

An Interview with Peter Barnes

Yvonne Schafer*

With the production of *The Ruling Class* in 1968, Peter Barnes was recognized as an important and distinctly unusual playwright. His plays are non-naturalistic, experimental, and explosive. By his own description, he is "literally trying to change the world" when he writes a play, and his plays are purposefully disturbing. Unafraid of taking on a challenge, he has written plays with unsavory subject matter such as the grotesque exploration of the events leading to the War of the Spanish Succession which he examined in *Bewitched*. Even more disturbing was his play *Laughter!*, which is a comedy set in Auschwitz. Commenting on this play Barnes said, "You cannot say there are some areas that don't work. You cannot cut off a subject and say we mustn't touch this. It happened, and human beings did those terrible things to other human beings." Following its production at the Royal Court in London (directed by Charles Marowitz), this remarkable play has had several other productions including one at Temple University in Philadelphia in 1982.

Barnes's other works include *Lulu*, adapted from Wedekind's *Earth Spirit* and *Pandora's Box* (produced at the Royal Court and published with an introduction by Martin Esslin), *Leonardo's Last Supper*, and *Noonday Demons*, as well as adaptations of plays by Feydeau and Ben Jonson. He has written screenplays and many radio plays. His work was immediately appreciated by critics such as Harold Hobson who wrote of the excitement he felt on seeing *The Ruling Class*: "It came as an immense delight to discover a drama which was not only thoughtful, but also exciting and amusing [It] is likely to prove a turning point in the drama of the second half of the twentieth century."

The Ruling Class won the John Whiting Award in 1968 and the *Evening Standard* Award in 1969. Since that time Barnes has won

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many awards for both his radio and stage plays. His most recently honored play was *Red Noses*, which featured a troop of comedians determined to make people laugh during the Black Plague.

The movie of *The Ruling Class*, which stars Peter O'Toole, is frequently seen in film series and is available on video cassette. Heineman published *Peter Barnes: Collected Plays*, and *The Theatre of Peter Barnes*, an interesting critical study written by Bernard Dukore.

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When I last talked to you, in 1981, you were having trouble getting Red Noses performed. Since that time the play has been produced by the Royal Shakespeare Company; it was both a popular and critical success, and you won a major award for it. So after all your trouble you did very well with the play. For an American reader tell me first what was the award Red Noses won?

The Olivier Award, which is the big one. It's the only big award given for playwriting in this country. And yes, it was a . . . surprise.

Who are the judges for that award?

The judges are two critics and two members of the public, and I believe that the theatre producers have a judge too, so it covers several areas.

That's interesting: in that sense it's more like the Pulitzer Prize given in America for the best play, and in the case of that award there is an option not to give any award. In some years the judges decide no play deserves the award. Things are in a dark state in America as far as playwriting for the commercial theatres, and I would be interested to hear what you feel about the playwriting situation in England at this time.

I think it's a bit worse in America--mainly because of the terrible desire for and need for success, because the plays cost so much to put on. It now costs to put on a play what it used to cost to make a couple of movies. Naturally, as things get more expensive to produce, there's less and less reason or desire to take any chances at all. The norm would be to try to find a safe hit, which of course is impossible. But producers still strive for it.

I remember when I gave a lecture at Temple University in Philadelphia, one student said to me, "But how, when you write a play, do you know what to put in it to make a success?" As if there was an

X ingredient which *made* it a success. And I said, "I've no special formula--if I had, I could market it and I'd be a multi-millionaire." But I'm sure a lot of producers think there is an X factor which makes the thing a success; of course it doesn't work that way. But in a different way, and in this country as it gets more and more expensive to stage a play, so it gets more and more difficult for original writing to be produced--because originality requires taking a risk, and taking a risk means that you might lose. So it's quite a simple equation.

We have a safeguard, in the sense that we have a subsidized theatre. But even in England the outlook is grimmer than it was a few years ago, because a few years ago we had provincial theatres which were subsidized and which had a very high reputation. *The Ruling Class* was first produced at Nottingham. Now they have run up against escalating costs and lessening government subsidies, which means that they can't afford to put on risky plays. So most of the provincial theatres in our country now are doing safe West End plays. Or plays that have been done before. And so that's a whole area which has been lopped off for playwrights such as myself who are risky.

I know writers tend to moan, but I think there's a genuine fear that it's becoming so prohibitive to do plays in England that we might reach the stage Broadway has reached where nothing gets on unless it's a sort of two-hander with one set. And of course that's a sort of admission of defeat because there are a lot of plays that need twenty characters and a number of sets. And to rule them out totally presents a very gloomy future for us all.

I've seen a number of plays here in London this month which seemed to me to be designed for American tourists. Could you assess the impact, good or bad, of the enormous usual influx of American tourists (which, in fact, hasn't happened this year) on the London theatre scene?

Well, you're not the only one who's noticed it. These plays which are designed for the tourist trade are a total anathema--I mean they are destructive to the English theatre. They're destructive to the American theatre, too. Why would Americans want to come over here to see American-type plays? They can see them much better in their own country. It's really convoluted and ridiculous thinking. They can come over *here* to see good contemporary British plays and classical plays. And the people who put those plays-for-tourists on have caught a very bad cold this year because Americans haven't come over. So nobody's gone to them. The English won't go to see them,

because they know they're second hand goods. So they're closing right, left, and center.

And some, you told me, stayed out of town and weren't brought in?

No, they weren't even brought in. I think that's a good thing. I mean, I never say it's a good thing when a play closes, but on this occasion I think it's very good that those producers who thought that they could cash in on the American tourists coming here are losing a lot of money and prestige.

It really underrates the Americans who do come over here doesn't it? An American man sitting behind me last night had just spent two weeks in Portugal and Italy seeing opera, and four days in Paris seeing Molière and an opera at the Paris Opera House. Why would he want to come to London and see some imitation of the standard Broadway two-character play--an example is The Garden of Allah which is now closing.

Absolutely--he wouldn't. And it's totally self-defeating. Aside from the fact, without wishing to be contentious, the English playwriting tradition is much richer than the American. I'm afraid with the Broadway system, they haven't got a backlog of classics.

Of course it's so much younger, there's really no comparison, is there?

On the face of it the American nation, the population being a melting pot, would be the perfect ground for a whole slough of great playwrights--I mean it's rather Elizabethan in its richness. And yet it hasn't happened, and I take it that one of the reasons is--I'm sure it's not the only reason--the emphasis on success: immediate success and on immediate cash returns.

Of course in America there's also the magnet of Hollywood which developed so early and draws off the playwrights.

Yes, and the actors, too, and the directors. That's very true. We haven't got that to contend with here and neither have the European countries. Once you get into the French film business, or the English, it doesn't mean you're cut off from the theatre; you go back and forth. Whereas in America, once Hollywood gets you, that's it. *I might remark that you are that rare Englishman who is speaking about America on the basis of actual knowledge. You have been in America, and you have had to do with films and productions of your own, your*

plays are produced various places in the country, and you were at Temple University. Would you tell me what you felt after the experience at Temple? Would you like to go there again? Or to some other university in the United States?

I was invited to Temple University because they were putting on a production of my play *Laughter!*, but while I was there I lectured and worked with some of the actors in a class. And I went to Yale, too. Yes, I enjoyed the students, particularly the students at Temple--I thought in the acting classes they were so alive. And I was sad to think that they would end up (if they were *lucky!* which is a horrible thing to say) in some television soap opera. You wouldn't see them grounding themselves in a string of classical plays out somewhere in the rep, and then going on and doing new plays, and building up a theatrical background of theatrical expertise before blossoming out into major leading actors. You felt that some of the more talented ones would be snapped up--but they'd be snapped up by television. And although from their point of view it would be financially very good for them, and I wouldn't want to knock that, when one saw their enthusiasm and potential, one realized that they were better than that.

So I came away ambivalent, really, and puzzled. Because I saw them do pieces, naturalistic pieces, marvelously. And then they came to classical work, *Romeo and Juliet* for example, very badly because they were frightened and they lacked conviction. And again this is a puzzle. Because American actors seem to me to have all the equipment to be very good classical actors, certainly Jacobean and Elizabethan actors which is what I'm interested in. They move marvelously, they have great passion and attack, and a sense for violence which is an absolutely integral part of Jacobean playwriting. But because the plays are written in verse, because the dialogue is split up in this (to them) peculiar fashion, they become totally inhibited, thinking there is a special way of doing it. But there isn't. Again, it's finding out what your words mean, what each speech means, and then doing it. And it's sad, sad to see so much talent wasted, really wasted.

But you felt that in working with them you experienced that talent, that it really was there?

Yes, it's there. Of course in this short interview, I couldn't go into it in detail, but that naturalistic, Actor's Studio approach is like a disease, like a plague that has stricken actors, has bitten into them. Acting is not therapy, it's a craft and an art. I'm surprised because I thought they would be moving away from it. But there is still an addiction to naturalism throughout the American theatre. It's so

limiting.

The problem is, of course, that so many people have a strong reason to keep it going. Because they've been taught the naturalistic approach, then they're going to teach other people to do it, and they sell themselves, and it perpetuates itself. Now I'm not saying that all plays should be anti-naturalistic, all I'm saying is that naturalism is only one way of approaching the drama. There are other ways. And in America it's even worse than in England: naturalism has won hands down, and nobody even bothers about another way of working. And that seems to me to be a terrible sort of deliberate self-mutilation.

While we're on the subject of acting, let's turn to a slightly different area. You've been working with a number of fine actors because you've been interested in radio plays. That is not a form which doesn't exist in America--it does on the Public Broadcasting station--but it has not been a major force which continued here as it has in Britain. Could you talk a little about how you started to do the radio plays, and what their history has been?

Of course BBC radio is a big operation and is a medium which is greatly respected. It's more respected--I'm not saying it's more popular--but more respected than television by actors, and writers respect the medium more than they do television. So it's always been a show-place and a source of income for writers and actors and producers. For many years I'd been involved in adapting Jacobean plays for radio--well, there must be twenty or so by now. And then I entered a stage when I was waiting, trying to get *Red Noses* produced over a period of eight years.

I was being criticized for, among other things, writing these huge epic plays with twenty people in them lasting two and a half hours with vast numbers of sets and everything. So as a reaction to that, I thought to myself, now what is the total antithesis to that sort of play, and the total antithesis is a monologue which is one person, one set. And so I decided to write seven monologues. I wrote one, then I thought, "Well, let's do a few more, let's do a series." So I then wrote the seven, and that was a successful series.

And who were the actors who performed them?

I thought we should try to get Alec Guinness. He'd only done one radio program before. So we sent him a script and he said he liked it and he did it. Then we got John Gielgud, Peggy Ashcroft and John Clements, I remember.

Was Alan Bates in it?

He was in the second series. BBC said let's do another one, but I thought I didn't want to do more monologues, so I did some two-handers. So there was Alan Bates and Don Sinden and Peter Ustinoff. Paul Scofield and Joan Plowright, who else? Trevor Howard, Harry Andrews. Then the third and last series, which was three-handers, and that's been Sean Connery, Donald Pleasance, John Hurt, and Alan Howard. Wendy Hiller . . .

I know you've left some out, too. In other words, you've worked with pretty much the range of the outstanding actors in Britain today.

Yes, absolutely. The reasons we got them, A) they liked the material, and B) all these pieces could be done in one day. And that means that if any of these actors has a film or television or play, one day can always be fitted in. And, of course, being radio, we can afford to wait. There's no set day these had to be done by. For example, it's taken two years to get these produced for each series. But that's all right, because if you need people of calibre, you have to wait for them.

And the latest series was on the BBC radio in August 1986?

That's right. They'll be presented one a night for seven nights. So they've been very valuable. They've kept me in touch with audiences and actors and the rest in a period when I couldn't get one of my plays on.

I enjoyed being in the audience when you recorded The Perfect Pair with Alan Howard and Gerrard Murphy, and it seemed to me that the actors were having a wonderful time. Of course, between that recording date and the present you've had a major success at the Royal Shakespeare with Red Noses, and there was serious talk about bringing the production to New York. I'm sorry that economic considerations prevented American audiences from seeing your play at this time. But of course they can see your work in London, and you have several exciting productions coming up.

Yes, I've been quite prolific over the past year and a half--there's nothing more encouraging for a writer, I can tell you, than having a piece produced or printed--work makes more work. So over the last year and a half, I've written two new plays which will be produced. So while it lasts, I shall try to ride this burst of creativity.

I'll look forward to seeing them in London, or, I hope, America. As I said earlier, your comments on our theatre seem interesting and worthwhile to me because they are unlike some of the descriptions of America which are simply caricatures or views based on inadequate knowledge. Some Britons seem to say, "Oh, that's a terrible place, but you can make money there." It seems to me that you have observed the good and the bad in our theatre and have an appreciation of the prevailing conditions. In the future would you like to be working in America, either in a university or overseeing the production of a play?

I'd certainly like it. Because although many of the universities know my work, the plays really haven't been put on very often. And I would like the experience, exhilarating or depressing, of seeing them in America. I have the feeling, and I may be totally wrong, that the things that are difficult for English audiences to accept in my work are the very things which Americans would rather like: extravagance, and passion and violence, and an acceptance of the new. I mean that's the best side of America. There is also the reverse of that: accepting only what's acceptable.

Another thing that interests me is how a representative New York audience would take non-naturalism. Because the main staple diet of Broadway is naturalism, and I wonder how the audience would accept total non-naturalism.

Well, of course it's been accepted by all the Americans who went to see Red Noses.

That's true, and I'd be eager to see if they would accept me in New York.

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