

**Agitprop Drama in Edward Bond's
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مسرح التحريض في مسرحية ادوارد بوند (انقاذ)
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Abstract

Because of the hard events, which the twentieth century had witnessed, many political dramatic movements appeared. It is noticeable that these movements used what is termed as "agitprop", originally employed by the Communist Party to propagate its ideas and thoughts at the beginning of the century, to instigate the audience against the corrupt political systems and the social conditions. One of the significant English dramatists who came to be known in the second half of the twentieth century is Edward Bond (1934-). Employing agitprop drama in his plays, Bond is known for presenting shocking events and extreme violence on the stage to instigate the audience and awaken them to recognize the socio-political defects in their life. This paper aims at studying agitprop drama as employed by Edward Bond in one of his well-known plays, *Saved*.

الخلاصة

بسبب الظروف الصعبة التي شهدتها القرن العشرين، ظهرت العديد من الحركات المسرحية السياسية. من الملاحظ أن ما يسمى (التحريض) الذي وظفه اولاً الحزب الشيوعي للدعاية لأفكاره ومبادئه في بداية القرن قد وظفته هذه الحركات لتحريض المشاهدين ضد الأنظمة السياسية والظروف الاجتماعية الفاسدة. أحد أهم الكتاب المسرحيين الإنكليز الذي بدأت شهرته في النصف الثاني من القرن العشرين هو إدوارد بوند (1934-). عند توظيفه لمسرح التحريض، عرف بوند في معظم مسرحياته بتقديمه لأحداث صادمة وعنف شديد على المسرح وذلك لتحريض الجمهور وإيقاظهم لمعرفة المساوئ الاجتماعية والسياسية في حياتهم. يهدف هذا البحث الى دراسة (مسرح التحريض) كما وظفه ادوارد بوند في احد اشهر مسرحياته وهي (انقاذ).

Introduction

Agitprop Drama

The term "agitprop" is originally a Russian term, which is composed of a conflation of the words "agitation" and "propaganda" and is derived from the name of the Department of Agitation and Propaganda established in September, 1920 as part of the Central Committee Secretariat of the Soviet Communist Party after the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917. The Bolsheviks wished to use art as a weapon in the revolutionary struggle and the agitprop department transmitted culture across the vast illiterate country to stimulate people's understanding of and involvement in such important matters as health, sanitation, literacy and the military situation. Trains and boats were used to show short agitational films and colourful posters with stirring slogans. In drama, the Blue Blouse movement, named after the industrial clothes a worker would wear, employed visual forms on traditional folk art to popularize its agitational ideas.¹

Blue Blouse troupes usually performed in pubs and wagons away from conventional theatres. They used colloquial language and music that featured a political analysis of a contemporary situation. They also used a striking but simple costume and little or no scenery. The performers were initially amateur and reached the height of their influence in the 1930's.²

In fact, the relationship between literature and propaganda has been important in modern times particularly after the expiry of the approaches to literature, which focus on the aesthetic aspects that see in the work of art a merely ripe source for pleasure and enjoyment. Hence, with the radical changes that happened at the early decades of the twentieth century, intellectuals began to question whether men of letters should involve themselves in politics or

preserve a distance between their artistically created worlds and the world of tough political struggle.³

In the late twenties and early thirties, agitprop drama spread to Europe and America through the visits of the Soviet companies and also through the international Communist movement. Agitprop was seen as a proletarian antidote to bourgeois drama and in each country, it evolved as a mix of the imported model and native traditions. Outside the Soviet Union, Germany had the most powerful agitprop movement until Nazism suppressed it. The German troupes were noted for their mass or choral speaking and were associated with the theatre director Erwin Piscator (1893-1966) and the renowned playwright Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956).⁴

During the 1960's, the European life underwent social and political pitfalls. These were due to the devastating effects of the Second World War. Youth were rendered unproductive, mindless pleasure-seekers. They shocked their elders with their outlandish appearance of long hair and flowing clothes and with their indulgence in filthiness and drugs. Moreover, there were political riots in many European countries against the increasing violence in the world such as the United States' war against North Vietnam. These upheavals were the result of the agitational views of the revolutionary socialist writers.⁵

Playwrights began to employ agitation in their plays to propagate their views to make a hopeful change in society. This was enhanced by the abolishment of the censorship in 1968. At that time, agitprop drama was increasingly used by some dramatists to show social injustices due to corrupt political systems; hence, Edward Bond (1934 -) emerged as an outstanding name in the world of modern British drama.⁶

Agitprop Drama in Edward Bond's *Saved*

Saved is Edward Bond's renowned tragic play which was produced in 1965, at the Royal Court Theatre, London, as a private club production of the English Stage Society. The "club designation" was necessary because Lord Chamberlain, the official censor of British theatre, had earlier demanded substantial alternations to the play including the complete deletion of scenes six and nine which Bond refused to make. Hence, the Royal Court decided to dodge the law in order to present the play without a license in a private club. This is because it had long been held that Lord Chamberlain did not have authority over private club productions.⁷

Nevertheless, the performance of the play caused an uproar. On the opening night, there were shouts of outrage from the audience and physical violence in the foyers during the intermission and after the show. The scene that most shocked the audience and to which Lord Chamberlain had objected with no room for compromise involved the murder of a baby in its pram by a group of young working-class louts, including the baby's own father. Most of the critics, except Martin Esslin, Penelope Gilliatt, and Alan Brien, "slaughtered" the play. Aroused patrons formed organizations to fight what they described as such obscene, sadistic, filthy, and unfunny drama. Moreover, leaders of the Royal Court were arrested and there was a court case.⁸

Although Lord Chamberlain illustrated that he did not intend to challenge the right of private clubs to present plays which had not been approved by his office, the magistrate's decision surprisingly stated that Lord Chamberlain did in fact have jurisdiction over such productions. Therefore, the theatre was fined in April, 1966 for performing an unlicensed play. The *Saved* case closed the door on what had always been thought as an outlet for avant garde theatre to perform free of censorship.⁹

But because of the controversy caused by *Saved*, some writers and organizations, on the other hand, called for abolishing the censorship which officially occurred on September 28, 1968. One of the first results of the demise of the censorship was a short repertory season of Bond's plays at the Royal Court in which he seriously and boldly dealt with the contemporary socio-political circumstances of his time.¹⁰

Saved is composed of thirteen scenes with an intermission suggested after the seventh. Six of the scenes are set in the living room of a flat in the working-class area of South London. This flat is shared by Harry, his wife Mary, their daughter Pam, and, after the first scene, Len, Pam's momentary lover. Two scenes are in an attic bedroom in the same flat; three are in a nearby park; one scene is in a jail cell; and one takes place in a café.¹¹

The events of *Saved* take place over a period of about two years. The playwright does not show the characters' development but rather depicts episodes from their lives. There is no clear explanation of what has happened to the characters during the elapse of time.¹²

The play explores the dehumanizing industrial environment, the moral emptiness of the working-class world of South London and the beastliness and brutality that have resulted. The play initially revolves around a girl, Pam, who picks up a young man, Len, and casually has an affair with him. Pam soon moves into a new partner, Fred but Len takes an obstinate root as a lodger in Pam's parents' home. Len remains faithful to Pam even after she has given birth to Fred's unwanted child. The atmosphere becomes hostile and erupts in the open bickering between Pam and Len, or between Pam and Fred. The atmosphere also simmers in the watchful, restless silence between Pam's father and mother.¹³

The climax of one of the rows between Pam and Fred happens when the girl leaves her child in a pram to its uncaring father. Along with some frivolous young men, Fred participates in stoning of his own child. Before indicating the intermission of the play, Bond interpolates a further scene in which Fred appears in prison for being held responsible for the crime. Fred is visited by Pam, in whom he has long since lost interest, and by Len, who watched but did not participate in the murder.¹⁴

After serving his sentence, Fred firmly rejects the still enamoured Pam. Len becomes enmeshed in a quarrel between Pam's father and mother, Harry and Mary, arousing in the old man a sort of desultory jealousy which erupts into a violence that is tinged with bathos: a bread knife hovers in the air between Len and Harry and a pot of tea hits Harry's head after being thrown by his wife.¹⁵

Len plans to leave but in the penultimate scene, Harry, pathetic in his long loneliness and seclusion, dissuades Len from going. In the final scene, the family members appear together in the living-room: Len is fixing a chair, which has already been broken in a previous quarrel, Mary is clearing the table, Harry is filling out his football betting slip, and Pam is sitting on the couch and reading her magazine, the "Radio Times".¹⁶

The emptiness, aimlessness and lack of familial communication and warmth are clear from the opening scene of the play when a young girl, Pam, whose life is supposed to be purposeful, productive, and hopeful, brings a stranger, Len, to her house just to have a physical affair with him and satisfy her desire. The two do not know even their names because when Len asks Pam about her name she answers "Don't be nosey".¹⁷ Bond's aim is to present a realistic portrayal of a life-style which is entirely conditioned by certain social circumstances.¹⁸

Although Pam's father is still at home, she insists on using the living-room because her "Bed ain' made"(11). Pam informs Len that she is not living alone when he asks her "Live on yer tod?" (11). Hence, Len seems to be embarrassed to see Harry, Pam's father, getting in and out of the living-room. Contrastingly, Pam does not seem to care for her father's presence at all. This is clear in the following conversation between Len and Pam:

Len. I thought yer reckon yer was on yer tod?

Pam. 'E's late for work.

Len. O. Why?

Pam. Why?

Len. Yeh.

Pam. I don't know.

Len. Reckon 'e saw?

Pam. Shouldn't be surprised.

Len. Will 'e be long?

Pam. Don't arst me. (13-14)

Further, the father, on his part, does not utter a word with his daughter as he is prepared to leave for his night work-shift. This dreariness and lack of communication between the father and his daughter is going to be mirrored and even intensified by the same barren relationship between Harry, the husband, and his wife, Mary. Moreover, Harry's going out to work and Mary's coming back home foreshadows their misunderstanding, familial tension, and paradoxical life.¹⁹

To remove the psychological barrier between them, Len and Pam resort to some filthy jokes. For instance, because Len expects that he is not the only man Pam brings home, he asks her:

Len. 'Ow many blokes yer 'ad this week?

Pam. We ain't finished Monday yet!

Len. We'll take that into consideration.

Pam. Saucy bugger! (16)

The critic Jenny S. Spencer argues that these jokes are not created by the characters but are part of the social currency and are needed and circulated in various circles of the society. Spencer also comments that these rounds of insults and innuendos all refer to "an oppressive sense of stasis in the lives of the characters".²⁰ Interestingly, Spencer elucidates these grimy jokes in the light of Freud's theory, i.e., these jokes are subconscious reflections of lack of communication and psychological repression.²¹

Then, Len and Pam continue their sexual innuendos when they eat some sweets and candies. It seems that Pam is used to bringing young men to her house because once Harry gets out to work, she proceeds to undo Len's belt at the end of the scene.²²

Further, this joking is a way to satirize all the institutions of the time whether religious, social, or political. Thus, the culture of the characters in the play is based on contempt for life; hence, their attitude to sex is obscene and their relationship to one another is hostile. For instance, in the third scene, to show both his boasting and contempt for women, Mike, one of the frivolous boys, insists on the availability of casual sex in the local church. Pete appears dressed in a suit because he is going to the funeral of a boy he has killed with his van, intentionally, as he says. Ironically, Pete openly seeks the admiration of the others and they do admire him for the killing and the fact that he has got away with it. This foreshadows their complicity in the most horrific event of the play which is to happen in the sixth scene; the stoning of the baby. David L. Hirst comments on the unproductive, pitiful life of these young men,

The play precisely defines a familiar working-class situation where incompatibility develops into hatred through an inability to communicate. The refusal to speak to one another is the ultimate expression of the barrenness of this culture.²³

Hirst adds that the society which unjustly deprives its members, specifically the working people, of their suitable economic and social conditions, will not certainly produce a healthy culture. The resultant violence and lack of communication, bred of ignorance and frustration, is therefore the fault of the various institutions of that society.²⁴

In this respect, the play is to show this lack of communication and love; Len's growing love for Pam is confronted with her rejection, Pam's love is rejected by Fred, and the pathos arousing rejection of Pam to her own infant child. The latter case is clear in the fourth scene in which Pam appears in her slip, turns on the TV and puts on makeup. The TV does not work properly and no one knows how to adjust it. The baby starts to cry off-stage and continues to

cry throughout the scene. No one does anything to comfort the baby, even his own mother. The only other actions consist of bickering about small domestic concerns. As Fred arrives, Pam nags him about being late and they leave unconcerned at all with the infant's screams.²⁵

The instigating effect of this scene on the audience is clear in the power of its uncomfortable aural images: the TV set plays improperly loud and the off-stage baby cries without a break approximately for eight minutes. The audience hope that the people on stage, particularly Pam, the baby's mother, should have an uncontrollable instinct and do something to care for the baby but they do nothing. Through the sounds of the TV, the idle chatter of the characters, and the ceaseless crying and screaming of the baby, the audience cannot help but feel the empty desperation of these characters. Moreover, the improperly-working TV set may represent the modern "intimidating" civilization which does not care for infancy and in which even mothers are made neglectful.²⁶

In fact, children and women are both subject to insult in *Saved* because they have no status in that hard, hostile society in which they lived. For instance, the boys' taunting of Mary when Len goes to her in the third scene is aggressive and humiliating:

PETE. One man's meat.

MIKE. More like scrag-end.

BARRY. Bit past it, ain' she ?

PETE. She's still got the regulation 'oles.

MIKE. Experience 'lps. Yer get a surprise sometimes. (32)

On her part, Mary's lacking of warmth and any marital relationship with her husband, Harry, makes her physically approach her daughter's ex-boyfriend, Len in the ninth scene. Mary enters in her slip and tells Len to feel free to take women to his room. She tears her stocking near the top and asks Len to sew while she still has it on. While he is sewing it, Harry enters, just watches them, and then leaves. Mary's seductive scene with Len goes parallel with the opening scene of her daughter and Len. Further, the same dreary relationship between Harry and Mary is repeated by the new generation; Len and Pam.²⁷

It is noteworthy that all the characters in *Saved* suffer alienation from the natural world, from each other, from their work, and from society as a whole; the result is extreme loneliness. But Bond does not want the audience to have sympathy for the characters because once you sympathize with somebody, you make excuses for him. The result is that you condone the mistake and then condone who has created it. Contrastingly, Bond wants his audience to react by taking action and changing the society itself, not by simply feeling compassion for the characters trapped in certain hopeless situations. Therefore, the audience is shown effects which, individually and cumulatively, are shocking and the audience must then involve themselves to arrive at the causes.²⁸

But the scene which provoked the maximum controversy when the play was first performed and which is still profoundly disturbing is that which culminates in the murder of Pam's baby. The baby is brought in its pram by Pam to the park. The baby is drugged with aspirin by his mother to keep it quiet. In a fit of anger, Pam leaves the baby there. Then, Barry spots the baby and violently shoves the pram at Pete. Barry's song foreshadows the baby's hideous death:

Rock a bye baby on a tree top
When the wind blows the cradle will rock
When the bough breaks the cradle will fall
And down will come baby and cradle and tree
an' bash its little brains out an' dad'll scoop
'em up and use 'em for bait. (63)

The other boys, including the baby's own father, Fred, begin to tease the baby by pinching it, spitting on it, rubbing its face in its own excrement, and finally stoning it to death. Ironically and astonishingly, after the boys' departure, Pam returns and wheels the pram off without looking into it.²⁹

Commenting on the boys' murder, Bond says that "their behaviour is so horrendous that it blurs over into something that can only be described in terms of the animal kingdom".³⁰ But the scene, still according to Bond, is a representative embodiment of the worst features of modern society. The scene strikes absolutely at what is supposed that all the spectators agree on; the unquestioned agreement that children are to be protected. But the baby, drugged by its mother into passivity, is incapable even of producing its own infantile signals of life. It is the fault of society that Pam, the infant's mother, has deprived it of the ability to respond and the fault of society that Pam has become that kind of mother.³¹

According to some critics, the stoning of the baby parallels the bombing of the cities in the second world war in which thousands of babies were directly killed just like Harry's and Mary's son who has been murdered in the same park. Whether by stones or bombs, the two are killed in the same park which is supposed to be a place of recreation, safety and joy. Further, the war caused cultural and emotional deprivation of a great many number of children; hence, Pam's infant is dead long before scene six. Culturally and emotionally, the infant is a dead thing being assaulted by other dead things. This is because if the infant had survived, it would have become something like Fred, Mike, Colin, Barry, Pete or anyone of the other boys. If the infant were to survive, it would have thrown into a relentless world; ironically, the infant being killed early is then "saved" from its miserable future life. Hence, what is revealed in the play is that these boys are victims of a society that sees people as commodities which may or may not have values. If Pam's baby is murdered in front of the audience, the other boys are emotionally and culturally dead because they suffer from oppression, frustration, and suppression. In an interview, Bond says "I didn't think the kids who murdered the baby were guilty. I thought they themselves were victims" and he quotes William Blake's verse line "Better strangle an infant in its cradle than nurse unacted desires".³²

The play generally and scene six particularly are meant to be agitating but those who are morally indignant at the killing of a child should connect this atrocity with the political and social system of the government that has led to that consequence. This public violence and brutality are direct results of political aggression and social inequality; accordingly, Bond comments,

Unfortunately since we live in a small world we have to think not of national society but rather of a world society. It then becomes clear that our species is threatened not by social criminals but by political ones: those who threaten us with the ultimate crime of nuclear holocaust. With the class of leaders we have, we must expect to find violence on the streets.³³

Hence, Bond's message is that all people are in some way responsible for the atrocities which are committed in the society. The horror of the on-stage action is not greater than the passivity of the viewing audience that becomes senseless like the murdered child.³⁴

Even Len who is supposed to be the likeable character in the play or the "lens" of the audience, as some critics call him, is unable to do something to save the baby. Although Len appears throughout *Saved* wanting only help: he carries Mary's groceries, tries to make a compromise between Pam and Fred, brings Fred cigarettes to jail, etc., yet he has not made a move to prevent the baby's murder. Further, like the audience, he is a negative witness on the atrocity so he is to be considered an accomplice just like the other boys.³⁵

But for some critics, including Bond himself, Len may represent a glimpse of hope for the future. He may be considered the family's saviour for whom the title of the play indicates. He

is like a son to Harry and Mary or may represent a substitute for their son who has been killed during the Second World War. Len remains a loving friend to Pam despite her harsh treatment to him. Moreover, in the last scene of *Saved*, Len remains with the family like an adopted son. He appears repairing a broken chair which Harry has tripped over and damaged in his fight with Mary. Symbolically, three legs of the chair are secure; one is loose so Len may stand for the family's fourth leg by which their life may go sound and safe.³⁶

Commenting on Bond's description of the play being "optimistic", Michael Mangan reflects,

This [description] opens up a debate, and in the course of that debate it may become clear that there is an optimism in *Saved*: not so much in the totality of its characters' lives-which are seen to be fatally impoverished-as in the suggestion that something might just be done about that impoverishment.³⁷

It is noticeable that Bond does not make the characters develop, except Len, intentionally for the dramatic message of the play. Hence, these characters do not grow and learn from their experiences. No explanations are given because Bond wants to agitate his audience so that they react and arrive at the causes. Further, the characters are given a particular language which is short and sometimes comic with sexual hints and aggressiveness. The characters' filthy language may be considered as a defensive tool to keep away from people and from life itself.³⁸

Conclusion

Writers and men of letters were frustrated with the corrupted twentieth century world that was full of exploitation, despair, famine, and loss of faith in everything. This chaotic world required the writers to awaken the people to the dangers they were facing. Hence, many politically oriented literary trends appeared that reflected the types of miseries the people were undergoing.

Agitprop, which was originally used in the communist propaganda in the Soviet Union at the beginning of the twentieth century, came to be employed dramatically to instigate the audience against their corrupt political systems and social conditions. Playwrights began to use agitprop drama as a way to awaken people to recognize the injustices of their society.

In the second half of the twentieth century, the name Edward Bond became dramatically significant both in England and the whole world. Bond is a Marxist figure, anti-authoritarian, utterly committed to the relief of human suffering and to the alleviation of man's violence to his fellows. He believes that as long as man is enchained to the socio-political institutions, the cycle of violence continues and the perspective remains hopeless.

The fear of a futureless society is effectively dramatized in *Saved*, one of Bond's early plays, through the metaphor of child-murder which is one of the most agitating scenes performed in modern drama. The promise or the potential hope of society is annihilated when a baby recovering from pneumonia is drugged into a comatose state by its mother and stoned to death by a group of impetuous youths including the baby's own father. Further, the church, as depicted by *Saved*, is no longer a moral institution; it is corrupted and inside its walls men do not search for the meaning of life but conduct a calculated hunt for sexual gratification.

Saved however is an agitprop drama that refuses to condone the world it represents or to mitigate, through some jokes, its serious effect. Employing agitating scenes, the play shows the erosion of a family under political and social pressures - war, work alienation, sexual frustration, despair, etc.

Except Len who tries to maintain ties with the people, all the characters in *Saved* are unable to love, create, protect, and enjoy. These essential needs for humankind are lost in the class-structured capitalist society against which Edward Bond's agitprop drama stands.

Notes

1. J. A. Cuddon, *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* (London: Penguin Books, 1998), s.v. "agitprop."
2. Ibid.
3. Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus eds., *George Orwell: The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1970), 176.
4. Cuddon, 15.
5. John Elsom, *Post-War British Theatre* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., 1997), 77.
6. Ibid., 79.
7. Harold Hobson, *Theatre in Britain: 1920-1983* (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 1984), 22.
8. Ibid., 24.
9. Ibid., 25.
10. Ibid., 26.
11. Richard Scharine, *The Plays of Edward Bond* (London: Bucknell University Press, 1976), 35.
12. Ibid., 36.
13. Ibid., 38.
14. Ibid., 39.
15. Ibid., 41.
16. Ibid., 42.
17. Edward Bond, *Saved* (London: Methuen and Co. Ltd, 2000), 12. All the subsequent references to the play are taken from this edition and the pages will parenthetically be referred to.
18. Scharine, 43.
19. Ibid., 44.
20. Jenny S. Spencer, *Dramatic Strategies in the Plays of Edward Bond* (Cambridge: CUP, 1992), 36.
21. Ibid., 145.
22. Scharine, 46.
23. David L. Hirst, *Modern Dramatists: Edward Bond* (London: Macmillan Publishers Ltd., 1985), 53.
24. Ibid., 51.
25. Scharine, 47.
26. Hirst, 52.
27. Simon Trussler, *Writers and Their Work: Edward Bond* (London: Longman Group Ltd., 1976), 11-12.
28. Malcolm Hay, *Bond on File* (London: Methuen, 1985), 78.
29. Hirst, 52.
30. Malcolm Hay and Philip Roberts, *Bond: A Study of His Plays* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1980), 50.
31. Trussler, 11.
32. Hirst, 55.
33. Ibid., 56.
34. Michael Mangan, *Writers and Their Work: Edward Bond* (London: Northcote House Publishers Ltd., 1998), 15.
35. Spencer, 32-33.
36. Scharine, 50.
37. Mangan, 16.
38. Ibid., 22-23.

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