

## Peter Nichols On His Art, Politics, and Peers: An Interview

William Demastes

The following is an interview with Peter Nichols conducted on June 10, 1985, shortly after he received a Tony Award for the New York revival of *Joe Egg* and shortly before he was to give a reading from his recently released autobiography, *Feeling You're Behind* (London, 1984), at the National Theatre, London.

That he won the Tony for the revival of *Joe Egg* is in fact little more than a culmination of recent American interest in the works of Peter Nichols. On Broadway, Otis Guernsey chose *Joe Egg* as the best play of 1967-68 (over Miller's *The Price*, Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, and Simon's *Plaza Suite*); and he chose Nichols's *The National Health* among the best foreign imports of 1974-75 (behind Shaffer's *Equus* and Fugard's *The Island*). Nichols's regional exposure, however, is perhaps even more indicative of his popularity in America. In 1984 alone, for example, no less than five major playhouses mounted productions of his play *Passion*. But despite this growing public forum, most of Nichols's work has not received the recognition in America that it's received in his native England.

Oftentimes his plays are identified as being part of the somewhat dated political commentary of the "Angry Young Men" of the 50's and 60's. But though he does come out of this generation of playwrights, he is more than a mere imitator of Osborne. His plays are far from being social tracts merely decrying social and political injustices of his homeland fighting to confront the necessities of change in a post-war world. Though he comes from a British middle-class background, his writings aren't imbedded in that perspective's all-too-typical "didactic" outcry for change. That is perhaps why Nichols is still active today while the careers of such contemporaries as Osborne and Wesker have virtually ended.

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Having a career that has placed him just beyond the limelight of his more sensational colleagues has its advantages. He has been more able to observe phenomena in peaceful repose and, as a result, has become able to present a more balanced outlook that continues to convey a relevance to audiences today. For those of his plays that are involved with social issues, such issues are often involved only peripherally. For example, though *The National Health* directly confronts socialized medicine in England, it also confronts a concern for England's "national health" in general. But Nichols transcends even this treatment of social concerns, having interests that go beyond English borders. Many of his plays deal with more universal human interrelations in such areas as family trauma--in *Joe Egg*, for example--and the affairs of the heart--as in *Passion*.

In addition to his break from treating localized social issues, his works are also conscious efforts to break from dramatic elitism and to attract a larger and more vital audience to the theatre while at the same time offering that audience the sufficiently engaging intellectual material that is expected in "serious" theatre. His wit and humor are the tools he works with to accomplish that end. And perhaps his recent popular and critical successes are indications of the more widespread popular future acclaim.

The following interview covers a wide range of topics. They are unified, however, by the fact that the questions originated from an American interviewer interested in, but not part of, modern British culture and theatre. Behind the questions themselves lies the broader, unasked questions of how America could and why America should be interested in his works in particular and modern British drama in general. Part of the answer lies in the fact that influences in drama have begun to cross the Atlantic both ways in recent decades, drawing the art of the two nations ever closer.

Nichols rightly insists on drawing critical distinctions between his works and those of his British and American contemporaries and predecessors, but he also acknowledges his debt to them. As a result, the following transcript not only sheds light on his own career, but also on the works and careers of many of his peers as well, in both Britain and America.

The interview was conducted at his Craven Arms home (The Old Rectory), Shropshire, England.

W.D.: Your work refreshingly avoids taking any overt argumentative stances on the subjects they address, and yet you come out of the tradition of the "Angry Young Men" who seemed bent on revolutionary social change. In fact, in your autobiography you noted that some critic asked, when *Joe Egg* first came out, "Are you one of those

angry young chaps?"

Peter Nichols: It wasn't a critic actually--it was somebody else who entered the same competition and the joke there, really, was that he said, "He must be one of those angry young chaps." The situation for me is that anyone who came from London--or Bristol in my case--and was a playwright had to be angry at something, and I saw myself being equated with angry people.

W.D.: It does say in your book, though, that Osborne's work triggered some new awareness for you. And it seems that in your plays so many of the liberal approaches to social problems are addressed: arguing for change in the National Health Service, advocating reconstruction or deconstruction of the family unit, attacking our love affair with the automobile, etc. But these issues of creating a "new society," after they are put forth, are then overturned by the criticism implicit in the work.

Peter Nichols: Well I think I just write about experiences, the notions that can be derived from experiences. And these notions are not very constant. I'm not in that sense, I suppose, a didactic writer who says or who fashions a play on a moral, though I do do that also. I mean if it seems to me that the total experience of *Privates on Parade*, for example, really means in the end that the working classes are being deluded into giving up their lives by upper class twits--then that's very sad, and the play can illustrate it. However that wasn't my experience as a conscript. That wasn't what happened, and that commanding officer wasn't our c.o. I got him out of a book. I read an account of soldiering in Malaya written by some man who was a major in the army, and it was very funny the way he wrote, so I made him into a commanding officer. And having done that then led me to think it was a very good fable about the way society seems to work. That is to say, I wasn't really saying anything particularly different from Kipling, I suppose. I mean he was saying to the men, "Be good soldiers," and to the officers, "Be fair to the men." I was saying, "Get rid of the officers; stop doing the pretending." And I did this through the events more than through the mouths of the people.

But even here it isn't didactic, it isn't schematic. There are actually two endings to the play. One is the one I used, finally, only in the film, and I think in the American version I may have used it. The one I wrote first had the boy marrying the girl which, when we put it on, created a skeptical audience, and I think they were right because it suddenly changed the part of the boy and was effected too quickly, and I haven't the time at that part of the play to make the

shift. I think that the right thing was that he stuck to his guns--he didn't go with the girl, he didn't marry her. He turned out to be prejudiced in the end and cowardly and didn't want to take back the Indian girl and face all the consequences. So she marries the old "queen," and it became nice then because you have the premonition of it in the scenes that they're together--the fights and that sort of thing--and that's the second ending which is also sad, marrying a raving old queen in order to get to England to see all those places she had read about. There's a sort of pathos there. So, you see, I wasn't working from a schematized plan though I did come up with a valuable fable.

Somebody spoke to me the other day when we went up North where they'd recently done *Privates*. The person came up to me and said, "I loved *Privates on Parade*; I thought it was so sad." I was terrifically thrilled by that. I thought, "Good!" Normally people say, "I laughed my head off." "It was so amusing," some will say. What I wanted in the finale was always softened in the stage productions. It never really told. What it really should've been was a row of very very badly wounded men trying to do a song, singing a song previously sung, and they are now all singing, trying to do a soft shoe about going back to London.

I once saw a picture of veterans of the First World War--they were French actually. They were walking in a Veterans' Day parade in 1919, all bandaged and maimed. And that's what I wanted; I wanted it to be very macabre. In order to do that after the sort of fun of the show, it had to be overdone in order to make its point, and it never was overdone. It really should've gone over the top--amputated limbs and all. One should've really gone to town to make the effects. Then it would've been very shocking. As it was, it got touching--the old dancer throws away his crutch as though the wound were irrelevant.

W.D.: As it stands, without such a production leaning, the end acts more as a nice send-off, ending it on a Hollywood note.

Peter Nichols: Exactly. Jack Lemmon and Tony Curtis sort of stuff. And it wasn't really what I wanted. I mean I was glad to have the audiences happy. But the trouble is that *Privates* finished up being kind of neither fish nor fowl. It was a moral tale that was quite attractive in some ways, but there was a good deal of bitterness in it, and when the poor stupid swearing corporal is killed and his lover kneels over his body and then finally appears and bitterly says to the boy, "Saving Malaya for the Empire, don't give me that," this is quite a tearing thing to put at the end of a musical. One's had his balls

shot off and another's--you know when he says, "There is some corner of a farm field that is forever fucking England," it's quite hard stuff really, particularly with the poem being such a favorite. It's a lot like spitting on the anthem.

W.D.: Your discussion helps to explain how *Privates on Parade* fits in with so much else of what you've done, namely confronting the status quo. Take *Freeway* as an example. There's some argument in the play that you want to do away with this whole obsession with automobiles in favor of more efficient, less ecologically damaging public systems. But in the end it doesn't work; there's a reluctant acceptance in your play that automobiles are here to stay. Similarly, the notion of progress, of wanting to "institutionalize" progress and advocate socialist improvements, exists in *Born in the Gardens*, but in the end the son and mother are home in Tudor Manor and refuse to be swept away by this wave.

Peter Nichols: Actually I think they're right to stay though I wouldn't advocate it and wouldn't stay in Tudor Manor. (But on the other hand I'm living here in the Old Rectory.) I actually agree that *Born in the Gardens* is a good case. I like to do this--present and defend something I don't really believe in. I advocate their freedom to be what they are and their freedom finally is to choose not to be free. I think really the play's a little debate on freedom and the nature of freedom and all the illusions of freedom. The daughter that lives in California, Malibu, thinks she's free but has made a bloody mess of her life. And the M.P. [Member of Parliament] son who thinks he's helping everybody else can't even help himself. And these two self-sufficient, harmless duffers [the mother and her other son] are sitting at home with the son, Morris, being more witty and more perceptive than the rest of them put together. He has engineered his life in a kindly but witty, intricate, ironic way to be what he wants.

W.D.: When Hedley [the M.P.] talks about social engineering, it is something that sounds like the posh thing to advocate.

Peter Nichols: And he believes it. When I wrote that, I thought, "Well, I must put a lot of my beliefs into Hedley." And I believed what Hedley does. I believe logically it's right that that old woman would be better off in the duplex or Durex, as she calls it. The Durex, by the way, I don't know if you know that--it's the biggest laugh in the play, and it's impossible for Americans to follow because it's a British brand of contraceptive. I use duplex even though it's not a word we use, but I used it especially 1) to make a joke and 2)

to show he's already thinking in American terms about making things better. Of course the malapropism has them moving into a Durex someone has died in, and it brings the house down because they immediately think of somebody with a sheath on! And then the mother goes on--the joke is continued. She says, "What about you, how would you feel?" Morris says, "It's perfectly alright by me." The joke continues, but of course he's delighted by it. He's indicated by this joke that jokes are what he loves in life above all. It's a throw-back to *Joe Egg*. The joke there is what Brie in *Joe Egg* loves more than anything else. Jokes for their own sake, jokes as wisdom. All my plays are based on jokes.

W.D.: By association or creation, then, is "the joke" what you believe in?

Peter Nichols: I don't know. I think, you see what I believe as man, as an individual, is not necessarily the way I can write. I'm not a "political" writer. I would like to be, actually. I mean, the writer I admire most, I suppose, is Orwell. I think he was able to say what he meant. He had the rare ability to say very simply and straightforwardly what he meant. But even then, as soon as he started to fictionalize, things went wrong for him. As long as he wrote pamphlets or fables, he was o.k. But I mean *1984* is the most disastrous, awry novel as far as intentions are concerned because it was seized upon by the Right. You know, "Look at this! This is why we've got to start the arms race. This is why we must have the nuclear bomb against Russia." Aside from whatever aesthetic flaws it may have, I think *1984* was flawed politically and that Orwell didn't realize how much it would play into the hands of the enemies of socialism, because he was actually criticizing the totalitarian extremes to which socialism could fall--or rise. But he wasn't saying, "We mustn't have it." He was saying, "We must have it, but we must make sure it doesn't get to this." Which I suppose in a way is what I'm saying. Concerning *The National Health*, for example, some people have seen the play--Mrs. Orwell, in fact, saw the play as an attack on the Health Service. I said, "I don't know how you could think such a thing!" I've always voted *for* that sort of thing. I'm very publicly minded and very civic in my instincts. I think we should be. In fact [I was saying], "We should curtail our freedoms" as it's said in *Born in the Gardens*. We must all try and live together. I don't believe in individuality like that, or in individualism in the way that America does. I think we should all be more cooperative. But what goes wrong is, I suppose, inertia, laziness, lack of effort, or lack of funds. That's as true today as when I wrote *The National Health*, perhaps even more so.

W.D.: Less a critique of the concept than of the execution.

Peter Nichols: Yes. And there's a difference between what one believes in and what one can say in fiction. To say it in an essay or tract is another matter. I don't find it very easy to design plays to say things. In fact, I suppose *The Freeway* is the most overtly political play I wrote, and it was a flop. Though I like it very much, it didn't settle with the public or the critics. It was a flawed effort, but it wasn't to do with the political message. It was about the car, and the car is an instrument of mobility. And what I had to do to get it on stage was make it static. I should've had one static act. One would've done, and the next should've been mobile. They should've left the freeway jam and gone away and tried to make their way through the countryside, and it should've become an episodic play like Shakespeare, perhaps, and it should've had a variety of incidents. Instead I set it and left it there, and the play died of inertia, as a traffic jam would! I don't know what this says about political activism in art, but in this case, for me, it didn't work.

W.D.: In your biography you expressed an interest in the works of the American activist playwright Odets, among others. It seems, then, that the activism itself was of less importance than something else in their works. What is it in them--or in others--that makes you see yourself possibly following in some dramatic tradition?

Peter Nichols: I suppose I'm interested in social comedy, actually, and I think really most of the English writers are. I noticed that when Americans write about Pinter, they tend to write about menace or aspects of that kind. In fact, to me he seems more like a social comedian. I think he's a very funny writer, and I think it's mostly to do with manners and means of expression that he writes about. Actually, it's about all we've got, because really plays are people on stage talking to each other. They're not much else. Or singing to each other or dancing with each other. Mostly talking to each other. I think particularly the English are obsessed with social comedy, comedy or manners. So we've often taken influences from Odets and O'Neill, Kaufmann and Hart and so on--they certainly were models I had. They were the more attractive models to me than Priestley, Coward, Shaw, who all seemed to me rather distant. America was demotic, both in its films and plays (I didn't see many American plays--more movies--but I'd read the plays before they were done here.) Then when Miller and Williams arrived in the late 40's, early 50's, that was like, "Ah!" And all of us wanted to write plays like

that. That's what we wanted. It took Osborne first to get it together. And then I think we made it more social comedy. I think Osborne now is unrecognizable if one thinks of him as an anarchistic activist. I mean he lives in a big house and goes to church, and he has arguments with the vicar about the Song and Prayer book--against reform in the prayer book! When the vicar reads the revised versions, he bellows out against it! He goes for long walks with his Labrador. And he has champagne for breakfast. So he isn't about to overturn anything. But what he wants--he was enraged at mediocrity. And I think he was enraged at social behavior that went with it. He couldn't stand ugliness, plainness, ordinariness. He wanted refinement, glamor, heroism.

W.D.: So then there is in fact, as many claim, nothing in particular he's attacking? He's just lashing out in general. What he's looking for is overall refinement.

Peter Nichols: Yes. He's a romantic, Osborne. Terrifically romantic.

W.D.: So is that what you're looking for too? Not arguing against systems--like the National Health Service--but against the mediocrity that it allows?

Peter Nichols: That's right. But if I told you how *The National Health* came to be written, it puts all this in a different context. I was in the hospital three times with a collapsed lung, and I wrote down observations about the men in there--I kept a diary and still keep a diary--and I mixed them up with some other men I met elsewhere. But mostly they were men I'd seen in hospitals. And I wrote a T.V. play called *The End Beds*. It wasn't accepted, and eventually I put it away. It was my best television play, but it wasn't accepted. And then Tynan and Olivier, after *Joe Egg*--they wanted *Joe Egg* but I said, "No, we've got a production under way." They said, "Well, do us a play." So I gave them *The End Beds* and made it longer and added Barnett, the orderly, and added the fantasy and added all the theatrical elements. They wanted a play, and I didn't have anything else in the drawer. *The End Beds*--you knew if you were moved to the end bed you were going to die. And it was like a Beckett play: "You're at the end!" Then I thought it was a rather dull title, and I thought--I'm not even sure it was my thought--it may have been Blakemore [the eventual director]. It was one of us, anyway, who said, "Why don't we call it *The National Health*?" And once that was decided, the play took on its double meaning--the nation's health. Once that was done, I suddenly saw those people; it was like drawing



a light on them which revealed them in a wide way. So they suddenly had a resonance.

W.D.: So they were converted into victims of a system?

Peter Nichols: Yes. They were not merely individuals anymore. They were also protagonists of points of view. Though these are real people I met and heard talking, I now had a "socialist," a "reactionary," etc. It was only the title that kind of tidied them all. When we wanted a big curtain for act one, I was able to write a big speech for the engineer which was very like something I'd heard him say. But I went further with it and made it into a big climax, filled it with irony and everything. And it was a wonderful curtain! So that's how it happened, you see. You wouldn't really call that political writing. It was kind of haphazard. Picking up unconsidered trifles.

W.D.: The title pooled ideas that were there but not focused.

Peter Nichols: Yes I suppose so.

W.D.: I'll ask one more question about influences. Concerning your play *Passion*, I was reading it thinking about the dates of production. We have Stoppard's *Real Thing*, Harold's Pinter's *Betrayal* and your *Passion* all written within a few years of each other and all asking questions about the nature of monogamous relationships. They all seem to lead toward re-evaluations of it. I'm interested in the fact that your generation of playwrights would become interested in this one issue, seemingly spontaneously.

Peter Nichols: We obviously didn't talk to each other. I mean Tom's came last, mine was the middle, Harold's was earliest. I absolutely saw no connection between his and mine, and I've never seen the *Real Thing*, but I read it. And I can't see much connection other than the subject.

W.D.: But the choice of subject is interesting in itself, coming from playwrights with similar backgrounds and at similar stages in their lives.

Peter Nichols: I should say that it's because we are all getting rather middle aged. What's interesting, I suppose, are the differences. Harold's is about, well, betrayal, about dissolution, the inevitability of missed experiences overall, passionate regret. I'm not sure what Tom's was. I suppose Tom's was about levels of reality. Mine is about

trying to lay a girl!

That "creative process" is very complicated. And I guess that why it's always difficult to talk about it. I mean I know authors--certainly most of my friends--are pretty reluctant to talk about it. I know I certainly am. You find yourself telling lies if you're not careful, trying to agree--with the person who's asking the questions. I don't think it's a very tidy process. Often I can't remember what it was that made me write something.

W.D.: It almost seems by definition that working from an argument destroys a work's artistic potential.

Peter Nichols: And why write it if you know what you're going to write? I mean I think it's very evident in Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. You read *War and Peace*, and you see it illustrates certain things about human life, and it leads you into a most wonderful world. And then in the end he delivers a great sermon which nobody can get through, sort of this great theory on life that he based the novel on, and the novel doesn't even illustrate that point. It isn't true anyway; it's a lousy theory. You know, "Forget it, Tolstoy, and just be satisfied that you've written a very good novel."

I remember watching *Passion* from the audience one night, and one person said to a friend, "That's the author." And the other one said, "Ask him what he means by the ending." And I was hoping they weren't going to and they didn't. I mean we all get different meanings, and we can sit around and talk about it. You have your meaning, I have mine, and it doesn't matter really.

W.D.: Finally, I'd like to congratulate you on recently winning the Tony Award for the revival of *Joe Egg*.

Peter Nichols: You know, if I'd have gone over there [to New York for the ceremony], it would've been a bit daunting to be in the same category with Shakespeare, Rostand, and O'Neill, but at least I've got this over them: I'm still alive!

Though Nichols strongly suggested in his biography that he has retired from theatre, he has since indicated that he's currently acting on his love for musicals and is working on one of his own, one that will compare more to the American musicals of the 30's and 40's than to the pyrotechnic wonders of the 70's and 80's.

In a brief *Times* essay on Fellini ("Fellini, dancing back to a golden era," *The Times* 6 Dec. 1985, p. 12), Nichols observes with fondness Fellini's intentions of completing a final movie before

retiring, *Ginger and Fred*. Nichols reports that the film is a tribute to the genuine efforts at pure entertainment found in the American films of the 30's and 40's, and what Nichols says "is seen by Fellini as an antidote to our times." In many ways, Nichols has been moved by the same spirit--to find an antidote to the fears and frustrations of our times. He never exactly sought answers to our problems, but seemed more to be looking for an "antidote," something to ease the pain of modern existence, however temporarily it may work. After all, his past works, no matter how serious the content, invariably turn on "the joke." And today Nichols's professed return to the world of musicals is similarly motivated by the urge to entertain, to defer the pains of reality.

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