Chapter III
Art and Commitment in the plays of Arnold Wesker

I

It is obvious that Wesker is a major figure in the contemporary theatre. In his study of the New British Drama, John Russell Taylor observes: "Arnold Wesker has acquired a greater reputation on the strength of a still relatively smaller body of work than any other dramatist of his generation." Undoubtedly, Wesker is a more interesting and adventurous playwright than a superficial acquaintance with his best plays, The Wesker Trilogy and Chips With Everything suggests. He celebrates the act of labour, especially the manual sort, and draws on his personal experiences in his plays. He is not content to let his plays speak for themselves, he points the moral, makes clear his themes, underlines his concerns. He is an active polemical writer dedicated to the task of teaching, enlightening, enabling the masses to share his enthusiasm for culture. The problem is how to make the public aware, how to bring culture to them. Wesker believes that this can be achieved by organisations, such as his own Centre 42, and by writing plays of purpose for those people he was brought up with — the bus drivers, the housewives, the miners and the Teddy boys.

If Pinter is one of the least politically involved contemporary dramatists, Wesker is one of the most. The central vision that lights up Wesker's characters and incidents is
essentially political in character. In fact, his characters come alive only when they are associated with protests and movements. Wesker's genius is particularly competent to handle a large variety of characters, to present political questions in successful art forms, to introduce an area of idealism in comparatively drab realistic set up. Thus we can say that Wesker is fiercely and overtly political. Politics is the driving force behind his rhetoric, the source of the strongest emotions in his characters. Yet he is not political in a narrow sense. We would have to re-define the word "Politics" to describe Wesker's conception of it, and think not of the art of rule or struggle for power, but of a brood humanistic concern for other men. But it is only within a framework of evangelical socialism that Wesker can envisage that concern.

Wesker is, indeed, a committed writer. He has marched in Ban-the-Bomb demonstration and has been jailed for his convictions, together, of course, with other distinguished Englishmen, including Lord Bertrand Russell. Wesker is undoubtedly committed to causes. American-Jewish writers are not as wedded to causes as Wesker. Too many of them deal almost exclusively with sexual relations, with romance, with love; they shy away from political and social issues. Wesker, mulling over the Jewish influences in his work, wondering why he "reponds to the cry of the blood" is as much a man of cause as he is an artist.

Wesker is a much more politically and intellectually
articulate and committed dramatist that Osborne. It would be too easy to describe him as a writer of politically committed plays. Yet as John Russell Taylor observes: "It is difficult to separate the plays from the man, to look at the plays as works of art rather than as sermons preached by Wesker's mouthpieces." He is the dramatist with the clearest political point of view which is expressed in his plays. He is the dramatist who became director of Centre 42, who was noted for naturalistic detail and frequently attacked for failing to make those details convincing. Wesker himself was born in a Jewish, East End, working-class family and he is constantly and terribly aware of the quality of brutishness in the world and a feeling that something ought to be done about it. How can the underprivileged mass become more fully human? Wesker's answer is socialism, not because he believes that socialism would solve problems, but because it ought, at least, remove the economic problems and leave people to face up to the real battle — the problem of being alive. His solution in terms of socialism is that of an artist rather than of a propagandist or moralist. And this is significant because it suggests the personal level of Wesker's commitment, that, as usual in British theatre, he is a dramatist who believes it is possible to write a private work and still feel part of a movement.

It is absolutely imperative to remember that Wesker's commitment to socialism is a product of family background. On a personal note Wesker writes:
It amuses me when people say to me, '0 but you are a socialist because you come from the East End and suffered poverty.' It is just not true — we experienced poverty but we nevertheless had a marvellous time. I loved it.

Compared with the commitment of a Brecht, Miller or Sartre, it is a sheltered position in time and place, but it had led Wesker to the heart of a problem which is occupying the full attention of greater minds than his. Wesker ponders that the underprivileged mass can become fully human with the help of education and arts — and this positive aspect of his drama distinguishes Wesker from other new-Wave playwrights and from other socialists. It accounts for the inner coherence which controls his dramatic writing; but, in so far as the writing system along which the benevolence travels is of Socialist pattern, commitment is at times a source of weakness.

Wesker's political commitments were also manifested in 1960-61 in his efforts to establish Centre 42. Wesker was instrumental in founding Centre 42 which began as a movement of new British dramatists to create a permanent home of all the arts acting as a reservoir of talent and professional companies. Certainly its purpose was to set up a centre that would act as a kind of pool of creative and professional talent and make arts more widely acceptable. It is to be pointed out that the actual name of the project came from Resolution 42, carried unanimously by the Trade Union Congress in 1960:
Congress recognises the importance of arts in the life of the Community especially now when many unions are securing a short working week and greater leisure for their members. It notes that the trade union movement has participated only to a small extent in the direct promotion of plays, films, music, literature and other forms of expression including those of value to its beliefs and principles. Congress considers that much more could be done and accordingly requests the General Council to conduct a special examination and to make proposals to future Congress to ensure a greater participation by the trade union movement in all cultural activities.

There was also the proposal that the trade unions should finance the projected centre to prevent commercial pressures overthrowing the entire project.

The idea of this movement was, indeed, a brain-child of Wesker. The T.U.C. took it up in 1960 and passed a resolution, but did nothing more than this. Wesker was then serving a term in prison for his anti-nuclear activities with the Committee of 100 and he felt that he must give himself to Centre 42. Wesker had not intended to become the director but while in prison decided that his commitment must be total. He became its artistic director with an ambition to make it a project that might consolidate and give outlet to new writers, directors and actors. He decided to give two years fully to Centre 42: "I
decided deliberately to cut myself off from thinking about plays, and chose a period of two years." But it is to be remembered that Centre 42 was a limited company incorporated on September 4, 1961 and having charitable status since October of that year. It was based on the idea that just as society accepts responsibility for health, welfare and education, it should support the Arts. Wesker's own play The Friends was produced there.

Wesker's involvement in Centre 42 project commenced with a talk, before a group of students at Oxford University, in which Wesker complained about contemporary culture. This lecture was turned into a pamphlet and sent to the General Secretary of every trade union in the country. This pamphlet was followed by a second one, making suggestions. One of the suggestions was that the Trade Union Congress should hold an enquiry into the state of the arts. This was the suggestion that the Association of Cine and Television Technicians took up and made a resolution at that year's T.U.C. Congress, which was number 42 on the agenda. The second pamphlet also pointed to the civic theatre in Coventry as an example of theatre subsidised by the elected representatives of the people, and cited Trade Union support for the theatre in USA, Norway, Israel and Japan.

As Charles Marowitz reports, "Before long a group of interested British artists met in Conclave to fashion a weapon with which to combat the forces that were merchandizing and vulgarizing art in Britain." These artists were generally
dissatisfied with the role they were playing and wanted to make contact with a larger and more popular audience. One of the things Wesker was determined not to do was become involved with another well-meaning Left-Wing cultural enterprise. Wesker managed to insist on a larger and more serious view of what should be done and generally outlined the idea which finally became Centre 42, but which was added to by various members of that Committee. They were going to be the initiators of such a centre, the council, the board. At no time Wesker had intended to become Artistic Director of Centre 42, but no one emerged from outside. Finally Wesker put himself forward to be its Artistic Director and it was generally agreed.

According to the Annual Report, Wesker is the Director, Beba Lavrin is Assistant Director, Michael Hemshaw is Secretary, and Olive Barker is Festival Organiser. Some of the important members of The Council of Management are Ralph Bond, Jennie Lee M.P., Sir William Corron, Michael Croft, Ted Hill, Dorris Lessing, Alun Owen and Arnold Wesker. Centre 42 had successful and encouraging commencement — something that was quite unexpected. The first phase of the Centre 42 project involved a band of artists — Shelagh Delaney, John McGrath, Doris Lessing, Barnard Kops and many others. These people wanted to bring the artist and the public together without the interference of an intimidating organisation. Wesker obviously united the aims of this group with the trade union initiative. A small city in Northern England, Wellingborough, asked Centre 42 to help it
mount its annual festivals. Wesker says, "Without money and organisation we accepted the challenge and the result proved a landmark." Trades Councils in Bristol, Haynes, Leicester, Birmingham and Nottingham extended similar invitations which were accepted by the Centre 42. Thus we can say, that during the first phase, the Centre 42 flexed its muscles and established its name by putting on provincial art festivals.

The next phase of Centre 42 project involved the acquisition of the Roundhouse, a disused engine-shed in London for conversion to a theatre. Though it was huge and spacious, but more money was needed to convert it into a theatre. In 1964, Louis Minz and Alec Coleman gave Centre 42 the remaining sixteen year lease of the building. Since the original intention had been to decentralise the theatre, to nourish the provinces and backwaters of England Centre fortytwo's final resting place London is ironic if inevitable. In 1965 Wesker was still speaking of Centre 42 joyfully and asking the architect Rene Allio to draw up designs for converting the Roundhouse into a playing space. But there were financial problems. The Trade Union Congress as a body did not give any financial aid, though individual unions and branches contributed small sums. The businessmen who figured among its trustees effectively obliterated its original function. In 1970 Wesker formally dissolved the movement. His resignation as Artistic Director of both Roundhouse and Centre 42 was announced in 1971 and was followed by a rather bitter correspondence in the pages of Sunday Times.
Thus we can say that Wesker expected the Trades Unions to become involved in the Centre 42 movement in such a way in which they were not prepared to. In this regard, in an interview with Ronald Hayman, Wesker says:

If I had been a different kind of person I might have known the right way to systematically go through not only those general secretaries but the whole of my social life would have been dedicated to mixing in Trade Union circles and slowly slowly building up personal relationships with all the right people. I obviously did not have that quality.

Others might have compromised, arguing that setbacks were to be expected and that anything was better than nothing. Wesker, characteristically, would not do so. Compromise with cynicism, is perhaps the ugliest word in his vocabulary. The original idea was that an enthusiasm to take part in the cultural life lay dormant in the majority of workers, and that enthusiasm only needed awakening. The location of the Roundhouse in London, its conversion to a theatre for hire will ensure that this sleep continues.

The history of Centre 42 may be revealing. Just how imaginative and ambitious this exercise in offering culture to the masses was to be may be seen from Wesker’s essays *Fears of Fragmentation*. Wesker directed Centre 42 from November 1961 to October 1963 and during this period Centre 42 mounted six festivals of the arts. At this stage Wesker felt free to say,
"There is one important principal that I should like to hold against all argument: art is the right and need of every civilized community, as such be subsidized and not forced into paying for itself." Wesker even says that Centre 42 has its enemies: "This is a discovery we have made in these last months and it must be acknowledged since it affects our future policy and approach."

The Centre 42 program is ambitious and far-reaching. It was criticised as well as appreciated. Ossia Trilling thinks that Wesker turned full-time to the management of Centre 42 because he fell into "spiritual impasse" when he learned that "proletarian public" for which he was writing was not coming to his plays. E. Martin Brown in Theatre Survey has kind words for Wesker but he regrets that Wesker dedicated so much time to Centre 42. Dennis Thompson in a report on Centre 42 writes, "Wesker has made remarkable progress, and his experiment promises to be, at least, an instructive experiment in mass culture." Charles Marowitz appreciating the Centre 42 says, "If Centre 42 expands and prospers, it can do nothing but good." But on the other hand Charles Marowitz criticises the Centre 42 and says, "What worries me about the Centre and its ideas is the assumption that working-class art, is going to be superior to the best commercial art," and he reports that many of the architects of Centre 42 feel that the whole project is too massive and that if its rights were lowered more could be achieved.
Jennie Lee, a member of Parliament as well as of Centre 42 Committee, welcomes the Centre 42 project. Though in the beginning she looked at the entire project as somewhat outlandish, she pays a tribute to Wesker for his faith and vision in accepting leadership in the Centre 42 movement. This glaring tribute is offered in a letter published in Encounter.

Arnold Wesker has got hold of a brave idea. When I first heard him talk about it I felt guilty and embarrassed. Ought I to share all this burning faith? Did he really think the trade union movement was capable of accepting his challenge? It seemed to me that he knew very little about it. I could see headaches and heartaches ahead for him... His was a poet's vising, a kind of inspired lunacy... A forward thrust has got to come from somewhere. It would be that at a time when the calculations of professional politicians and the still more professional calculations of the economists have manifestly failed to rescue us from the torpor of a subtly totalitarian culture, the only thing left is to give the poet his chance.

But Joan Littlewood had a point when she shrewdly observed that it took ten or eleven years to make a good playwright, which was Arnold's job and he should stick to it. Clearly it was protective goodwill towards an able young artist that prompted her to say so. Regarding the criticism of Centre 42, Wesker says:
Our critics accuse us of dictating to an unwilling and otherwise perfectly happy community what should engage their emotional and intellectual sensibilities in the world of art. The popular phrase used is "taking culture to the masses" — this is a phrase which at once carries overtones of self-righteous soul saving, though God knows who these masses are or quite where they are to be found; our critics then assume, and this is where their thinking becomes irrational and emotional, that in wanting to broaden the frontiers of art we are implying that we are better people...

Far from assuming that all cultured people are better people, we know, only too well, that many are prigs and bores. Neither is the other assumption true that we are "taking culture to the masses" — it is a fact about our policy that we will go nowhere unless invited... Then we are "accused" of presuming to know what is good and bad in art — yet another example of illogical outrageousness.

Surely inherent in any public enterprise is the right to create a standard, otherwise the function of all public performance may be questioned.

Wesker also attacks the British cultured class to whom projects like Centre 42 appear presumptuous, and therefore, intolerant:

A strange hysteria descends upon the English personality, especially the intelligentsia, when
projects affecting "art and the people" are put into operation. There immediately springs to mind the image of patronizing salvationists wanting to do good. Over the years there has grown up such a tradition of meddling that now any public act, no matter how innocent or spontaneous the motive, is greeted with suspicion. Many artists and intellectuals are terrified of appearing to stand out beyond popular tastes for fear of seeming 'square' or 'not with it'.

Through Centre 42, I do feel, Wesker has established himself as a personality on the English cultural scene. I do not agree with E. Martin Brown who regrets that Wesker devoted so much time to Centre 42, or with Ossia Trilling who thinks that Wesker turned full-time to the management of Centre 42 because Wesker fell into a spiritual impasse on learning that the proletarian public was not coming to his plays. Rather I appreciate Wesker's total commitment to Centre 42 — an endeavour to consolidate and give a continuing outlet to that whole group of new writers, directors and actors whom Wesker instinctively felt would be dismissed in a very short time because of the fashion-conscious approach of the cultural world. I feel, if the trade unions had provided all the hoped for financial support, and if the public had been responsive to the festivals that were experimentally mounted, Centre 42 project could have been quite successful.

II

Three important strains go into the plays of Arnold Wesker.
These strains are Socialism, humanism and Judaism. The term Socialism was first used in its modern sense in 1827 in the Owenite co-operative Magazine to denote tendencies opposed to liberal individualism and in 1930s was applied in both England and France to describe the social ideals of Owen, Saint-Simon and Fourier. Socialism is that policy or theory which aims at securing by the action of the central democratic authority a better subordination thereof, a better distribution of wealth than prevails now. Thus we can say that socialism is that theory which holds that individualism and social welfare can be best secured under state regulation than by unrestricted private enterprise. Therefore, it is a protest against the theory of individualism and the off-shoot of the failure of the laissez-faire policy to promote the interest of all manufacturers, growers and consumers. In the social field it lays stress on the equality of all. The aim of socialism is man's emancipation, his restoration to the unalienated, unrippled individual who enters into a new, rich, spontaneous relationship with his fellowmen and with nature. Therefore, it can be said that socialism is an equaliser and leveller.

Of course, Wesker is the most socially-minded of all the new English dramatists. While Harold Pinter has captured the imagination of the non social critics, Wesker is more warmly debated and discussed in England than any other contemporary British dramatist. Though Wesker professes to be a socialist artist, he can be described as such only in a very loose sense.
He views the British Communist movement in the thirties as an endeavour by the working-class to humanise social forces. The period of brave idealism was soon over and problems cropped up, hitherto unsuspected. The movement which opened gates of selfrealisation suddenly revealed its sudden traps. Wesker is honest enough to describe the failure of the movement to improve the condition of the working-class people, as the failure of an ideal. The sense of security under the Labour Government is a paltry reward for their brave expectations. The Wesker Trilogy traces the forces of disintegration in the Communist movement as well as in human personalities involved but it creates two positive characters — Sarah and Beatie Bryant. The trilogy is a disturbing human document in which the playwright grapples with the question of genuine human relationship in industrial set-up. As action develops the socialist movement slowly shrinks back giving the characters fuller freedom to express themselves. Thus The Wesker Trilogy is the only sustained effort of the new generation dramatists to comprehend and interpret the climate of social and political changes in Britain from the anti-Fascist thirties to the Labour Government of the fifties. It can also be interpreted as a dramatic story of defeated individuals trying to realise themselves in a fast changing society which remorselessly casts aside those who do not accept its values and practices. Sarah, Ronnie, Dave, Ada, Cissie refuse to accept the pattern of values in the industrial society with all its infra-structure of
mass advertisement, pop song, television, lady's journals, cheap market, and they live in a smug small petit-bourgeois life. The explorers who had audacity and independence of search for their own identity and questioned the validity of contemporary complex ideas and practices, are not tolerated. They look like a bunch of frustrated imaginative fools who misjudged an ineffectual vision for wisdom.

In Chicken Soup With Barley, we see the struggle of individuals to realise themselves in terms of social and political activities. It was the period when all the world was a communist, and these working-class characters seemed to have no doubt that something great was going to happen very soon. They had a purpose in life, were sure of the direction of their struggle and happy in their consciousness of dedicating themselves to the cause of class struggle in a capitalist system. Yet the picture is never boring in spite of its earnest tone. Harry's congenial lethargy and Sarah's vigorous but ineffective attempts to make him more active are skilfully interwoven into the hubbub of political idealism and youthful eagerness. The Spanish Civil War, the International Brigade, the working-class movement in Britain, the Fascist march in London bring to us, as never before in a play, the political realities of the thirties. The broad exciting sweep of the day seems more truthful in juxtaposition with the stable family environment in the East End basement flat of the Kahns.

I Am Talking About Jerusalem traces the failure of an
experiment in craft socialism of a vaguely William Morris type in a rural setting and moves in time to the defeat of Labour Government in 1956. The play relates the experiment of Ada and Dave to live the William Morris life of creative craftsmen in the lap of nature, away from the rush and hubbub of industrial civilization. A socialist writer generally calls for a proletarian revolution for doing away with the economic disparity in society. But Wesker takes an original approach to the problem and calls for a proletarian cultural revolution among the working-class. In his view, it is only by making the dumb mass of Proletariat better educated that a real revolution would be brought about in Britain. Wesker is very different from the orthodox Marxist in his approach to the working-class problems, and perhaps has something of the Fabian brand of socialism in him. In Roots Beatie's discovery of her power of expression may well be taken as Wesker's hope that the working-class may one day find their own language to demand a culture of their own which they can participate and not remain passive recipients at their end. Robert Muller aptly says that The Wesker Trilogy will "act as a monument to its era."

III

On the other hand, humanism implies devotion to human interests. Humanism is clearly a suitable term to characterise any suitable view of the world for which humanity is the central object of interest. That which is characteristically human, not supernatural, that which belongs to man and not to external
nature, that which raises man to his greatest height or gives him, as man, his greatest satisfaction, is apt to be called humanism. But Wesker's humanism, like his Marxism, is a blend, not a pure doctrine. His humanism is a blend of Marxism, Judaism and British liberalism.

In *The Kitchen*, Wesker feels intensely for the purposeless drudgery of the cooks, groping for a more meaningful living. They work there for eight hours but still the kitchen means nothing to them and they mean nothing to the kitchen. Nobody bothers for the cook who knocks over a pot of hot water and burns his face. Wesker makes us feel pity for the Cypriots who are regarded as racially inferior and are handed out inferior jobs. Wesker is not only criticising Marango, the boss, who is dominating the life of the workers, but his more potent attack is directed to the machine itself, the organised chaos which is reducing people to mindless nonentities: "you have stopped my whole world. Did you get permission from God?" Marango demands of Peter. (*The Kitchen*, p.68) But it is to be remembered that Peter, the rebel, is crushed whereas Sarah and Ronnie have a note of triumph even in their defeat. In the trilogy the characters have the ideal of a socialist society before them, and they direct their energy to fulfilling their ideal. The contrast and the centripetal force of an ideal are, in a sense the emotional nuclei of the trilogy that holds it together. But in this play, Peter and all his associates, have no vision before them. They are dissatisfied with their work, their life, nervous about
losing their job and eager to escape the drudgery. A sense of uncertainty is a characteristic feature of this kitchen world.

**Chips With Everything** is a serious and powerful attack on class system. John Rosselli, writing from London for The Reporter in New York says, "the play is punctuated with moments of song and collective moment." Following the opening of **Chips** in New York, The New York Times Magazine published a Sunday feature on Wesker by John Beaven. In its impulse of social protest, **Chips** is complementary to **The Kitchen** but more powerful for its attacks on one of the cherished British institutions, the R.A.F. Here the victims are not workers, but R.A.F. conscripts exposed to the brutality of military training and, which is no less significant, the rigid hierarchy of the officer class. **The Merchant**, is indeed, an attack on anti-Semitism. **The Friends**, **The Old Ones**, **Love Letters on Blue Paper** depend heavily on the drama of approaching death — a fear that has been a source of incessant trouble to humanity since the very beginning. **The Journalists** is about the poisonous human need to cut better men down to our size, from which need we all suffer in varying degrees. **The Four Seasons** is about man-woman relationship. Their **Very Own and Golden City** depicts an idealistic architect's struggle to build six golden cities in which the working-class might live humane, enlightened lives. But Wesker is very liberal and frank. He does not put the blame on society, as does Osborne, for the disintegration, failure and loss of faith of characters. The characters themselves are somehow made
responsible for their failure to realise ideals. Ronnie's inability to go through anything to the end, Dave's pilfering of two rolls of lino signify their weakness of character, the considerate gap between their ideals and practice. All these facts show Wesker's interest in humanity and the problems facing it.

IV

Judaism is the complex expression of religious and ethnic community, a way of life as well as a set of basic beliefs and values, which is discerned in a pattern of action, social order, and culture as well as in religious concepts. Nineteenth century historians of religion, especially Christian historians, have used the term Judaism to denote the religion of the Jews since the time of Ezra (C.444 B.C.) in contrast to the pre-exilic religion, which they called the religion of Israel. This attitude was promoted primarily by the belief that post-exilic Judaism was a retrogression, due to foreign influences, from the teachings of the prophets and that the true prophetic tradition was continued in the religion of Christianity. Closer study of the sources has revealed more and more clearly, however, that Judaism is but a perpetual and incessant development of the teachings of the prophets. The major prophets conceived of Yahweh as perfect and holy, as the principle of all spirituality, that is as one and only God. Like every other religion, Judaism passed through a certain historical evolution, throwing off old elements and acquiring new ones. Foreign influences were always
operating from the earliest influences of Egypt, Babylonia, Assyria and Persia through the Hellenistic period, the contacts with Arab culture in the Middle Ages, the humanistic tradition of the Renaissance down to the influence of Protestantism on the development of Reform Judaism. One or the other aspect or tendency may have become especially stressed or become dominant, but until the close of the eighteenth century there was never a racial break with the main tradition and characteristic form which Judaism assumed from Ezra to Akiba (C.135 A.D.) Rather it was constantly reinterpreted in the course of centuries and adhered to with astonishing fidelity. Some of the important virtues in Jewish religion are honouring parents, deeds of steadfast love, attendance twice daily at worship, hospitality to wayfarers, visiting the sick, dowering brides, accompanying the dead to the grave, peacemaking in community and in family life.

Before trying to know Wesker's views on art it becomes rather absolutely imperative to comprehend the real meaning of the term "art". The consideration of art has from the time of Plato been an inevitable concern of the social philosopher and is coming to be recognised as of first importance for the student of social sciences. So far from being concerned only with paintings, museums, poems in books and symphonies in concert halls, it is rather to be identified with the whole process of intelligent or directed activity. Used in this sense, art is
distinguished from and contrasted with nature and is the name for that deliberate and controlled contrivance by which man interferes with nature in the interests of realizing its intrinsic possibilities. A consideration of art is then tantamount to a consideration of the whole civilization. The history of art as the history of human contrivance would comprise the whole enterprise of mankind — handicraft, industry, and medicine, institutions governmental, legal, educational and religious. From the point of view of the social scientist, considering the whole economy of human interests, art may be described as reason or intelligence in operation. Reflection upon art is thus critical reflection upon all the distinctively human activities of human beings, the methods by which they modify a world which was not made for them but in which they have to grow.

John Russell Taylor who has so often been hostile to Wesker's work calls Wesker a "committed artist." In his essay "Art — Therapy or Experience", Wesker points out that art is serious and is not a "hobby." He insists that the people of England need not look to art to "fill in" their increasingly large number of leisure hours. Wesker is still on the attack when he says:

To associate the need for art with the increase of leisure is false; the difference is the real and important one because it affects our approach. You don't read, go to theatres or listen to music because
you're bored or because there's nothing better to do — this reduces art to a mere makeshift. You read books out of a burning human need to share another man's thoughts and experience, out of a compelling curiosity for the story he has to tell; you listen to music because without it your spirit must dry and shrivel; music is a release, a stimulant, a need — like a blast of fresh air — not a mere noise to fill the silence between bored bites of food.

Wesker believes that arts are the means through which men are given the chance to comprehend the marvellous nature and complexity of their lives. It is the artist who has inspired the politician, the architect who has shaped the pattern of man's daily life. He believes that "the artist's work is a battlefield where ideas are fought and values affirmed."

Wesker ponders that through art we may comprehend and, to some extent, change social injustices, and this thing enables us to come to terms with life. Wesker says of himself, "I would give anything to be able to convince myself that as an artist I can do no more than ply my craft and trust that the little ripples my pebble has caused will grow in ever-widening circles." In a lecture, Wesker has defined the true artist as a man who is able to assimilate all that has been passed on him, and who understands:

not that he is a man of our time, but that he is a man at the end of a long line of all time; not that he uses
twentieth century eyes, but he uses twenty centuries of man's accumulated sensibilities and experience.

The lecture Wesker delivered at the invitation of a group of artists in Tokyo in 1968 reflects Wesker's growing concern most fully dramatised in The Freinds with the fragmentation of art from life and of human experience from community.

Wesker is of the view that art makes people believe that they are part of humanity and tells them that "they are not alone not only in their attempts to make a better world but in their private pains and confusions also." Art is considered as a key to life and having the function of stirring the human spirit. But to underline the fact that this key should not be twisted to fit the cause of offensive didacticism Wesker emphasises that art is also a sort of hymn in praise of man. Wesker expresses the view in Theatre Why that "the true artist knows that past is too rich with endeavour, suffering, and achievement to be dismissed and ignored." Wesker complains that the artist is not really a respected person in society, but says that he can be dispensed with because he "accepts the role of a clown." At one time Wesker believed strongly that the work and life of any artist should be seen as a whole; the knowledge of a writer's life gave the right perspective to his public utterances, whether dramatic or academic. In an unpublished lecture, The Nature of Development Wesker extends the usual concept of the artist presenting his raw material (life, truth, reality) in one of a variety of ways _ naturalistic, absurdist, symbolic or whatever
by dividing raw material also into categories, 'what is absurd in reality'; or 'what is paradoxical in reality' so that:

the artist is dealing with what is absurd in reality in a naturalistic form as Pinter sometimes does, or he's dealing with naturalistic aspects of reality in an absurd form which is what I think is happening in Beckett's Godot.

Wesker's plays, too, both depict, in what happens in them, and employ, his own marshallings of order out of chaos, the desperate life-or-death pursuit for an understanding of the complex world we live in.

Wesker shared in common with all artists, the function of exploring reality. It means nothing to think of his plays and stories as social realism — a term he has always resented because it blinded people to all those other elements in his work he had always hoped would be recognised — the paradoxical, the lyrical, the absurd, the ironic, musical, farcical and so on. Wesker says that optimism in art is "the result not of happy endings and joyful exclamations but of the recognition of truths — secondary ones — whether the truth is a sad one or not."

Wesker does not ponder that any artistic manifestation leads immediately to action whether it is great art or not. What he actually means vis-a-vis his plays is that one comes away with a more immediate feeling about them. He does not think that this is the kind of thing that has a delayed action, with the possible
exception of The Four Seasons. All the others are fairly simple immediate theatrical pieces.

Wesker remarks that the handling on even in the relatively straightforward forms of lecture and article, is not too easy for the creative writer because of the change of mental gear involved. He says:

"It seems to me that artists should never lecture because the two activities involve disciplines so different as to bring about a conflict leading to paralysis when both are attempted by the same person. The re-creative process we call art contains an intuitive logic which is not necessary to substantiate; the intellectual process on the other hand demands the endless substantiation of fact and figure, thesis and antithesis, qualification and definition: the unending accumulation of scholarship. To lecture is to marshal the knowledge accumulated by great scholarship. It is the application of one's intelligence to fitting together the known parts of the history of many things in a way that shapes possible understanding of man's behaviour. On the other hand, to re-create experience, as the artist does, is to apprehend truths about man's behaviour, from the small clues of one's personal and imaginative life."

In thinking about the structure of his work Wesker has come to consider a possible theory about any work of art. Wesker
assumes that all art is the re-creation of experience, and the re-creative act takes place under two headings — one is "the organizing of experience" and the other is "the transformation of experience" — transformation that is, into poetry. From such a theory one may analyse a work of art to discover how much is organizing and how much is transforming an experience. As Wesker believes, the more moments of transformation one can find, the greater the work of art. Wesker says, "Seventy-five per cent of Roots is organization of experience. Moments such as when Beatie looks at herself in the mirror after her bath and discovers the lumps in her body — that for me is transformation into poetry."

In the final lecture Fears of Fragmentation itself, there is a shift away from the original concept of community art underlying Centre 42, towards a proposal for neighbourhood centres that would be as much people’s universities as continuous festivals. And this shift shows that Wesker no longer considers it the function of the artist to be at the beck and call of any and every town or village. The suggestion in Tarnished Virtues and Confused Manners that "our cities should be built around our centres of art and not our town halls" (p.63) is an opening but subordinate point in an elaborate argument about artistic values, but in Golden City the belief that "our city’s heart is its gardens, concert halls, theatres, swimming pools" (p.182) is not illustrative of but specific to the play’s subject matter, the building of cities.

Wesker is an unconscious craftsman, yet he has ranged from
the almost expressionist dominance of setting over characters in *The Kitchen*, to the impressionism of *Golden City*, to the entirely logical yet un-pin-downable narrow flow of *The Wedding Feast*. His technique of characterization also matures from play to play. Stylistically, too, his command over language in the plays increases from the functional competence of *The Kitchen* and from the instructive verbal exuberance of the Kahns in *Chicken Soup*. He has always been at home in faithfully reproducing speech patterns of particular classes and of particular localities — from Norfolk to the fading north-eastern echoes of *The Friends*. But from *Chips* onwards the language of the plays shows more considerable dramatic depth and variation in theatrical tone. Structurally we can say that from *The Kitchen* onwards, and particularly after the trilogy, Wesker has learnt more fully to exploit the possibilities of the chronicle form in the short interacting scenes of *Chips* and *Golden City*.

VI

Wesker's Critical Writings on the Theatre.

At the very outset it would be pertinent to remember that the choice of drama on the part of Wesker seems to have come from an innate learning towards the theatre; he had histrionic tendencies and had cousins who were keen amateur actors and drew Wesker into their productions. In fact, Wesker was attached to the stage while still in school, and joined an amateur acting group in 1945. And finally it was through Lindsay Anderson, who was working at the Royal Court Theatre, that Wesker began his own
connection with the Royal Court Theatre. To Wesker the theatre is a battlefield. Though he sees the theatre as something to watch, he obviously has to use words to get his message across. We can find in most of his plays embarrassing stage directions to explain the play. Some British critics, who have taken the trouble to write in some depth about Wesker question his skills, or his ideas. They too seldom credit Wesker with the ability to create electricity in the theatre itself — a quality too important to ignore.

Writing in an article entitled To React — to Respond for the theatrical Journal (Encore, June 1959) Wesker defines the difference between "to react" and "to respond". In Wesker's view, "to react is to behave out of kind of fear" whilst "to respond is to open out one's whole being, in an act of recognition, is to be enthusiastic in an unashamed way ... to react is to feel in a negative way, to respond is to affirm." In his article Casual Condemnations Wesker suggests that overnight reviews should be descriptive and tentative, and that serious criticism should have a longer period for digestion and well-supported analysis. Wesker believes that criticism should never be casual, because in practise "a review, by attracting (or not attracting) a live audience, ensures (or does not ensure), a livelihood," and because ethically it is wrong 'irresponsibly' to draw conclusions in hours about a work that has taken years to accumulate or create.

Wesker is indebted to the Royal Court Theatre because it was
here that the London premier of his first five plays took place. These plays were directed by John Dexter and most of them were designed by Jocelyn Herbert. All except Chips With Everything were first tried out at the Belgrade Theatre, Coventry. In his article entitled Debts to the Court Wesker says:

Their real courage, as far as my work is concerned, lay in their continuing to present it even when they seemed not to comprehend its success. The peak of course, was the presentation of the entire Trilogy in the summer of 1960.

What the Royal Court theatre had given Wesker, as he himself said, was a feeling of working "as a part of a team." But the Royal Court's mistrust about his plays was something he had to encounter time and again as he remonstrated later in a letter to Peter Hall: "Time and time again I have been vindicated, and still I am not trusted. When does trust in me begin to operate instead of trust in you?"

For Wesker, attending and participating in rehearsals was the next best thing to directing himself. The advantage to Wesker of participating in rehearsals was that his final vision of the play could be tested against its actual performance. But it carried the corresponding disadvantage that the author on the spot could be persuaded to make alternations and cuts convenient to the company but, perhaps, not in the best interest of the play. About The Old Ones Wesker wrote in an article entitled Butterflies with Everything:
Rehearsals are amongst the happiest I've known. But the approach of first night brings with it yet another set of tensions. It's nearing the moment when that 'umbilical cord' must be broken. The play is no longer in my hands but entrusted to others. I can bear that: What I can't bear is being made to feel the play is no longer mine, treated like a stranger in my own house.

Of The Friends Garry O'Connor published Wesker's diary account of the rehearsal period in Theatre Quarterly in which he says, "a period of rehearsal prior to an opening is a period of acute difficulty and tension, and many of the comments _ harsh at the time _ should not now be taken too seriously."

Balancing his often repeated statement that the rehearsal period of the first production is the final draft of a play is his absolute conviction that the play's essential existence is as it is conceived in the playwright's mind. The realization, that a playwright can not desist a director from presenting his play differently from his original private vision, is quite baffling to Wesker. He, therefore, says that the writer should have the right to direct the first production of his plays himself. Wesker declares strongly that there is no mystique inherent in the art of directing, it can be learnt; the learning may not make a great director but it can be learnt. He argues, "A new dimension, it is true, can be brought to the production of a play by a director. But are all new dimensions inevitably good dimensions? There does exist the danger of an incorrect
It is to be pointed out that John Dexter has made a far-reaching contribution to Wesker's plays. As Wesker recalls in his diary: "He directed my first five plays and they were his first five." The intensive collaboration and common experience of Wesker and Dexter brought out the potential "perfect" performance of the plays. After looking at the first draft of *The Kitchen* Dexter said, "It needs a middle section. I don't care what it is, except that it's got to be quiet." In *The Old Ones* Dexter had objected to the three members of the younger generation being all men. As Wesker recalls:

John first of all said 'I would like, one of them to be a girl just simply for the sound of it. To have a female voice.' But second he said 'All you've written here belongs to a female and not a male?' Which threw up some interesting points.

No doubt, John Dexter's contribution to the plays of Arnold Wesker has been substantial, but it is difficult to expect that the director and the writer should have absolutely same views on a play. However, problems arose when their (Wesker's and Dexter's) priorities for the plays pulled in different directions. There was more than one break in Wesker-Dexter relationship. Dexter did not like *The Four Seasons* and *Golden City*. Wesker wanted to avoid the directorial conflict by himself directing *The Friends*. But with *The Old Ones* Dexter resumed the relationship. Wesker says "John is a very complex personality."
In an article for the Guardian Wesker says:

From hour to hour moods and relationships change, mercurially. If changes don't take place it's not because of intransigence but because __ because __ because of what? At this late stage I can't tell. I am now schizoid. One of me is calm and full of trust, admiration and faith that me is visible. The other is anguished, resentful, full of dreads __ and hidden.

But it is to be pointed out that the rows between Wesker and Dexter have always been productive and professional, never personal. Their rows enabled them to cancel out each other's capacity for self-indulgence.

Some of the other prominent directors who directed Wesker's plays are __ Henrik Hirsch, William Gaskill, Geoff Bennett, Peter Frango, John Madden, John Harrison and Michael Attenbrough. Wesker's relationship with his directors has had a tense period, as he says: "Directors! What they can't make work they imagine doesn't." Wesker says:

Starting work with a director on a play is a bit like watching a young man woo your daughter. You watch him handle her mood and rhythms and you think Christ! He is being a bit clumsy. So you shut up and sit back and watch her teach him a bit about herself, and you watch him influence her."

At an other place Wesker says:

You have no idea how despairingly impotent one feels
when another has the control of one's play; especially for a writer like myself who also feels one should give the director as much breathing space as possible. My loyalty is split between my play and my director. Invariably the play suffers. Other writers scream and create scenes. I am very anxious to maintain calm for everyone and so I leave things till the last moment by which time it is too late, always imaging the director is going to do something. But he doesn't!"

It was perhaps for this reason that Wesker himself directed *The Four Seasons* at Saville Theatre, London in 1965; *The Friends* at Roundhouse in 1970; *The Old Ones* at Munich Kammerspiel in 1973; and *Love Letters on Blue Paper* at Cottensole Theatre (National Theatre) in 1978. But in foreign countries Wesker has been fortunate enough to have slowly commanded the right (and technique) to control his own plays.

The first production of *The Merchant* took place at Aarhus, Denmark, and there was an anxious period during which various managements looked askance at the play. The script was sent to John Dexter and had enthusiastic results. Wesker recalls in his diary, "Within seconds he was saying: 'I have read The Merchant and isn't it good. It's very good indeed.'" Wesker was doubly unlucky with the Broadway production of this play. On the one hand, Zero Mostel, who was playing Shylock died after the first public performance which was at Philadelphia. Wesker felt guilty and said, "My play had killed him, he dieted for it, and was
under pressure for it and _ silly bugger! He overdid it. Oh Zero, Zero, Zero!” And on the other hand, Clive Barnes, the all powerful drama critic of the New York Times, who liked the play, left his job before the play reached New York and the play was not liked by his successors.

During the American production of *The Merchant* the director, John Dexter, made many unauthorised cuts in the text, and changed the order of Wesker’s scenes. Even at the final stage, when Wesker was in England, Dexter made more cuts. Though Dexter was himself upset about it, but frequent changes undermined respect for the text and increased Wesker’s anxiety:

> What do I feel? A mixture of many things. Some humiliation to be so powerless, to have had it done behind my back before the company. Ashamed that a lot of what gave me pleasure in the play is now gone ... I wanted to write an epic, now it’s neat, Reader’s Digest, and my share is that I can’t really stop it _ the actors’ work, John’s work, the producers’ money are to be considered. And if it is a success I’ll be earning a lot of money on something I don’t really feel is mine.

> There is the humiliation. And a feeling of _ rape.44

Before the British premiere in Birmingham, Wesker not only restored the cuts and original order, but made some changes of his own.

That Wesker does not like the idea of any change by the director during production of a play becomes quite clear from the
American production of *The Merchant*. Wesker refers to the misuse of a writer's play as "rape". Wesker quotes Margaret Drabble on the greater control enjoyed by the novelist with an example that recalls the actors' misrepresentation of the characters in *Six Characters in Search of an Author*. Drabble says:

No I don't even want to write plays. What? Put in a stage direction for a certain kind of yellow hat to be worn, one that's absolutely representative of the character's personality and you can be sure they'll get the wrong bloody colour if they bother to get a hat at all because the actress is allergic to things on her head or something! Give me prose every time where the reader reads exactly what I have written, whether I am making mistakes or not... at least they are my mistakes.

On this kind of change Wesker also gives the example of Harold Pinter who had objected to an Italian production of his *Old Times*, directed by Luchine Visconti. Wesker then tells about the fate of *The Island of the Mighty*, a play John Arden wrote in collaboration with his wife Margaretta D'Arcy. The Royal Shakespeare company found this play "marvellous, magnificent, mythic, poetic" but in this case the author felt that the end product was a distortion of what had been intended as an anti-imperialist play. The fact is that a play belongs to its author under the international law of copyright. Therefore, any attempt of alteration on the part of the director is unjustified.
In his article The Strange Case of Actors' Revolt, Wesker writes in a depressed mood: "Two new plays were to appear under the wing of our major companies. A reputation was going to be consolidated ... Neither play was performed by those companies. The year collapsed in ruins and heartaches. What happened?"

It looks odd that the actors of a company, which has already contracted for a play, should reject that play. The actors at the Royal Shakespeare Company did not like The Journalists. Their objections mainly stemmed from their lack of conviction about the play. Wesker himself was fairly casual about the problems he was setting his directors:

... because I don't see that they are as difficult as you suggest. Just as The Kitchen didn't seem to me to be difficult to stage as I wrote it, and then before the production everybody said how difficult it would be — yet when we actually put it on in two weeks, somehow it all fell into place. I think that after a while one learns to trust one's instincts. In The Journalists it's only that you've got more people to keep occupied, and at the same time keep quiet, while something else is going on. That's not impossible — a straightforward theatrical problem."

In Journey into Journalism Wesker says about The Journalists:

It must be set like The Kitchen, all departments on stage at once ... to the rear of the stage, a large scream of the machine which, as the end approaches,
slowly begins to move and spit out the sheets of newsprint with its attendant noise in the background.

David Jones had commissioned *The Journalists* and was to direct it. But David went on holiday, leaving the casting to Maurice Daniels, who passed it on to a director, John Barton. The resulting confusion led to the play's not appearing in the booking schedule as arranged. The artistic director, Trevor Nunn took over the responsibility and proposed a rewrite for production at the Royal Shakespeare Company's small Stratford auditorium, The Other Place. Wesker disliked The Other Place because it was too small and seemed short on adequate technical resources. Wesker wrote to Trevor Nunn angrily:

> You have a right not to like *The Journalists*: the actors have the right not to want to perform it; David Jones has the right to cool off a play; and it is no crime to have mismanaged affairs as you described it to me when we met so that the wrong person offered the roles to the actors ... I understand all that. But who is to pay for all these shifts and failings?

In an interview with Ronald Hayman, while talking about the production of *Golden City* Wesker said:

> The production really didn't work. I think Bill was unhappy finally -- there was a point at which he said, 'I realized this just isn't my kind of play' and it needed an energy really in the production that should have been able to cover up all the structural
Wesker has instructed that there should be separate sets of old and young characters for the production of the play. But in the London production one set of actors played both parts. In this regard Wesker says in preface To Revised Edition, "After the London productions in which the director made the mistaken and crippling decision (with which I foolishly agreed) to have one set of actors play both the old and young protagonists, I thought the play was irretrievably flawed." Nigel Lewis asked Wesker why he had not resisted Bill Gaskill's and John Dexter's agreement that there should not be separate sets of old and young characters. Wesker explained that this was partly because he had not the power, the play having passed out of his hands; and partly because of a phenomenon which Wesker described in Plays and Players article (February 1974) namely "suggestions for changes in text, characterization, emphasis or rhythm which seem perfectly sensible but which are wrong for reasons the author has forgotten."

The rehearsal conflicts between the director and actors affected the London production of The Friends. Determined to direct himself, Wesker turned down an opportunity to have it staged at the Royal Court by William Gaskill. After some months, Eddie Kulukundis, a shipowner, making his first independent venture into theatrical management, gave Wesker a chance to direct it in England. They managed for a very good cast and Wesker invited the actors to his farm-house in Wales for a week's
holiday. In that week and the following rehearsal period Wesker antagonised them to the point where they were reluctant to get direction from him. Wesker felt that they were all limited by the conditioning and the insecurity they had acquired in the conventional theatre. So Wesker thought that the contribution of the cast should only be executive: "to co-operate with actors in finding the best production approach to that concept, yes, that's natural, and inherent in the theatre anyway." But from the actors' point of view Wesker was quite inexperienced as a director. Victor Henry who played Ronald called Wesker "a bad director," and his philosophy was totally opposed to that of Wesker. A tug of war for dominance followed and as a result the play suffered. Wesker felt that his idea of directing the play himself did not work out. And in 1974 Wesker said, "I don't think I've quite recovered from that disastrous production of The Frinds in London. It was the director's fault _ my fault. I allowed the actors to be terrorized by one other actor."
Notes


33. Arnold Wesker, quoted by Charles S. Spencer in "Arnold Wesker as a Playwright," The Jewish Quarterly
37. Arnold Wesker quoted by Glenda Leeming in Wesker the Playwright, p. 78.
42. Arnold Wesker, quoted by Glenda Leeming in Wesker the Playwright, p. 16.
43. Arnold Wesker, quoted by Glenda Leeming in Wesker the Playwright, p. 132.
44. Arnold Wesker, quoted by Glenda Leeming in Wesker the Playwright, p. 135.
45. Margaret Drabble, quoted by Glenda Leeming in *Wesker the Playwright*, pp.15-16.


