CHAPTER II

Wesker the playwright and the role of Centre 42

Arnold Wesker, along with John Arden, Harold Pinter and John Osborne, is considered the key figure in the mid-century revival of English drama. Undoubtedly, Wesker satisfies the long-expected demand of working-class drama in England and is a true child of his age. His strength lies in the social relevance of situations, of themes of social protest, in portraying characters who have distinct social conscience — in a word, he finds his idiom assured and imagination free when he is nearer political and social problems. The plays of Arnold Wesker have always evoked extreme reactions. They were not liked in the beginning but later on they were acclaimed by the critics with words like "great" and "masterpieces". His reputation in England was at its height between 1959, when Roots made such a strong impact, and 1962, when Chips With Everything transferred successfully to the West End. After reading Chicken Soup with Barley, Lindsay Anderson wrote Wesker a marvellous letter in which he said, "yes, you really are a playwright, aren't you?" ¹

As a playwright Wesker's achievement was evident at once. First, he reversed the former role of underprivileged characters and insisted that they should be taken seriously. Secondly, he dramatised history from the Depression to 1955 in terms of an East End Jewish family like his own. Thirdly, he detected the contradictions of mass education and media persuasion, still a
key issue thirteen years later, and in *Roots* expressed them definitively. In the next place, he explored the English ruling caste’s method of absorbing rebels. But Wesker’s greater effectiveness as a playwright of the people in comparison with others of similar intention is that he is upward looking from the level of his own people, not downward looking from another plane. The special contribution of Wesker lies in dramatising the working-class participation in the socialist movement of Britain, and in demonstrating deep insight into the pathos of a political movement. Indeed, Wesker regards his public activities as an integral part of his work and intentions as a playwright. No doubt, Wesker is committed to the view that the people of his own working-class are exploited and debauched by materialism and its by-product cynicism, but also by an inherent weakness in their own character.

Arnold Wesker and John Osborne were, indeed, the discoveries of the Royal Court Theatre. But Wesker is, in many ways, the precise opposite of Osborne. If the plays of Osborne seem like the lively start of a long career, Wesker’s highly controlled trilogy is more like its sober ending. In *The Wesker Trilogy* there is nothing of the incoherence of the theatre of the absurd, nor of the personalised misfit mentality of Osborne. Wesker does not put the blame on society, as does Osborne, for the disintegration, failure and loss of faith of the characters. Wesker is a much more politically and intellectually articulate and committed dramatist than Osborne, but much more naive as a
person and craftsman. Wesker depicts in convincing terms the hopeless battle of the underprivileged against the Establishment to project a fresh set of social values. He has been remarkably successful in achieving all this in the trilogy and other plays, not because of mastery of ingenious dramatic technique, but assuredly because of the strength of his central vision and the intensity of his conviction. But Osborne does not offer anything positive in his work, and the profession of an iconoclast loses some of its validity and strength and becomes tiring when he goes on demolishing institutions and practices without offering any substitute for them. Shaw was also an all-round iconoclast but he offered the dream of socialism as the panacea for the ills of society, and his attacks went home, for he knew whom he was attacking. But Osborne's attacks are directed against that undefined section of society called Establishment which professedly upholds traditional values and throttles the individual's spiritual development. But he does not clearly spell out for whom he is fighting.

The most striking feature of Wesker as a playwright is that he is an autobiographical writer, not in the choice of plots, but in the sources of the characters from which they spring. Harry and Sarah Kahn in the trilogy are closely modelled on Wesker's parents. In fact, Hary and Sarash Kahn are \(^2\) "in so far as possible \(^2\) total re-creations." His sister and brother-in-law withdrew from London to Norfolk, like the protagonists of I A'm Talking About Jerusalem. Wesker himself married a Norfolk
girl who like Beatie in *Roots*, had been a waitress in a hotel. His national service, like that of the recruits in *Chips* was spent in the Royal Air Force and afterwards he became a professional pastry cook, like Ronnie in *Chicken Soup*. And his first play written in 1957, when he was twenty-five, and finally performed in 1959, actually evokes a typical day in the life of a number of overworked chefs, waitresses and kitchen porters. Sarah's last speech in *Chicken Soup* is more or less verbatim something that Wesker's mother said to him. Corporal Hill's opening passage in *Chips* comes straight from a letter that Wesker wrote to someone in London immediately after their Corporal had spoken to them like that on that day. Like Beatie Bryant, heroine of *Roots*, Wesker was undertaught. His wife-to-be Doreen Bicker, was the model for Beatie Bryant.

Wesker is fiercely and overtly political. The central vision that lights up Wesker's characters and incidents is essentially political in character. Wesker is inspired by a profound political faith as was Odets in the thirties. It is tempting to compare the trilogy with Odets's *Awake and Sing* — the political vision gives them an emotional intensity, and they share a certain simplicity in technique. The Jewish Berger family is very much like the Jewish Kahn family and the urge to fight for a better life animates important characters. Sarah is modelled, in some respects, on Bessie Berger and Ralph anticipates Ronnie. The trilogy offers a study of Wesker's exercise in political arguments and characters. Kenneth Tynan
aptly says: "Nobody else has ever attempted to put a real, live, English Communist family on to the stage; and the important thing about Mr. Wesker's attempt is that they are real, and they do live."

There is a wide impression that Wesker is a simple dramatist who writes simple plays — "simple" being the synonym for "obvious" or "easy." It is true that Wesker is straightforward, naturalistic and simple in his establishment of theme, delineation of characters, manipulation of dialogue and composition and there is nothing hazy about him. But his simplicity of treatment has a certain purity in it and his dramatic vision is often refreshing. But his simplicity of treatment has a certain purity in it and his dramatic vision is often refreshing. Most of his simplicity is a mote in the eye of the more critical beholder, who ignores and adjusts what he sees to fit his particular preconceptions, but will be lucky if he can preserve his own simplification without foisting a lot of inconsistencies on to Wesker's works in the process. A closer examination suggests a different picture, and we hope in the course of discussing their themes, characterization, structure and language to show how superficial and deceptive the impression of simplicity really is — indeed, not only deceptive but ironic, for one of the topics to which Wesker returns most consistently is the complexity of those choices and delicate adjustments all his thinking characters have to make. Perhaps it should be added that at the time, the relative straightforwardness of the trilogy
or of Chips had its own rewards. The apparently polemical tone was appropriate to the late fifties and the early sixties — though even then it would have been more rewarding to glimpse complexities that, in retrospect, certainly told cautionary tales for those times. Therefore, the impression of simplicity in Wesker’s plays is only superficial.

Wesker has given himself to the crusade for working-class culture. His first play, Chicken Soup, a drama following the life of an East End Jewish family from the 1930s to the 1950s was successfully produced at the Belgrade Theatre, Coventry, in 1958 and was followed at the same theatre by two further plays, Roots (1959), and Jerusalem (1960), concerning members of the same family and their further adventures in search of an ideal life. The working-class people play a vital role in the plays of Arnold Wesker. Wesker’s drama is a mighty effort to understand modern man’s, particularly the working-class man’s struggle to realise himself in society, to integrate and focus the essentials in his life, to discover areas of individual fulfilment in a standardised community. Thus we can say that Wesker is the most genuinely equipped people’s playwright of the 1950s. Wesker says in his preliminary note to Roots: “My people are not caricatures... The picture I have drawn is a harsh one, yet my tone is not one of disgust... I am at one with these people, it is only that I am annoyed, with them and myself” (Roots p.80).

The source of the author’s annoyance lies in the refusal of all but one of the characters, Beatie in Roots to endeavour activity...
to better themselves. Beatle who has become mentally energized through her lover in London, cries to her family at the end of the play, after her lover has refused to marry her. Undoubtedly, Beatle is here standing as a transformed personality, discovering her latent powers, as well as a representative of the working-class championing the cause of proletarian culture.

In some plays of Wesker, a group of characters presents a microcosm of society and of the world. In The Kitchen, Wesker presents as the microcosm of the world, the stifling hell of an overcrowded kitchen in a large restaurant. The low sound of gas in the ovens, the anger and irritation of the lunch-hour rush, the physical pressure of the labour involved in preparing meals for such a big restaurant, bickering about foreigners, the Babel of different languages, the quarrels about dates with the waitresses — all this builds up into a complex image of man as a working animal. In Chips also Wesker is making his group of characters into a microcosm of our social and economic system. Admiring the play Nigel Dennis says that it is "a direct reproduction upon a stage of military training as it actually is."  

Wesker depicts in convincing dramatic terms the hopeless battle of the underprivileged against the Establishment to project a fresh set of values. He has been remarkably successful in achieving all this in the trilogy and other plays not because of mastery of ingenious dramatic technique, but definitely
because of the strength of his central vision and the intensity of his conviction. The anti-establishment inspiration which we noted earlier in the trilogy and The Kitchen exploded into a scathing expose of, and attack on, the British ruling class represented by the R.A.F. Officers. The area of attack is much more defined and precise than in his earlier plays, and the play represents, up till now Wesker's most powerful subversive attack on British institution. In a sense Golden City is a development of the central theme of Chips — the relationship between the rebel and the Establishment which endeavours to win over him. Andrew Cobham, the architect hero, with his sweetheart Jessie and his friends Stoney and Paul, has a youthful vision of building new golden cities all over England. In a letter to H.U. Ribalow Wesker says:

They begin on a dream they know from the start is impossible and for this reason they reveal the picture of the state of the Left in Britain today. They do not live in revolutionary situation, but must act. The result is doomed to compromise.

But Andrew Cobham is not corrupted to the same degree that Pip is. He fails to get more than token support from the T.U.C. Therefore, he compromises. He accepts the help of a conservative Minister of Town and Country Planning, and in this way does get one golden city built.

In this respect we can compare Wesker with John Osborne who has also been eminently successful in arousing a non-conformist,
anti-establishment passion. Osborne brought on the British stage all the anger and pity of the deprived generation of Britain, unable to adjust themselves to the highly materialistic motives of a fast changing society. This generation fails to achieve human fulfilment in the community, a kind of communication gap divides them from the Establishment. Look Back in Anger of John Osborne is the first authentic theatre response of the underprivileged British youth to the structure and spirit of the Welfare State. For the first time, we had the genuine voice of the rebel youth (Jimmy Porter) challenging the validity and moral texture of Post-war Britain. Henry Livings is also sharply critical of the Establishment and the authority. John Arden also depicts the rebellion of the individual against the Establishment, even though his treatment is very different from that of Wesker or Osborne.

Wesker's characters are mouthpieces of Wesker himself. Of course, Wesker provides characters who speak for him — indeed, all his plays have been accepted as autobiographical accounts of his own endeavour to find a responsible role for the artist in society. Wesker has taken particular delight in a scene without a single word in Chips, where he demonstrated without and almost without subsequent comment, the effect of imposing one man's will on that of his fellows. In Roots, Beatie is, of course, spokesman for all the girls who have suffered in the same way, most of them even without realising that they were suffering. Wesker's people are less characters than personalities, indeed,
it is part of the statement that they are not characters, but as usual with him they refer to a social context far bigger than themselves as in The Kitchen to boring work, misused leisure, incentives, retirement, and other subjects of mid-century anxiety or debate.

It is noteworthy that in some plays of Wesker, the intervention of a particular character provokes the dramatic closing speech. For instance in Chicken Soup, Ronnie returns home from Paris disillusioned with what International Communalism has become. He says: "I've lost my faith and I've lost my ambition ... My thoughts keep going pop, like bubbles. That is my life now?" (pp.72-73) In this way Ronnie provokes the dramatic closing speech by Sarah: "And he calls me a pathological case ... And you want to be like your father? I'll fight you then." (pp.73-74) In Roots also, Ronnie's intervention, this time by a letter provokes the play's dramatic closing speech. The letter informs that Ronnie is not going to marry Beatie. Beatie feels upset and becomes reminiscent of Ronnie's terrified accusation, "You don't know who I am or what I'm trying to say and you don't care, do you?" Beatie's long speech, "Oh, he thinks we count all right ... We want the third-rate we got it!" (pp.147-48) is the climax of the play. Of course, Ronnie's letter is the catalyst to Beatie's growth, the emotional trigger of an intellectual advance.

Wesker deals with man-woman relationship in his plays. In Chicken Soup, Sarah, the mother, is strong and authoritative.
Harry, the father is an apathetic weakling. The constant quarrel between Harry and Sarah, which was the only discordant note in the family becomes more embittered with the passage of years. In Roots Beatie spends her time expounding to her apathetic country relations Ronnie’s views on art, politics, sex and kindred topics. But when Ronnie’s expected arrival fails to materialise, she finds herself in an ambivalent state. The Four Seasons deals with a very private love affair between Adam and Beatrice. Harold Hobson in the Sunday Times says: “It sings, often beautifully, of how love came, worked its transfiguration, and then went away.” Adam and Beatrice live together for a year in a deserted house. After one year they find no solace in each other and so they depart. They fail to live with and for each other because they have failed to live with and for anybody else.

Some plays of Wesker are concerned with a particular family and some with a group of characters. Chicken Soup, as Wesker himself says is “about the disintegration of a politically-conscious family,” the Kahns. On the other hand, The Kitchen is concerned with a group of twenty-nine characters of an overcrowded kitchen in a restaurant. Wesker, here, of course, is criticising the meaningless mechanical life in the contemporary industrial society, and the image of the hectic rush in the kitchen. In the same way Chips is concerned, not with a family, but with a large group of characters assembled in a working situation. Undoubtedly, in Chips “Wesker has got away from Jewishness and politics.” Rather he concerns himself with an
intricate comprehension of class tensions. In it Wesker is more adroit in translating his argument against pop culture into stage action. When the patronising Wing Commander endeavours to get the airmen to sing pop songs, Pip persuades one boy to sing a 17th Century dirge and the others sing an old peasant revolt song. The Journalists is also concerned with a group of characters. As Wesker says, "It is about the poisonous human need to cut better men down to our size, from which need we all suffer in varying degrees." In it there are in all twenty-three characters, plus a miscellany of messengers, sub-editors and reporters.

II

As a playwright, Wesker has developed steadily right from the very commencement — not only by eliminating the faults of technique, but by increasing the range of his dramatic material and certainty of his control over it. Equally, the more closely concentrated actions serve their own, quite distinct purposes, so that although George Devine wanted Wesker to combine the first and second acts of the already compact Roots, Wesker was right in sticking to his stand. And as a result Roots was "not taken up by the Court," says Wesker.

Wesker's technique of characterization matures from play to play. It ranges from the narrow selectivity that sketches the officers in Chips to the traditional psychological realism of the portraits in The Wesker Trilogy. In between lie all the characters whose actions and words are visible trappings of each
one's independent personality. Dave, Pip, Ada, Charles, Kate, Tessa seem to live outside the action as fully as any of the more peripheral characters. We note that in the earlier plays the central characters are frustrated and disheartened by the inordinate muddle of society, so submissively accepted by its members. And after Chips, the protagonists are not only conscious of the confusion that surrounds them but also of the dislocation and unpredictability within themselves.

Wesker does not believe in strictly adhering to any dramatic theory. Here it would be pertinent to remember that Wesker has had no university education. Moreover, he gives freedom to his characters to express themselves fully under pressure of great emotion. This belief in the freedom of the playwright as well as the characters goes much deeper than the question of technique and is rooted in his romantic idealistic attitude, for Wesker's drama in a broader sense, is an expression of his dream of future. Again and again we see this romantic aspiration breaking through the fetters of naturalistic framework and investing his work with a quality of freshness and imaginative statement which is baffling to many critics. Although stylistically, his work is of slight importance and there is little psychological depth in his approach, but a meaningful philosophy of life gives a quality of substantiability to the best of his politically animated pictures. Disarmingly simple in the treatment of themes and characters, his somewhat flat one-dimensional world betrays an ignorance of the subtlety and complexity of human personality.
His technique is pre-dominantly that of the Edwardian well made plays, though Chips demonstrates a measure of success in composing Brechtian short scenes. In Golden City and The Four Seasons, one has the impression that Wesker is moving away from his home area and experimenting with subjects and techniques which do not give ample opportunity of expression to his native genius. Wesker has ranged from the almost expressionist dominance of setting over characters in The Kitchen, to the impressionism of Their Very Own and Golden City to the entirely logical narrative flow of The Wedding Feast. In The Four Seasons, his style had expanded to achieve an expressive and compelling poetry, embryonic in the flexibility and allusiveness of Chips.

III

In the end, something needs to be said about Wesker's relationship to the new movement in English theatre, which made itself felt in 1956. The first characteristic of this new movement is that the new dramatists are young. Wesker, Pinter, Osborne, Arden, Edward Bond, David Cregan, Charles Wood, Joe Orton, Bernard Kops — had their first London production in their twenties — usually by twenty-four or twenty-five; by the mid sixties none of them was out of his thirties. Bernard Kops says, "We write about the young, because we are young." Secondly they like to be sensational, to surprise and shock; to be fantastic, unlikely, outrageous. Homosexuality, prostitution and abortion, violent or casual deaths, disfigurement and callow humour are all part of the new drama. In Wesker's The Four Seasons, the man
spends about ten minutes carefully to and often silently making an apple strudel on stage, and the woman, in a scene carefully hedged by the Lord Chamberlain's instructions, bares her breasts to be embraced. In Edward Bond's play Saved a baby is stoned to death in its parambulator on the open stage. In Harold Pinter's play The Room a woman suddenly goes blind while talking to a Negro. Thirdly, the new writers frequently choose popular, topical, up-to-date subjects. Wesker's Chips is about the service of conscripts in the Royal Air Force; his Golden City is concerned with the new housing projects and the ways of bureaucracy. John Arden's Live Like Pigs is about slum clearance, his Workhouse Donkey is about local government. Pinter's Collection is partly about a collection of fashion-clothes and partly a collection of antiques. In the next place, the new dramatists are firmly based in the theatre. Pinter and Osborne were both actors before they became dramatists. John Arden was trained as an architect but, marrying an actress, became immersed in theatre work. Ann Jellicoe was taught at an acting school and has directed her own plays. These new writers work for television, radio or films, but return again and again to the theatre itself. Wesker became dramatist after numerous jobs. But since writing plays he has become the administrative head, and Chief fund-raiser and propagandist for Centre 42, a play producing trust backed by the Trade Unions.

Whereas Wesker shares characteristics of the new movement in English theatre, he tends also to be distinct from it, as a
result of superior maturity and insight. This can be seen by comparing his handling of conflict between parents and children, social protest, violence or a working-class milieu with that of young playwrights. But Wesker's theatrical idiom, the entire flavour of his work in performance, sets him aside from boulevard drama and the show-business status quo. Many of these new playwrights are inspired by a vision of an alternative society. But their criticism of the existing conditions is characterised more by a negative approach than by the positive projection of an alternative set of values. But Wesker in Roots believes that it is only by education and arts that the underprivileged mass can become fully human. This positive aspect of his drama distinguishes him from the new-wave playwrights.

IV

Centre 42

During the 1960s Wesker directed Centre 42, a project with trade union involvement for popularising the arts. Its aim was to destroy the mystique and snobbery associated with the arts and to bring the artists into closer contact with the audience. As a brochure issued by the Centre 42 movement states:

The FORTYTWO movement is a bid by a new generation of writers, actors, musicians, painters, sculptors, architects to relieve commercial managements of their burdens and responsibilities in shaping our culture, to assume this responsibility themselves and place art
back into the lap of the community where, through familiarity and participation, they can revitalise their work by confronting a new audience and turn their art from a purposeless mess into a creative force.

Jennie Lee, a member of Parliament as well as of Centre 42 Committee, hopefully looks forward to the Centre 42 project, "If Centre 42 did no more than stimulate more participation in the promotion and enjoyment of the arts, that in itself would be wholly worthwhile."

In the Centre 42 Annual Report 1961-62, Wesker explains in detail his commitment to Centre 42 and his opinion about the achievement of the Centre 42 project. To know what Centre 42 has done one should study the brochures of festivals at Bristol and Leicester. The festival at Leicester was very interesting and exciting. There was presented Enter Solly Gold, a new drama by Bernard Kops; The Maker and The Tool by Charles Parker. Then there were art exhibitions, folk music concerts and poetry readings. Wesker said victoriously, "Forty two (Centre 42, that is) works; this is a fact whatever our inadequacies may be." But there were financial and administrative difficulties. In an essay, Wesker calls upon the working-class man to aid Centre 42. In 1970, after producing his play The Friends there, Wesker resigned and persuaded Centre 42's Council to dissolve. Wesker takes the blame on himself and like Andrew Cobham says, "I will go on record with a hundred per cent prophecy that things like Centre 42 will be existing all over the country sooner or later."
All that's happened is that I've failed to bring it about." The early pieces of *Fears of Fragmentation* are concerned with the vissitudes of Centre 42 in its original conception as an arts centre which was to function as a cultural reservoir for any client community.

But Wesker's achievement as a playwright must not make us blind to his limitations and drawbacks. It is a pity that his passionate idealism has so badly interfered with his creative work, which since * Chips* — a routine but brilliantly excellent portrait of service life, has badly deteriorated. In the second place, Wesker has often been accused of naivety and a simplistic reading of complex social and political issues. Thirdly, Wesker's use of the technique of flash-forward is ambiguous and confusing. *Golden City* is constructed out of a series of flash-forward scenes, using 1926 as present and setting the rest of the action in future, that is 1990. We cannot be entirely certain whether he is telling us that this is what will happen, or that this is what could happen, or that this is what the characters are imagining. As Wesker himself admits, "The form of flash-forward gave me the opportunity to cheat, in fact, to have two endings — the ending of the young people in the cathedral which is still off the ground and optimistic, and the ending of the reality stream."

Fourthly, it is hard to follow some of his plays without being familiar with the history of the period he talks about. For instance, an audience unfamiliar with the history of the
British Labour Party would find it very difficult to comprehend Golden City. Many crucial points are made in words only, without being amplified in action and Wesker makes the dangerous assumption that each line of dialogue spoken will register in the audience's mind. And if it does not, they easily get lost.

Fifthly, it is felt that there are too many scenes in some plays of Wesker. For instance, in The Journalists, each of the four acts has over thirty scenes, some of them very brief, and there are a hundred and fifty-four scenes in all. Sixthly, it is sometimes argued that in some plays of Wesker characters tend to explain themselves rather than reveal themselves. This thing happens in The Journalists and The Old Ones. Seventhly, in some plays of Wesker, the main action occurs off-stage. For instance, in Chicken Soup, the main action — the battle against the fascist marchers occurs off-stage. Eighthly, there are too many monologues and quotations in some plays of Wesker, as in The Old Ones.

In the next place, the note of didacticism becomes too explicit in plays like The Kitchen and Roots. Roger Gellert who generally admires Wesker wishes that he did less propagandizing. He informs us, "I cannot help feeling that the proselytizing tendency is Wesker's biggest pitfall as a dramatist." In this regard Wesker himself says that he wants to "teach." In the next place, we can find in most plays of Wesker embarrassing stage directions. Wesker sees the theatre as a battlefield, as something to watch, yet he has to use words to get his massage
across. Lastly, we can say that there are some weak characters in Wesker's plays. For instance, in the trilogy, Ronnie is more effective in his absence than in his presence. In spite of these limitations Wesker's merits cannot be ignored. Richard Findlater is quite right when in *Plays and Politics* he calls Wesker a major dramatist.
Notes


10. Arnold Wesker, in an interview in Theatre at Work (eds.) Charles Marowitz and Simson Trussler,
Methuen: London, 1967, p.82.


