

A Discussion with Edward Bond

Kouros Gohar, Suzanne Kim, and Ian Stuart

(This interview was given at Edward Bond's home in Cambridge on December 19, 1996.)

Can you discuss the uses of the imagination?¹

I think we are formed by our early experiences. We are not captured by them but our imagination is structured when we are young. And, I think, in a very dramatic way. Children map the world in dramatic, extreme terms. So for children there is not a practical distinction between what you practically have to do in order to survive and live and your imaginative life, which is in many ways the interpretation of that practical life. There is no division between the imaginative world and the practical world for children. They interpret the practical world in imaginative and dramatic terms. Basically I think the mind is a theatre. As children get older and involved in the practical affairs of life it means that everything collapses down to rationalistic, schematic things. But the imaginative world is still around them. Unfortunately, it's no longer theirs.

People always think that if you are dealing with your imagination you are somehow expressing yourself. With adults imagination is the way in which they are denied themselves and so their imagination takes on a life of its own and becomes collective and obscene and dangerous. That's why wars and ideologies are possible.

You can never say of any human activity "That's it." All human activities are over determined. They have a rational component, an ideological component, an economic component and you chase round trying to sort out which is the one that really determines what you are doing. The only thing you can say is that none of them could exist without the other. In a way it is idle to say what is the final determinant because they coexist. What is the most important thing for the fish? The sea or its fins? It's an idle question. In the last resort you can say it's the

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ocean that counts. But when people say the last resort they really mean the first resort.

Children are criticised because they have no imagination and then five minutes later they are being criticised because they have too much imagination. We don't really understand what the imagination is. Children have to exercise their imagination because they couldn't make sense of the world otherwise.

The imagination of the child is much freer to judge accurately than the imagination of the adult. By the time you get to adulthood necessity becomes much more important. The child is in a very political situation. It's in the power of others, it's fed and clothed and so on. Nobody does this for adults. Adults have to become practical—they have to have a practical relationship to the world. But they can't just jettison their imagination. Every part of my body changes every seven years but my mind, my imagination, stay the same. My foot is no longer mine after seven years. But my imagination is always mine—I cannot get away from it. For the child, the imagination forms a creative function. For the adult it becomes a much more practical activity. It becomes not a question of creativity but of belief or conviction. It is incorporated into the patterns of necessity. And then imagination becomes the way you are owned by your society. A child is afraid of its world; an adult is afraid of himself or herself.

Imagination is owned by the social order, by nationalism, by patriotism, by racism, by religions, by all sorts of cultural forms of possession in that way.

Very few people sincerely believe that two and two are five. Because it makes no sense. No use. Therefore practical reality is a guide. It is very easy for one race to believe that another race is less human than the first race. And this is like saying two and two are five. Society would cease to function if many people went round saying two and two are five and others said no, it's four.

Imagination unites both the functional and the creative. This is its strength and weakness because it means that imagination must always change the world—but it may do this either creatively or corruptly—*which*, is a political matter. Ultimately, imagination is the desire for justice—but when reason distorts our relation to the world, imagination is corrupted.

My theatre is not called a theatre of imagination because I know that is open to abuse. It's called a theatre of reason. Because, in the end, what drama is trying to do is close the gap between reason and imagination.

Stanislavsky is the inheritor of the romantics and Brecht is the inheritor of the enlightenment. Both inherit this split between reason and imagination. It is only when those two things acknowledge each other and reflect a common reality—and human beings do this by accepting responsibility for that situation—that human beings can become human. I want to create in theatre situations where people are required to test that ambiguity between reason and emotion and not find either of those as an excuse or explanation for what they do and have to accept responsibility for that relationship. There are disasters in the world because people don't accept responsibility for what it would mean to be a human being. Instead it's always socio-biology, the country, or God, or something like that. It's never a self-responsibility.

If I could write plays that would set up those situations, that would put audiences in situations where they were stretched in that way and have to ask the meaning of what they were watching, and the meaning of their involvement in it, and because of that the meaning of their relationship to society, how they participate—if I could write plays that were doing that and work out the proper aesthetics for acting that, then I think we would have a workable, rational theatre. But what happens now is our theatre is totally stereotyped, formulaic. It never says "What is justice?" it says "Whodunit?" This is not good for us. Two and a half thousand years ago the Greek theatre was concerned with justice. It's an ability we have lost and I don't think you can be human if you don't question the meaning of those ultimate determinants which you have always handed over to authority.

You can never hand over moral responsibility to authority. If you abdicate that then you enter into a state of fear. That is irrational and can become corrupt in various ways.

Would you describe the T[heatre] E[vent]?

In writing plays I try to close the gap between imagination and reason. To do that you have to have a theatre that aggravates both of those things. The T[heatre] E[vent]s are built in the gap between imagination and reason. Normally it is assumed that the "big images" come from the imagination. I don't think they do. The imagination can be very banal. It is only when you enter into the gap between imagination and reason that you can create the enormous images that can change the way people see, understand and feel about the world. I say "see" because to see something in this context implies to understand it in the sense of feeling it and understanding it rationally. The gap is the area where we have to

start thinking rational concepts or rational ideas—thinking a rational idea about society.

I will give you an example of what is, I think, a good TE image. Many people would say it is an image of the imagination. The romantics, Wordsworth, would say that is where you find truth intuitively. Really it is a TE—an image of imagination and reason. Caravaggio painted a picture of Christ being stopped on the road by one of his disciples who said "I don't think you are Christ" and Christ said "Yes I am. Put your hand in my side." Christ has a hole in his side and St. Thomas puts out his finger. And it is a wonderful picture because to put your finger into someone's side must be a very odd business. Christ and Thomas look squeamish: that's the social realism of the moment. And if you look at the wound in the side of Christ, and if you look at St. Thomas's jacket, there is a tear in it and they are exactly the same. Nobody in the picture notices it. The attention is given to the more obvious dramatic icon. Now I would use the torn rag, as I would use say a teacup or something—to say this picture isn't telling us something useful about God, but about people. What the painter is saying, and he might not have even been conscious of saying it, it might just have been his imagination telling him this, "actually, you should look at the other man too." Forget God, look at it from that more social, more human point of view. If I were living in a religious society and I understood this then it would, presumably, make me feel totally different about the next beggar I met or the next poor man. I am not saying that image is of any great use to us now in considering poverty but I think it is very interesting when you consider that it was painted in the sixteenth century. I would try to set up those tensions in a script and find a way of acting so that those tensions would always be made graphic and difficult for an audience. I don't think that theatre can provide solutions other than by making them possible and necessary in people's imaginations. That combines reason and imagination.

What do you see as the importance of the writer?

The ends of my plays are always beginnings. At the end of a Shakespeare play somebody comes in and wraps it up. He is usually in armour, or wears a crown. Authority is taking over. It has taken your imagination out for a walk and then in the end it takes it over because Shakespeare cannot risk anything else. That wouldn't work for us. We have to avoid closure of that sort. It's like somebody saying "What the beggar with the tear in his coat needs is a needle and cotton." I would say, "No, he needs a new society, a new world, a new way of being human."

I think in the end one has to realize that it's risky to be alive. To live is to take a risk. And in the end we all die anyway. So the risk is, if you like, not worth taking. You are going to lose. But it is a risky business. In a good society it would be possible to say, to feel, to know. To say, "I could not bear to allow this to happen because it offends me too much as a human being." You could be in a society where you could do that and not be taking a risk that would cost you everything. We are far too comfortable. We avoid these risks. Whilst I am talking kids are starving. Why am I sitting here drinking coffee? The only possible justification for that is that in whatever I do creatively I am going to tell the truth. I am going to work at that problem. If I feed that child the child might be able to grow up and believe in all sorts of dark spirits living in the jungle, or to go round shooting its enemies. I have given that child food and the child will live. It doesn't mean that I have closed that gap in the world between imagination and reason. That I have made it possible for us not to run the world in such a way that it's normal that children starve. The only possible justification for my writing is that I understand, or try to understand, that and to make the situation clearer. And that I produce the tools, plays, dramas, that will make people face those situations and come to understand them.

Would you discuss your concept of theatre?

I don't believe that the theatre is social realism, a slice of life. I am not trying to tell the truth about the play but about the audience. That is different. If I try to tell the truth on the stage I am simply trying to teach a lesson. And I don't think that imagination, that people, can be taught important lessons in that way. You can't be taught to be a human being. I presume Stanislavsky would want to know what was going on in a character and what his or her motivations were—that sort of question. Frankly, I am not terribly interested because in the end it is not helpful to us anymore. We know that human motivations are diverse and that we act for reasons that we don't fully understand. That often we are not guided by our reason. But reason provides us with excuses for what we do. So I am interested in a different series of questions and in a different relationship to an audience. That creates problems for actors. One can easily provide Stanislavskian explanations. What I want is to do something in the audience, something to happen in the auditorium. If I wrote "whodunits" I would never say who did it because it is of no great interest that something happens to fictional characters. Then we are allowing fictional characters to live our problems vicariously for us. I don't think that's good. A child if it's playing a game doesn't say well I'll sit here and you play my game for me. It needs to be involved in its game. I don't like audience active participation in plays. I think it is rubbish when an audience is allowed to choose the end, for instance. It is

just a trick. I want to make the audience accept responsibility for an actor's situation. I think all good theatre has in the end actually done this. I don't know that the average member of the audience really believes the end of Shakespeare's plays but they accepted it as being socially necessary at the time and may hope that it's still necessary. In any case the ends didn't work because although the kings restore order at the end of his plays, a few years later somebody chopped the king's head off.

I think what I want to do on the stage is to make the situation vital and urgent for the audience. Now what I also need to do is to reassure the audience that they have the ability to deal with the situation. I don't want to simply chuck the situation at an audience and say "Get out of that." That's not a proper communal use for theatre. I want it to be clear that people on the stage are struggling to understand their situation and I want the audience to take from the stage both the problem but also the ability of the actors on the stage to struggle with the problem. If the actors are struggling with the problem they push the problem further—it becomes a more critical and extreme problem, less of a nicely wrapped-up cliché. That can only be done through the demonstrated strength of the characters on the stage pushing the problem further and further and further. In order to do this characters on the stage have to have physical courage and intellectual energy. Otherwise the play will be like a doctor saying "I have diagnosed your problem for you." That's not a theatrical problem. If the characters on the stage have the energy and need to make them pursue justice then this commits the audience in a certain way. Some people say my plays are too long. But it takes time to pursue the problem. Beckett's plays got shorter because he was obsessed with the problem and despaired of solutions. Now if you are interested in pursuing the problem, the plays are not too long. We have to find ways of making the problem interesting over a larger span of time than is usual in the theatre nowadays. That means a different approach to acting. You have got to make the search for the solution more interesting than the problems. Otherwise you become a social hypochondriac. We talk about these things theoretically but what is needed at the moment is to find out the practicalities of what we are talking about. This sort of theatre is not purely theory and it's not something which is unobtainable. We need a theatre that can put meaning back into the audience.

People say that I am talking about a serious solemn theatre but people want to be frivolous and happy. That's an appalling put down. When kids play they are enjoying themselves but they don't play at silly or frivolous things. On the contrary they take the most serious subjects and are fascinated and engaged. If

we lose the human skill of using our imagination profoundly and deeply in that way, then it's very dangerous because we still have to become artists, scientists and so on. If your house is burning down you don't say what a nice opportunity to make toast, you put the fire out. But I dislike pretentious theatre. A lot of theatre that takes itself very seriously in a bad way is empty theatre, because it's obsessed with the problems of survival—not with creativity.

You said that you write your plays to show the audience the situation. If it's not necessary to know the motivation of the character from the psychological/Stanislavskian point of view, how can the audience know what the solution is if they do not experience the problem?

You have to answer the Stanislavskian questions. They are legitimate. If the actor is playing Mike [in *Olly's Prison*] he will want to know why he murders his daughter.³ I can understand that question, and take it seriously, and try to provide an answer for the actor although I did not have to provide it for myself when I wrote the play. But then I want to say to the actor "Now you have discovered this, don't think you've solved the problem of how to act the play. All you're doing now is not solving that problem but opening the problem up for yourself." How can we make this play useful for an audience? A play is a totality in that it doesn't at the end say "That is the problem and we've solved it." The particular problem is useful only as an instance of the total situation. Actors must use the total situation to illuminate the particular problem—not solve that problem individually: that's just survival. (At the end of *Coffee* the character says "I survived"—but he means more than that.)⁴ Drama ought to put what it means to be a human being on the stage and then you would take a particular problem/situation that would enable us to focus on/analyse what it means to be a human being. There is no solution to the problem of what it means to be a human being. There might be a solution to drug-taking, there might be a solution to playing truant. This is like saying "Well, pass your exams." It doesn't ask "but what does it mean to be a human being?" Schools have lessons in religion, and in citizenship, but I know of no school that has lessons in being a human being. And it seems such a fundamental thing that it is amazing that it is overlooked. It's like going to a school for hairdressing and no one ever gives you a pair of scissors. You feel that something fundamental is missing. So that it is no use going to see *King Lear* in order to be told that you die full of illusions. And rather fed up. The problem being posed by that play is something other than that.

I want to set up situations that will say "What is the nature of being human, what sort of actions make you human and how do you understand the human situation?" If I have a just society then I have a less inhuman society.

I am trying to invoke in the audience something much more basic about what it means to be human. That is not necessarily to desire better conditions. It is to desire a juster society. I presume a juster society would have better conditions—it would be very odd if it didn't, I can't imagine how it would be just—but it is not the same question. It is more basic than the usual sociological explanations politics tends to provide. Brecht said you have got to provide the food and then people will be moral. It is not true. It is an oversimplification of the problem. Because the imagination could still be murderous, could still be destructive. Another sort of theatre would be needed. So I need to ask more fundamental questions because as a species, as a society, we need to ask them. If we don't what we then do is solve our problems by building more prisons, which is what Stalin did.

Theatre has to return to its roots. People ask will Brecht's plays survive? All Brecht's plays are based on myths. *Mother Courage*—it is a myth about a mother who loses her children. He has the security and the comfort of myths and then in a curious way he wants to turn the play around and uses the myth almost as propaganda to say that these people should have the land, tractors and so on.

There is a tension between Brecht's plays and his theories. This creates a tension which is one of the play's strengths. It ensures they survive any seasonal declines in socialism.

The surface of his plays is social observation. The events observe the characters as they are caught in the social, economic and political matrix. They show characters as being the expression of material determinism. Appearance as the product of ideology. Alienation is then used to expose appearance. Brechtian theatre is anti-fate. Yet it is based on economic determinism. There is a preliminary tension here. The characters are not presented as abstract, match-stick people—products of statistics as in some of the writings of Piscator. This tension reflects the economic determinism of Marx's writings and their rhetorical moral tone. But statistics don't need theatre and determinism doesn't need moral persuasion. Of course, material determinism only works in the "last instance." The conclusion should be this: the plays present a structuralist appearance of things—and this is then alienated, to create a gap between the perceptions of the characters and the perceptions of the audience's. This approach isn't rigidly followed but it is one of the main theatrical tactics—but sometimes, for instance, the audiences' understanding is appealed to directly. The tactic raises many questions. If the audience is already alienated by its social practice, how can it be counter-alienated by theatre?

But the contradiction in Brecht's plays that I begin by referring to is that they are all based on myth. One example: *Pantufa* is based on the old master-servant relationship found in *Gilgamesh*, Roman comedy, *Figaro*, *Lear* and his fool, *Jeeves* and *Wooster* and so on. The myth negotiates relationships of power and knowledge. The working out of the myth contains its own integration—its own integrity. The myth may be radicalized. But in Brecht the myth is not itself alienated. It lurks behind the alienation and holds the disjointed scenes together. There are two structures in Brecht's plays: the economic determinism (and the possibility of choice)—and the myth. In post-modernism the relationship between the operating rigidity of appearances and the myth has changed. Myth can no longer be used—consciously or otherwise—to integrate an attack, by alienation, on appearance. Brecht's alienation left the myth untouched. This smuggled in purpose and reason without examining—dramatizing—their causes. It is the ghost of Lao Tzu, which guards the frontier post. Reason is not allowed, in Brecht, to follow Lao Tzu through the barrier—into the gap. But that gap is where the *questions* of drama in the final instance come. It is not an unconscious in the accepted Freudian or biological sense. It is the hinterland of history—which is personal and social, economic and psychological, political and exegetic. Brecht alienates the appearance of things. I need to alienate the myth. Brecht alienates the structure of appearances by alienating the theatrical form—but leaving the myth intact. Brecht alienates appearance: that is, he appeals to the same structure of appearance that ideology uses—but rearranges it. If the myth is to be "alienated"—if our relationship to reality is to change—then the relationship between reality and myth must be changed. The elements of the myth can no longer lurk in the background or in the foundations: they must be brought into the world of appearance—our "real" world where we work, eat and are paid. This is the function of TE. We use the reality of appearances by intruding into it not another opinion—not a realignment of syllogisms—but the myth itself. This is not an appeal to the irrational. It's not even an appeal to the imagination. It is the expression of imagination and reason in each other's terms. In fact, all drama does this but with different priorities and aims. The TE alienates both the appearance of reality and myth. It does not rely on the obtrusiveness/unobtrusiveness of myth but questions myth. If authority assumes and acts as if we were living in the post-enlightenment—then it will use myth in a more abrasive way than before. Myth is no longer codified into religion. It is made virulent. This brings authority into conflict with itself and makes the future more violent. In this situation appeals only to reason are ineffective. The TE goes beyond this by using the myth against itself: myth and reason mutually express each other. The TE works in the existing gap between reason and imagination. Otherwise reason will appropriate the myth as religion, mysticism, nationalism, ritual

etc.—the rational appropriation and subversion of the imagination: this reifies the imagination as the real and corrupts reason into the reaction. History is not so much the blind leading the blind as the blind dancing together.

I think you cannot combine myths and authority in Brecht's way. Our times have to be much more radically deconstructed. I am not a deconstructive in the sense of thinking that there are no values. But I think theatre has to be more basic. I need to deconstruct the lurking myth. To take the reality of our situation and find the theatre in that. You cannot solve those problems by social realism. It has to be a return to a much more epic, total, dramatic theatre. We have to bring on the stage all the things that Ibsen and Chekhov could keep off the stage. It is said that the Greeks put their murders off stage because it might offend the audience. That wasn't the reason. They weren't shown on the stage because they were impractical. The actors wore masks and strange get-ups and you can't go around killing each other in these things. It wasn't that they weren't prepared to bring their murders on stage. They did something much more extreme—they brought their gods on stage. But Ibsen and Chekhov can't bring the murders on stage nor can they bring the Gods on stage. It is a deeply impoverished theatre. But I think we have to put these things on the stage—the gods and the killers. That means, why we kill and yet are moral.

So you are suggesting that you call your theatre a theatre of use?

There are three things that are important. I accept Stanislavsky and Brecht. I think my theatre incorporates them. It doesn't stop at either of those two things because it is interested in the gap which I think dehumanizes us between imagination and reason. If the gap becomes too large we become mad but, ordinarily, the gap is sufficiently large for us to become merely corrupt, although, in a sense, that is more dangerous because the mad we lock up but the corrupt we give power to. That is the premise of my theatre. In order to enter that gap we need something called *use* which is the exploitation or use of the elements you put on stage to point to the gap—and to show that it is peopled with fantasies. Fantasy is imagination trivialized and corrupted. It excludes reason.

All life is alienated. You can't stop at theatrical alienation anymore. We have to go beyond alienation. But it would be a disaster if we collapsed back into Stanislavsky. In any staging you have to say to yourself "What is the TE of this particular moment?" or "What TE am I moving towards at this particular moment?" My plays build that in, anyway. You can't act them without the TE just as you can't act Brecht without alienation. Brecht's plays then collapse into

myth. The return in the staging of Brecht's later plays, to the early Brecht, produces kitsch.

I don't want to limit the actor. I want to turn the actor into a total artist. You go to the theatre to see the actor as artist. Actors are losing their artistry because they are not facing those problems.

What are the realities facing a director?

The art of directing, the whole business of directing, is the relationship with the actor. It's not the decor or the conception. We do it the wrong way round because of economic pressures. We design the set and then rehearse. The great theatres don't. They begin by working with the actors and trying to understand the play in that way.

The Royal Court, when it was a great theatre, did not have a permanent group of actors but it had a company of actors who were Royal Court actors. They didn't appear in every play but they would be there pretty often. Out of that a common approach—attitude—to theatre was possible. Now actors are very isolated, very on their own, very anxious about their situation. They have no security. They learn how to survive in the situation and in the end that knowledge is destructive. For me, it is not a problem because I don't direct very often. My job is to write plays. I get involved in productions more than I want to because if I am not there terrible things happen. I don't think directors understand the sort of things I'm talking about. I think people don't go to the theatre now because they don't see the sort of theatre I am talking about. I am not talking about something elitist or dour or difficult. No, it's the stuff that's now put on that actually keeps people away from theatre. The English theatre—the R[oyal] S[hakespeare] C[ompany] and the [Royal] National Theatre—wouldn't exist if it wasn't for tourists—they go to it as they go to the zoo. It's on the itinerary.

It's difficult to understand what it means to be yourself anymore. My feeling is that there will be a revival in theatre. Somebody has to create the possibilities of theatre.

When there are a million TV channels nobody will look at any of them. People will want some other way of representing themselves. Theatre always recreates itself. But having said that, I do think there are real dangers. The power of technology is enormous and I think the control of imagination in society is now much more pervasive. For example, it is more difficult to be a heretic now than it once was. It is much easier to be a criminal. And this is not good news

because a heretic is a criminal of ideas; an ordinary criminal simply replicates the behaviour of society but in a cruder form. I think there are possibilities but this new form of theatre has to be created, it isn't there at the moment. As far as I can see it is becoming more difficult for actors. They need a different theatre. I'm not sure that many directors do. The commitment of an actor to the theatre is, in a way, more vital than the commitment of a director. This is because an actor has to go on and live it night after night. A director can be irresponsible and direct a play and not go and see it. Actors couldn't do that. There is a lot of bad acting around by good actors and a lot of bad directing by bad directors. You can become a director for the worst reasons. I think most actors become actors for good reasons.

Notes

1. Bond's ideas about the imagination form chapter one of *Edward Bond Letters 4* (London: Harwood Academic Press, 1998).
2. Greater detail is provided about the TE in *Edward Bond Letters 1*, p. 41-76 (London: Harwood Academic Press, 1994).
3. *Olly's Prison* (London: Methuen, 1993).
4. *Coffee* (London: Methuen, 1995).