

# CATCHING UP WITH WESKER

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“How terribly strange to be 70” wrote the young Paul Simon (*Bookends*, 1967), conjuring images of “old men lost in their overcoats waiting for the sunset”. A generous five-hour interview with Arnold Wesker shortly before his 70th birthday confirms that this image bears no resemblance to the prolific playwright old friends call ‘Wizzie’. His continuous output includes 42 plays, four books of short stories, two collections of essays, a children’s book and an autobiography. He also crosses continents for audiences discerning enough to value his work.

On the day of the interview, I lunch with Arnold and Dusty Wesker, in her Hove townhouse. After 35 years of marriage Arnold fell in love with an old friend, without falling out of love with his wife. Arnold and Dusty separated, salvaging an admirable *modus vivendi*, which enables our meeting to take place in Dusty’s kitchen. Delicious home-cooked food (parsnip soup, wild rice risotto and apple strudel) is served on blue and white dishes, collected during the long years of their marriage.

Dusty remains friendly, vivacious, warm and welcoming. Arnold remains sardonic, mercurial, fervent and flirtatious. I know, because I am eating lunch with characters immortalised in plays written some 45 years earlier – plays which are now part of the canon of English Literature. The relationship between an unknown interviewer and those with scenes from their lives preserved for perpetuity is unequal. It feels a little like dropping in on the Rochesters and asking between

mouthfuls of rocket, “Are you still teaching, Jane?”

In advance of this interview I was sent *Catching Up With Wesker* (2002), an elegant brochure marking Arnold Wesker’s 70th birthday and summarising his achievements, thus far. The foreword is a quote from Wesker’s friend ‘Maggie’ (Margaret Drabble), noting “Arnold Wesker’s reputation has survived the vicissitudes of fashion, and it is now easier to see the lasting strengths and variety of his work.” The brochure includes examples of reviews written decades apart which consistently label him as “the unique outsider in the British Theatre” (Richard Bryden, 1966), and “the British theatre’s congenital outsider” (Michael Billington, 2000). But Wesker’s own *crie de coeur* in the Prologue of his autobiography remains, “I want to be here, to belong”.

This particular child of the Jewish East End was delivered by the father of Oliver Sacks, (author of *Awakenings*), on 24 May 1932 at Mother Levy’s, Underwood Street, off the Whitechapel Road. He was the third and youngest child of Joe and Leah Wesker, who respectively arrived in England from Russia and Transylvania in the early 1900s. Known ancestors include a *shochet* (ritual slaughterer), a *chazan* (cantor), a *sofer* (writer of holy texts) and various Talmudic scholars and rabbis. Sadly a brother was born and died within the eight year gap between Arnold and his beloved older sister, Della.

Wesker’s first home at 447a Hackney Road, Bethnal Green was followed by ‘rooms’ in Fashion Street, then a council flat in Weald Square, Hackney. Arnold loves taking friends on walking tours of the East End, and for years

dreamed repeatedly of living there and running his own restaurant – enthusiasms apparent in his earliest works.

Whereas Harold Pinter, his contemporary and arguably his antithesis, attended the prestigious Grocers’ Grammar School, Wesker left Upton House Secondary minus the coveted Matriculation necessary for university entrance. He maintains that his poor spelling, punctuation and grammar

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would have prevented him passing exams, even had his parents been able to finance higher education. Wesker explains, “I am only good at what I am good at. I was not university material.” The three universities who have conferred Honorary Doctorates upon him beg to differ!

Arnold Wesker could have celebrated his barmitzvah as the Second World War ended, but his parents cast off tradition, embracing new socialist ideals to change the world. I indulge my imagination. Had the children of Perchik from *Fiddler on the Roof* left Siberia and journeyed to England, would they too have joined London’s Communist Party alongside Wesker’s

Arnold Wesker with grandson Werner





AW (aged 4) Della and Bryan

parents, uncles and aunts? *Chicken Soup With Barley* (1958) documents the stubbornness with which his family clung to Stalinist ideology, ignoring mounting evidence of its corruption.

I ask about revealing intimate secrets in his plays for, despite changes of name and a rearrangement of letters from Arnold, (meaning eagle strength) to Ronald, identifiable family foibles are documented alongside family strengths in *The Wesker Trilogy: Chicken Soup with Barley* (1958), *Roots* (1959) and *I'm Talking About Jerusalem* (1960), as well as the meticulous autobiography *As Much As I Dare* (1994). Wesker responds, "heroes must be portrayed with their flaws".

After lunch we climb to the top floor of Dusty's house, to a study where the attic ceiling slopes, a prerequisite for rooms in which Wesker can work. He brings evidence of differing and delicate styles of his published work and I am then privileged to hear him read, which he does well. There are no traces of stereotyped Jewish East End accents. His vowels are honed by childhood elocution lessons – a surprising contrast to his Socialist background. And he constructs rich, concise sentences, using carefully chosen words which seem to visibly undulate through the air.

At 70, the voice remains strong, melodious, expressive and clear. Written words spring to life as he reads of "private aches" weighted against

"good great causes". I wonder if the roots of Wesker's battles with directors lie in a simple truth, that ultimately he knows how to read his own lines best of all? The reading ends and crossing his arms, Wesker observes my response.

The man is passionate about his children, about his plays, about Israel and about his Jewishness. These passions are embedded in the mosaic of Wesker's work. He recounts an incident when school bullies punched his son, Lindsay Joe, in the eye for no reason other than resentment. Taking this personal family story Wesker draws analogies with September 11 and the Twin Towers tragedy. A seed is already planted and he contemplates writing a new play on the nature of violence.

Asked about his favourite play, Wesker observes that like his children, he loves them all for different reasons. However, he considers *Shylock* (1976) as

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possibly his finest play, and undoubtedly a 'favourite child'. *Shylock* skillfully challenges religious bigotry evident in *The Merchant of Venice*, dismissing all need for Shakespeare's case pleading the humanity of Jews. Wesker's *Shylock* simply states with dignity, "My humanity is my right, not your bestowed and gracious privilege." Wesker believes in this play's contemporary relevance, regretting that whilst

Turkish audiences greet it with acclaim, British audiences are denied its performance. Wesker wants the Royal Shakespeare Theatre Company to stage *Shylock* as a contrast to their regular "rehashing" of *The Merchant of Venice* and he attributes his failure to secure its performance to latent anti-Semitism. He now appeals for Jewish projects to mount a commercial production of his play, which he believes would offer some counterbalance to the pernicious myths Shakespeare's play continues to reinforce.

I ask Wesker about general omissions of the Holocaust from his work. He was 13 as the Second World War ended, and he finds it curious that he neither remembers learning about the horrors and Anglo-Jewry's narrow escape, nor does he recall a dramatic moment of not knowing one day and then knowing the next. Wesker explains: "I know now, it was something I could not handle. In my view of the world, and in my considerations of Jews and Jewishness, it is major." In answer to my question about Wesker's identity (Jewish playwright or playwright who is Jewish) he describes himself as "first and foremost a writer but there is no doubt that being Jewish permeates my writing, as blood through my body".

Unlike his parents he is not one to join movements or organisations. "I prefer to respond to individual issues". But he did belong to Habonim in the 1940s. I tell of a friend in her mid-60s who knew him as a *rikkudim* (Israeli dancing) enthusiast. She thought

John Dexter's 1959 production of *The Kitchen*

(correctly) that Wesker would not remember her. “He was so far above me – all the girls had a crush on him”. Hearing this story Wesker smiles and claims not to have known of his popularity at the time. Wesker remembers celebrating the very first Yom Haatzmaut (Israel’s Independence Day) with a *hora* danced on the pavement outside Kingsway Hall, Holborn. He has contemplated *aliyah* (living in Israel), but family ties in England have been too strong. Today Wesker remains involved with Israel’s theatrical companies, and has just learnt that the Cameri Company will stage the world première of his adaptation of Aharon Appelfeld’s novel, *Badenheim 1939*.

Arnold expresses distress both at Israel’s behaviour and the way people perceive Israel. His autobiography, published in 1994, satirises an imagined Palestinian manipulation to recruit world opinion, warning that one day there will be a United Nations Conference, singling out Zionism as racism. He mentions a correspondence with Shimon Peres some years ago, when mourning “Israeli arrogance” Wesker had cautioned about the deleterious consequences should Israel fail to engage seriously in a public relations war. Being a signatory to the recent British Friends of Peace Now advertisement in *The Jewish Chronicle* was therefore not uncharacteristic; to Wesker solutions lie in the words, the debates, the discussions and the dialogues that he deems to be more powerful than silence.

This playwright, however, now lives mainly in what he has termed “self-imposed incarceration”, near Hay-on-Wye. This rural location offers only limited opportunities to see plays. I ask what he looks for on his rare visits to the theatre and he explains that he hopes “to be emotionally moved and intellectually stimulated - preferably both together. I look for a quality of mind, at work poetically.” Wesker’s advice to emergent playwrights would be to remember “that the component parts of a play are not finally what drama is about, but rather it is the quality of the writer’s mind, and the power of thought and the power to perceive and contribute to a mainstream, made up of individual towers.”

I ask about his own favourite playwright. He says it is rather that he has favourite plays, yet concedes he would always go to see a new Pinter play – and then come away trying “to guess what it meant”. Wesker’s own emergence as a playwright in the late 1950s was as something of a *wunderkind*.... He says, “I don’t know how to put this without appearing vain, but I always knew something was going to happen....partly by the way people responded to me.” He was in company with those other ‘angry young men’, Harold Pinter, John Osborne and Bernard Kops, but maintains, “I was never an angry young man, none of us were; it was a silly, journalistic misnomer.” Wesker, however, is angry now. He asks, “aren’t you angry; likely my anger will coincide with yours?”

The interview with Wesker speeds by. Stories from a lifetime’s energetic love of family, humanity, and of course, the theatre intermingle: Dusty making chicken soup with barley for 250 people on an opening night of the play in Paris; the four-day Aldermaston March headed by Bertrand Russell and Robert Bolt, “with acts of civil disobedience unknown since the suffragettes”; imprisonment as a member of the Committee of 100 during CND days; bagels, smoked salmon and cream cheese taken round to John Lennon’s house, with hopes of his signed commitment to Wesker’s Centre 42 Project – known now as The Roundhouse. (Lennon interrupted rehearsals to sign-up his support, against Paul McCartney’s advice. Wesker did not get offered so much as a cup of tea!)

Wesker says he sometimes toys with what his last words might be: possibly “now it’s going to get interesting”, but probably not, and he adds, “it’s a pity; as much as the most religious person I would like there to be an afterlife.”

Still a compulsive writer, he fears mediocrity less and less, bouncing back from rejection and believing that each new work he is engaged upon is going to be the masterpiece that will earn him a fortune. In the meantime his fantasy is that a great pop composer will pick up one of his lyrics and make a great song, which would become a huge success. I hope his deserved acclaim will happen, and that there will be many, many more happy returns of the day for Arnold Wesker.

## OLD BOATS

My chest creaks like an old boat  
Left behind, long forgotten  
Only the rotten hulk  
Of past glory and adventure  
Courage, fears  
Heaves on tired tides.  
The wind sighs  
The timber soaks up tears.

We’ll sail no more to Byzantium  
Nor challenge storms  
Round rough capes  
Nor ride high the stern salt waves  
Whom nothing halts.

And yet within this bony barrel  
Beats a young man’s dream  
Which cannot comprehend  
Erosion, rust  
The superseding thrusts of power  
The blunting of lust  
The loss of steam.

Worn sails are down  
Threadbare.  
Gulls croak  
Float here and there  
Their wings sing.  
The old frown  
For there is little left  
To catch the wind of things.

ARNOLD WESKER

In print for the first time

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