing in the Brechtian sense, but it departs from what Raymond Williams has identified as a critical element of complex seeing: namely, the capacity to put contrasting and even mutually contradictory interpretations and readings of the drama in suspended animation one alongside the other. By providing greater direction to the interpretative act by the audience, these plays move away from what Williams defines as the deliberate failure to reconcile any particular interpretation with another.

This suspended animation is achieved through a number of dramatic devices in Bond, but perhaps most notable is the use of aggro-effects which serve to “challenge his audiences, and to unsettle them, not only intellectually but emotionally, too” (Eddershaw 165). In *Narrow Road*, audio techniques are used to achieve this unsettling effect. Thus British grenadier music breaks into the action of the play, Georgina spends much of the time banging a tambourine, and the audience is confronted at one point with the shock of cannon fire coupled with the absurdity of its originating with Georgina, who fires it. As well as providing an aural shock in production, the presence of bizarre music, drumming and off-stage sound effects is something which recurs in Bond’s work, and which obliges the audience to attempt to reconcile the visual with the aural, the stimuli which are being provided to the different senses, in a way which is often disturbing or uncertain. By bringing the audience into the action only to destabilise it through visual or sound effects, Bond creates the necessary removal from the theatre as naturalistic presentation of individuals which he explicitly rejects in his understanding of the Rational Theatre project. Another device which achieves the same end is the apparent *non sequitur*, which Bond inserts into otherwise naturalistic dialogue to provide a moment of questioning on the part of the audience, to reorient them towards the action on the

stage and prevent them from immersing themselves too readily in the characters as real people having real conversations. Thus the farcical scene with the monks and the antique pot is made all the more *Unheimlich* by the attempts of the monks to kiss one another, and by Heigoo's remark, seemingly apropos of nothing, that "You've got beautiful ears too, Argi" (Bond, Plays 2, 185).

As such, Bond seeks everywhere to disturb the notion of character as complete and coherent. As was noted above, the Rational Theatre is concerned with society: Bond, it was recognised, does not consider the individual to be a stand-alone entity, he or she, without society, is a monstrous conception. All literature, Bond has argued (xi), is about society, and in *Narrow Road* characters are destabilised so that they are less integral individuals on the stage and more the mouthpieces for particular ideas, or for the presentations of themes and concerns, sometimes contradictory, that the audience is obliged to attempt to reconcile.

It has already been mentioned that Basho himself appears in the introduction to the play as a historical individual, one who has stepped onto the stage from his real past in the seventeenth century Japan. The title of the play references his most famous work, but here the reference to the real life individual ends. Similarly, both Kiro and Shogo lack the consistency or naturalism of believable character-individuals. Their conversation, with its chatty and familiar tone, its discussion of women and murder, is absurd in the social and political context in which it takes place. It is also marked by comical asides which further destabilise any sense of naturalism: "There's a line round your neck where the pot went. I suppose that'll stay" (Bond 196). The people who speak on the stage do not represent any attempt on the part of Bond to present a realistic idea of a coherent and consistent human consciousness; instead, they serve to gesture towards and evoke different ideas and sets of concerns with which the audience is forced to engage as a critical and rational interpreter, rather than as a passive subject.

However, and as Williams has noted, the complex process of seeing is one which does not lend itself to glib or trite socio-political exegesis. Nowhere is this more evident than in Bond's dual subversion of both genre and post-colonialism. The first of these gestures towards complex seeing by presenting comedy amidst all the bloody, violent and disturbing elements which one usually associates with tragedy in the Jacobean revenge model (Finke 358) or in the Greek tragic theatre (Burnett 11).

At no point in the play is the audience kept far from comedy which borders on absurdity. At the end of Part One, amidst all the political assassination and power-mongering, Shogo manages to escape capture by correctly stating that God has “Eight thousand seven hundred and five testicles” (Bond, Plays 2 204).

On a superficial level, this can be read as a satirising of the Eastern tradition of gnostic catechising, in which the answers to apparently innocuous questions are designed to induce a state of enlightened concentration in the listener. On another level, it demonstrates how the socio-political machinations of the play are ones which the audience is always expected to remain somewhat detached from. In the Brechtian tradition, it can be argued that the purpose of this is to ensure that the audience always retains that critical distancing which allows them to relate the circumstances of the play to their own social and political circumstances. By providing a comic reading of historic Japan and British imperialism, Bond seeks to ensure that the play engages the audience as much with the Coventry of the 1960s as it does with world presented on stage.

This mixing of genres and comic undermining of moments of pathos in the play relates to the second of the two elements in Bond’s model of complex seeing: namely, his complicated presentation of imperialism and colonialism. Critics of the play, as was noted above, were broadly unequivocal in their reading of the text as a political parable, and their seeing in that parable the issue of British imperialism and colonialism. These themes are important ones in the drama of the second half of the twentieth century, and Bond is clearly engaged with them (Gainor ix; Gilbert and Tompkins 15). However, the fact that out of this realisation there came, and continue to come, a number of varied and contrasting interpretations, and the fact that the play has been noted for its complexity and ambiguity, demonstrates the degree to which Bond’s engagement with postcolonial issues is a vexed one (Jones 507).

The play’s ostensibly tragic ending, with a deranged woman confronted with a man who is committing ritual suicide, suggests that the comedy is at best superficial, and that what is being shown is a criticism of the imperial engagements of the British Empire abroad. The choice of Japan in a dual time frame, both the Basho era in which the country was closed and the nineteenth century in which it was seeking to repel and manage the arrival of British and American imperial forces in the region, evokes this political exploration and the ambiguities that surround it. In the manner identified

by Williams, no single glib interpretation is available: Bond is critiquing the British Empire, but his presentation is sufficiently absurd and comic so as to destabilise any attempt by the audience to take a coherent message from the political parable.

Dramatically, the audience is always kept 'above the stream' of any particular current of exegesis. This is played out explicitly towards the end of the play, where two dramas are acted out simultaneously and alongside one another, one on stage and the other off it. Kiro comes to his realisation at the same time as the trial of Shogo, and Basho's own admission of guilt, are taking place off stage. Again, destabilising sound effects take precedence over dramatic explication in a way which recalls Samuel Beckett: "A longish, sighing exhalation from the crowd with five diminished pulses in it" (Bond 222). This sound mimics the idea of a fading out, an expiration, just at the climactic moment of the play when the audience might be more prepared for a heroic act. As Patrick O'Neill has said of Beckett, Bond is here engaged in an inversion of tragedy and comedy, in a sort of 'comedy of entropy,' with many elements of the play's narrative simply fading out, unresolved (147).

The ending presents multiple events alongside one another, the drowning man emerging from the river evoking the play's beginning and the drowning of unwanted children and prisoners, (Durbach 485) and suggesting a comic undermining of the pathos which derived from that scene. Bond does little to make these separate acts of submission or sacrifice cohere, and where there is resolution (Kiro's suicide, Shogo's execution), there is also irresolution (Basho's position, Georgina's apparent madness). Indeed, the audience is confronted with a process of complex seeing which seeks to make sense of these complex events, and the audio techniques and narrative fragmentation that Bond presents at the play's close all serve as aggro-effects which detach the audience from any submersion in the play as naturalistic drama. This detachment is at the centre of complex seeing in the Brechtian sense, and the audience for *Narrow Road* must leave the theatre knowing that what they have seen is political parable, knowing that instead of naturalistic and coherent characters they have been presented with socially and politically engaged ideas but in a state of suspended interpretation which seems to imply that an exegesis of Bond's work is always just out of reach. The striving to interpret is the point, and that striving is borne out of complex seeing.

References

- Barth, Adolf. "The Aggressive 'Theatrum Mundi' of Edward Bond, *Narrow Road to the Deep North*" *Modern Drama*, vol. 18, no.2, Summer 1975, pp.189-200.
- Bond, Edward. "On Brecht: A Letter to Peter Holland." *Theatre Quarterly*, vol. 8, no.30 1978, pp. 34-35.
- ". "Drama and the Dialectics of Violence," *Theatre Quarterly*, vol. 2, no.5, 1972, pp. 4-17.
- ".*Plays: 2*. Bloomsbury. 1998.
- Brassel, Tim. *Tom Stoppard: An Assessment*. Springer, 1985.
- Brecht, Bertolt. "Theatre for learning," translated by Edith Anderson, *The Tulane Drama Review* 1961, pp. 18-25.
- Brecht, Bertolt. *Brecht on Theatre; the Development of an Aesthetic*. translated and edited by John Willett, Methuen, 1965.
- ". *Brecht on Theatre*, edited by Steve Giles, Tom Kuhn, and Marc Silberman, Translated by Jack Davis, Romy Fursland, Victoria Hill, Kristopher Imbrigotta, and John Willett. Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2015.
- Burnett, Anne Pippin. *Revenge in Attic and later tragedy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.
- Carney, Sean. *Brecht and Critical Theory*. Routledge, 2005.
- Chambers, Colin, and Mike Prior. *Playwrights' Progress: Patterns of Post-War British Drama*. Amber Lane Press, 1987.
- Coult, Tony. *The Plays of Edward Bond*. Methuen, 1979
- Davis, David, editor. *Edward Bond and the Dramatic Child: Edward Bond Plays for Young People*. Trentham Books Limited, 2005.
- Durbach, Errol. "Herod in the Welfare State: 'Kindermod' in the Plays of Edward Bond." *Educational Theatre Journal*, vol. 2, no.4, 1975, pp. 480-487.
- Eddershaw, Margaret. *Performing Brecht: Forty Years Of British Performances*. Routledge, 1996.

Eliot, Thomas S. 'Little Gidding.' *The Four Quartets*.

<http://www.columbia.edu/itc/history/winter/w3206/edit/tseliotlittlegidding.html>.

Finke, Laurie A. "Painting Women: Images of Femininity in Jacobean Tragedy." *Theatre Journal*, Vol, 36, no.3, 1984, pp. 357-370.

Gainor, J. Ellen, editor. *Imperialism and Theatre: Essays on World Theatre, Drama, and Performance*. Psychology Press, 1995.

Gilbert, Helen, and Joanne Tompkins. *Post-colonial drama: Theory, practice, politics*. London: Routledge, 2002.

Hay, Malcolm and Phillip Roberts. *Edward Bond: A Companion to the Plays*. T.Q Publication, 1978.

----- . *Bond, A Study of His Plays*. Methuen, 1980.

Holland, Peter. "Brecht, Bond Gaskill and the Practice of Political Theatre." *Theatre Quarterly*, vol. 8, no.30, 1978, pp. 24-34.

Jones, Daniel R. "Edward Bond's " Rational Theatre"." *Theatre Journal*, vol. 32, no.4, 1980, pp. 505-517.

Katafiasz, Kate. "Quarrelling with Brecht: Understanding Bond's Post-Structuralist Political Aesthetic." *Studies in Theatre and Performance*, vol. 28, no.3, 2008, pp. 237-251.

O'Neill, Patrick. "The Comedy of Entropy: the Contexts of Black Humour." *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature/Revue Canadienne de littérature comparée*, vol.10, no.2, 1983, pp. 145-166.

Rademacher , Frances. "Violence and the Comic in the Plays of Edward Bond." *Modern Drama* vol. 2, no.3, 1980, pp. 258-268.

Rai, R N. "Brecht's Non-Aristotelian Theory of Drama and Dramatic Art of Girish Karnad." *Indian Drama in English: an Anthology of Recent Criticism*, edited by C L Khatri, Book Enclave, 2007, pp. 23-44.

Roper, Bill. "Imagination and Self in Bond's Work." *Edward Bond and the Dramatic Child: Edward Bond Plays for Young People*, edited by David Davis, Trentham Books Limited, 2005, pp. 125-147.

- Schaper, Eva. "Aristotle's catharsis and aesthetic pleasure." *The Philosophical Quarterly*, vol.18, no.71, 1968, pp. 131-143.
- Roberts, Philip. *Bond On File*. Methuen, 1985.
- Spencer, Jenny S. *Dramatic Strategies in the Plays of Edward Bond*. Cambridge University Press, 1992.
- Stevenson, Randal. *The Oxford English Literary History, Vol.12:1960-2000*. Oxford University Press, 2004.
- Trussler, Simon. *Edward Bond*. Longman Group Ltd., 1976.
- Tuailon, David. *Edward Bond: The Playwright Speaks*. Bloomsbury, 2015.
- Willemen, Paul. "An Avant Garde for the Eighties." *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media*, vol. 24, Spring 1984, pp. 53-73.
- Williams, Raymond. *Modern Tragedy*. Stanford University Press, 1966.
- . *Drama From Ibsen to Brecht*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975.
- Wintel, Justin, editor. *Makers Of Modern Culture*. London, Routledge, 2002.