

Edward Bond and the Dramatic Child

Ed. David Davis

Published: Trentham Books

Chapter 5: THE SHEET OF GLASS

JOHN DOONA

In the spring of 2001 a group of teachers in Tameside, on the eastern edge of Manchester, began an experiment to explore the use of drama in the delivery of an education which addresses the concerns of being human in the modern world. The ideas of Edward Bond, his belief in both the importance of drama and the imaginative potential of young people, were our starting point.

The project draws from seven Tameside secondary schools and Tameside FE College. In response to pieces offered by Edward Bond, staff and artists met to create a challenging two hour performance and workshop for students. During the workshop the students from all schools worked together. With the exception of the Tameside College students who were studying BTEC Performing Arts, all students were in their first year of studies in GCSE Drama (therefore aged 14 – 15 years old). Following the launch event students worked with staff from their own school for seven weeks before coming together to share. During this time they created a response to the stimulus and drew this into a public performance.

The current chapter will explore three episodes in the developing work. The experiments detailed are taken from the work of the Egerton Park group. Parallel explorations took place in other institutions. The three areas I will explore are; experiencing the imagination, working with image and narratives and creating public theatre.

Section One: The Sheet of Glass

Our first act as a group was to approach Edward Bond. We posed this question: “What does a young person need to think about or to know at this time?” *The Sheet of Glass* was his reply.

The Sheet of Glass

There is a sheet of glass.
You see through to what is beyond.
A window

It keeps out cold and rain.

You paint the back with silver
You see yourself.
The same glass but now it does a different thing
The opposite
You see yourself but not beyond.

At night you dream.
Can't remember who you are.
You go to the mirror to look for yourself.
All you see is the dark.
You can't see through it
.....or anything in it.
You don't know who you are or what's beyond the mirror.
A dream is the opposite of being awake.
Or is it ?
Is a dream a sort of mirror ?

You wake and go to the mirror.
The dream's upset you.
You'd like a mirror which shows you who you are and at the same time lets
 you see what's beyond it.
So you break the mirror.
You cut your hand.
It bleeds.
But it works !
Through the broken gaps you see what's beyond the mirror
- you see other people there and what's happening.
And in the broken mirror still in place you see yourself.
But only bits of yourself.
For every bit you see of what's beyond the mirror you have to lose a bit of
 yourself.
It can't be otherwise.
It is the law of opposites.

Now
The mirror was magic.
Every morning when you washed your face you asked it
"Who's the best person in the world ?"
The mirror looked you straight in the eye and said "You".

But the morning on which it was broken
....it didn't
- and it never did again.
Instead it said :

What are you for ?

What are other people for?

The Sheet of Glass is difficult. It is probably at odds with the material we, as teachers, might ordinarily offer to young people in the classroom. Ordinarily our instincts are for the direct. We present narratives that are accessible and immediate and pursue our “humanising” goals through exploring the meanings of the situations that arise. Edward Bond gave us something different. He says, with regard to audiences, “If we trust the audience they become artists... The audience’s experience becomes part of the practice of their daily lives. It is the difference between a photograph and a ring at the door.” (Bond, 1998, p336) The same is true for young people encountering Bond’s work as participants and performers. From his earliest plays he has confronted audiences. In *The Sheet of Glass* there is no compromise to its young audience. By presenting us with a piece that is fundamentally problematic, he gives authority to the young people.

During the Manchester leg of the Classworks’ tour of Bond’s *The Children*, a young cast member had commented in regard to Bond, “He doesn’t hide things from us. He knows we’ll understand.” The comment was made at the end of a process which had allowed the young person to absorb Bond’s creative work. It expresses a sympathy with the playwright which we had yet to win in the current project.

When *The Sheet of Glass* was offered to our young people we had to be ready for the possibility of flight from the expectation expressed by it. And we had to be prepared to counter this flight. It seems that there is no place in our culture for meaning. Our culture is dramatised but is dramatised meaninglessly. Our televisions endlessly tell us stories but they are stories which do not offer us any insight into our situation. The reaction of young people to Bond’s deep questioning here can be to turn away, to express impatience and a desire to stay within the restricted terms allowed by the parent culture.

In working with the Egerton Park group, I ease students into approaching Bond with:

We do not live in a world that asks us to question. Indeed, we are told not to. But it is our ability to question that makes us human. We aren’t just special kinds of objects in the world. We are human beings who think and need to understand. Each one of us is capable of asking the BIG questions... and answering them for ourselves. By believing that these problems are not beyond you Edward Bond is showing you great respect.

The countervailing response to the flight-response is the silence. The silence comes before the flight. It is as if the young people hear it and then leap to defend themselves from the danger. Bond says, “A child asks what, why, how – the questions of the great philosophers.” (Bond 1998, p261) It is this conviction which compels him to offer such work as *The Sheet of Glass*. But in the same essay he says, “...innocence protects itself by being corrupt.” (Bond, 1998, p252). Young people have developed survival strategies for living in the world. These strategies, Bond says, corrupt the young. Their response to Bond’s questioning is a symptom of this corruption.

The silence and the flight are a paradox. Bond's piece has "rung the doorbell" but the young people seem to recognise the danger of engaging with the questions. The group need to understand their responses before they can understand the piece. *The Sheet of Glass* leads us to the exploration of identity. It becomes important now for us to begin to untangle its questions: who are we and what is our place in the world? It is addressed to young people, standing, as they do, at the point of separation from the structures of authority which have thus far sought to contain their self-knowledge. To begin to allow the young people to understand themselves we look to Bond's concept of the imagination.

Section Two: Experiencing the Imagination

In the summer of 1985 Bond's trilogy of nuclear holocaust, *The War Plays* (Bond, 1998), was staged by the Royal Shakespeare Company. In the *Commentary on the War Plays* (Bond, 1998) that was to follow Bond gives us his account of the theatre necessary to the modern world and begins to uncover the concept of imagination that has become the cornerstone of his thought. In the *Commentary* he writes,

Comment: I think this is right.. it doesn't have a page ref because it's general? Right?

I devised a scheme for improvisation by students at Palermo University. A soldier returns home with orders to choose a baby from his street and kill it. Two babies live in his street: his mother's and his neighbour's (...). As I planned the improvisation I realised how it would end. I noted the end in my notebook.

Next day the students improvised. I asked them to act honestly what the soldier would do. The soldier came home and was welcomed by his mother. She showed him her baby. He went next door. His neighbour welcomed him and gave him her baby to hold. The action became very slow. The soldier seemed to be staring into a watch as if he tried to tell the time from its workings. He gave the child back to the neighbour. Then he went home and killed his mother's baby. In my notebook I had written that this is what he would do. He and the other students were surprised that he had done it. They were surprised when the next student to play the soldier also murdered the "wrong" baby. All the students played the soldier and none of them could bring himself to kill the 'right' baby. It was a paradox. (Bond, 1998, p247)

The Palermo Improvisation describes the uncovering of a paradox in which the human individual acts in a manner which, to the understanding of the world, should be impossible. We all know that "Blood is thicker than water" and that "We look after our own". Clearly the soldier will kill the neighbour's child in order to save his own sibling. But the paradox is unavoidable. If we are even surprised ourselves at the answer that we have given, what is the source of our answer?

Bond continues, "The unconscious sees through us and our social corruption and sends us messages of our humanity, ingeniously and persistently trying to reconcile the divisive tensions in our lives. Our unconscious makes us sane." (Bond, 1998, p250) Elsewhere he will re-shape this "unconscious" as the imagination and make it the source of all human value.

The Palermo Improvisation is seminal. Its importance lies in identifying the moment at which an individual is able to recognise the extent to which his or her own thoughts are occupied by ideology. It is important that the paradox is revealed by an act of creativity. In Bond's framework it is the Imagination which supplies the surprising answer.

In our work with students we followed Bond's description above as a lesson plan. Students were invited to enact their own answers to Bond's situation. The responses noted by him fifteen years earlier proved remarkable consistent. Students' solutions are loaded with imagination: The soldier kills himself rather than harm another. The soldier kills his own brother to contain the suffering. The soldier accepts the court-martial. The soldier kills the officer. The solutions are simple but clearly not the expected. The soldier does not kill the 'right' child.

Immediately after the improvisations we begin to discuss the student's responses. In the workshop I go on to ask: "Why has no-one done the 'obvious' thing? Were you just trying to be dramatic or original? This is a possibility and there is a use of the word "imaginative" where we mean simply 'original' or 'unexpected'."

At this point it is time to explain Edward Bond's concept of the Imagination. I continue by asking:

Had I told you the soldier's story and simply ASKED you to TELL ME what he might do, or if we had spoken of it in an "ordinary" way (i.e. in the site of the ideologised world) you may have given me the "obvious" answer. Really, Edward Bond says, this is the world's answer. He tells us that many of the thoughts we think are our own are not. Because of how the world is organised, we carry thoughts around in our heads as if they were our own. If it were not true, for example, that "we look after our own" we might not continue to compete to own more than other people, continue to be, as we might say, "competitive consumers". Without this our society, our economic system, could not work. BUT, Edward Bond's theory says, we can give another answer. We are not limited to the answers of the "world-in-our-head". We hold onto a "deeper" place that is ourselves. Edward Bond calls this our Imagination. He says we understand the world, firstly as children, by telling ourselves stories about the world. When our imagination speaks, as in your creation of these scenes, it gives its own answers. It speaks "humanly". It doesn't say that "We look after our own"; it says, "We cannot create our own happiness on another's suffering." If this is true don't we have to start again to understand who we are? Don't we have to look very closely at what we believe, feel, understand, think?

In opening up such a discussion the first response can be hostility. You are asking students to consider that they do not 'know themselves'. That what they think they believe may not be a valid belief at all. In the same way that the theatre establishment and Bond's own audiences can be hostile to the challenges of his work, students resist this apparent attack on their dignity and self-knowledge. Bond has always been the one to turn the lights on at the party.

Three things prevent the students from turning away.

Firstly, their understanding of themselves is in flux. Bond says, “From the beginning the child needs a total explanation of the world.” (Bond 1995, pvii.) And at this point in their development young people are in the full grip of this need. As they move to adulthood the desire becomes urgent. But the explanation of the world is also under constant challenge. One student, Vicky Shelmerdine, commented in notes after the project, ‘My understanding of the world is still confused, in the making.’ It is this recognition of confusion and desire for clarity that creates the conditions for the challenge of Bond’s work.

Secondly, in as much as Bond’s theory of imagination implicates a pervasive, malign authority, for the young, the example of how authority can control a person’s idea of themselves may be very close at hand; their own recent childhood. Parents project their own (Authority’s) concept of ‘The Good Child’ onto their off-spring from birth. As young people emerge from the sphere of this authority and complete the rituals of rebellion they are willing to recognise the ferocity of Authority’s control. In a written statement on the project Vicky Shelmerdine gives her assessment of authority as, ‘Authority is lost in this world, messed up. People have authority, people who don’t deserve it. I don’t like it. It’s wrong. Why should authority be given out? I think it’s used wrongly, unfairly.’ Of course, this is a statement of general understanding but the thought is expressed in response to her work with Bond. She has found an ally and feels supported in her felt response to her own life. It is in this way that we can consider Bond a ‘popular’ writer. His thoughts are rooted in a general experience.

The third reason that students do not run from Bond is this: the experience of the Palermo Improvisation has occurred amongst us. It must be explained. The students are struck by what their own creative response has given out, and especially since there seems to be a consistency across the group. So, not only does Bond reflect a general experience, he also creates new experiences for participants in his work and his audiences which demand explanation.

Bond’s theatre involves moments in which individuals face themselves in need of understanding. In my own experience of Bond’s self-revelatory aesthetic the profundity of the thought that you hold ideological beliefs as your own is uniquely troubling. But it is also the fundamental act of separation necessary for both creation and ‘human’ living. It makes possible the self-interrogation needed to understand the truth of your place within the world. In my work with young people it is sometimes possible to recognise the moment at which they begin to understand the occupation of their “selves”. They begin to separate themselves from their “occupied” selves. It is in the vitality with which they approach the next stages of the work, the trust they place in their imaginations and the depth of the resulting theatre product which attests to their understanding.

Section Three: Image and Narrative

i. Finding the image

In a discussion of the urgency of theatre's task Bond says, "Theatre finds images to reveal (the) hidden drama so that its reality may not drive us into extinction." (Bond 2000, p192) and refers to imagery as, "The means by which situations are known." (Bond 2000, p185)

All of Bond's plays 'find the image'. It is the image created by Bond's stage pictures, held in gesture and word and situation, that carry meaning and impact. A moment where meaning is gathered like a knot. It is what Bond calls a Theatre Event (TE). Bond says, "Drama is a complex intervention in reality to get at truths society obscures or denies." (Bond, 1998, p300-301) It is at the moment of the Theatre Event that the meaning is revealed.

In the summer of 2000 a Manchester community theatre group, Bare Witness, staged the first performance on British soil of Bond's *The Crime of the Twenty-first Century*. As I directed the production I became strikingly aware of what Bond refers to as Theatre Events (TE). As the play opens Hoxton is alone in the vast empty wilderness beyond the city. It could be a scene from one of Bond's earlier post-nuclear holocaust plays, but the city has been systematically and painstakingly felled by lorries with chains: lorries sent by the city's own ruling authority. The wasteland separates the secure from the criminal; the suburb from the prison. To live in the wasteland is a crime in itself. Hoxton, trying to wash the dust from her faded clothes, hears a sound. In the Manchester production she raises a stick. She wheels around. She looks to the sky. Her breathing is shallow. She listens. Her pointless weapon raised. We do not hear the helicopter gun-ship. Hoxton does. She swipes at the authority that has laid waste to her home as she might swipe at flies. She is suddenly frail and old. A worn rag. Her head twists but her body cannot follow. In the swipe of her stick and the twist of her neck we see the terror of the individual caught at rest. The foolishness of believing in your own sense of security. Hoxton's gesture is a moment that reveals a social truth; a Theatre Event.

In the next stage of our work with our young people we begin to follow Bond's process and to 'find the image'. In the following sections I will attempt to both capture the workshop experience and provide an analysis of it. I trust the stylistic shifts will be accessible to the reader.

Speaking in images is important for another reason. Bond sees the fact of human language as the source of our desire for justice. He writes,

It is the self-consciousness sustained by human language that promotes both change and our ability to change. It is a basic dynamic. It originates in the speaker's sense of his or her right to be, to exist, and that this right ought to be acknowledged by the listener. It is the origin of our desire for justice. (Bond 2000, p6)

In this 'desire for justice' our language is human, but Bond considers it axiomatic that the world is owned and therefore unjust. One site of this owning-authority's control is the control of language. The degree to which we are able to understand our

own situation is determined by the language we are 'given' to speak. That is, our form of life generates our language; the conditions of our existence give us the language we speak. When a central condition of our existence is the management of an unjust world our language finds its limits at the limits of the allowable truth. Our language has been bled of its full explanatory function. An aspect of Bond's work has been the attempt to put back in place a language that allows a fuller understanding of our situation.

Bond indicates that we cannot 'talk' or 'reason' our way out of ideology's control. He says, "Reason alone cannot help us to understand our situation humanly, or even use ideology against ideology." (Bond 2000, p179) and continues, "Reason may be corrupted but imagination cannot be because it has no ideas – and so drama may directly confront imagination without the distortions of corrupted self-consciousness (and reason in its service)" (Bond 2001, p181) So for Bond there is no 'talking-cure' for the occupation of ourselves. We need to create acts of imagination.

As a part of the process we find the moment to expunge speech. We want the imagination to have a clear route into the world. As far as possible not to be mediated by a language that may have been bled of its descriptive power. The young people are invited to speak in images.

We return to the practical. The Egerton Park workshop progresses.

We stand against a wall. Looking into an empty space that is the stage. It calls us. The wall against our backs won't let us retreat. We have to fill the stage. We start with images. Theatre begins where our words fail.

We ask the mirror's blunt question. What are you for? What is your purpose in the world? Again, we're not afraid of the silence. Silence is what divides our work from the meaningless.

Then someone steps forward. When they enter the space they may not yet know what it is they will create. This is encouraged. We trust the imagination. They ask for as many people as they think they need to join them in the space. They begin to place their actors. They are following an imaginative hunch. The teacher may question the creator, to press them to be confident and clear. A picture builds. At this point the 'audience' may not offer ideas or interpret. It is our goal to preserve the clear channel of the creator's imagining. The picture is complete. In one case we see a group crouched, eyes averted, hands busy, heads bowed. They are under the dangerous, indifferent eye of supervisors. Those of us not participating stand back. We repeat the question: "What are you for?" We look at the stage. It is no longer empty. We have a new line in the conversation of our imaginations.

These are all simple things. What matters is the light in which we are able to see them. What matters is meaning. We can all make plays. The point is to make meaning.

When the originator determines that the image is clear and right we empty the space and repeat the process. The images mount. They build on each other, or they reflect an alternative, or they break new ground. As we progress we catalogue each image. We

have images of desperate work, of selling, of dangerous streets, of isolated individuals in empty rooms, a strangely smiling face, an individual under the surveillance of their own family.

Now we need language.

The images are enacted in the order in which they were created. Now each “creator” must give a title to their image. We hear each title with each image. In interview students observe,

Stacey: We used images to give us ideas of what the play was going to be about. Each image had a subject and each subject had words that went with it.

Carol: Each image was a piece of the puzzle so that we could put the jigsaw together.

The images quickly became suggestive of theme, character and situation. The images outlined above move us towards a story of the struggle to find rest and peace under an authority which would have us constantly stimulated and constantly active; a kind of forced and necessary sleeplessness. So the group has an embryonic narrative. At this point we begin to talk about performance. The following conversation ensues:

I ask the group whether we are ready to create a piece of public theatre from the accumulating ideas. One student comments “They won’t know what we’re talking about.” She is challenged by another, “Why not? Are they stupid.?” “No,” comes the reply, “it’s just difficult.” I press the group, asking whether it is possible for us to create a performance that does for the audience what this work of ours has done for us? What has it done for us so far? A student replies, “It has done our head in?”. What does this mean? I pursue, does it mean that we have challenged what we thought of as our understanding of the world?” A student replies, “Yes, it has, it makes me look at everything new.” Can we do that for our friends and family and teachers? “Yes.” “What do we need?” “We need a story.” What sort of story?” I ask finally. “A hard one.”

ii: Finding the Narrative

Bond talks of “storyability”. He says,

The ability to analyse and calculate is characteristic of isolated reason: when it is combined with emotion, to produce imagination, it becomes “storyness” (Storyability etc.). Imagination is essentially storyability. Imagination needs to relate experience as story or as potentially storyable. When experience becomes overwhelming or chaotic stories are told. (Bond, 1996.)

In the account he gives of the self the world is ‘inscribed’ in the imagination in the form of story. Indeed Bond says, “The self is a story. The story relates experience to the real world.” (Bond 2000, p118) And it is certainly true that when a person is asked to tell of who they are they will quickly resort to story. Our identities are largely the collection of stories we tell about ourselves. Bond goes further saying, “When we

introspect we ask: Tell me a story. “(Bond, 2000, p117) For Bond, in the development of our understanding of the world and ourselves the story carries the load of meaning. When it comes to the communication of meaning in drama the process is reversed. We gain an understanding and the imagination drives out meaning as story. Storyability is the bridge from idea to theatre.

In the process we are engaged in our young people wish to move towards a public performance and, therefore, need ‘story’. The process for the group mirrors the act of creation of the dramatist. Bond quotes a letter from Van Gogh to his brother,

You don’t know how paralysing that is, the stare of the blank canvas, which says to the painter ‘you can’t do anything’. Many painters are terrified of the blank canvas, but the blank canvas is terrified of the really passionate painter who dares – and who once and for all has broken the spell of ‘you can’t’ (Bond, unpublished paper, no date.)

The moment of terror at the ‘blank canvas’ does not last long with young people. Perhaps this is because, as Bond says, “Young people are still close to the practical use of imagination. . . . Their imagination is critical. They are open to theatre.” (Bond, 1996, p15.) Perhaps, as observed in our projects, it is because the force of the new self-knowledge gained has created a sense of their own potency as creators. A professional actor employed to work with the project in our third year, a woman who had entered the profession at sixty, reported being very struck by the young people’s serious approach, by the silence that seemed to attend the important moments of the work. It forced a change in her attitude to the young.

To return to the process. The work continues. The group assemble to create their story: Images, ‘headlines’, thoughts are accumulated onto a blank board. The board isn’t blank any longer. But the absence of story is staring back at us like the ‘blank canvas’. The group stand and look at the board. For a time, in silence. We look for the narrative on the wall. We listen to all contributions. We discuss. We refine. The point is not to draw in all images lazily into a plot. The point is to capture the meaning we wish to present. We build a consensus. We are dealing now with a “social mind”. We are writing by committee. But the committee is standing in the same space, looking out from a shared perspective, responding to the same questions, sharing the same understanding. Is it remarkable that a structure emerges so painlessly?

To return to the collection of images noted earlier. The narrative evolves into the following, as re-counted to me in interview by students, but retold in my own words: We are in the near future. A work-place where the work is urgent but meaningless. The authorities constantly re-enforce the sense of urgency in the full knowledge of it’s meaninglessness. A worker catches the supervisors unguarded eye and knows the truth. She walks out. On her way home she passes the non-working poor begging and wailing. She doesn’t give to them and wonders why she doesn’t. She passes the screaming market-traders and wonders why she is appalled. Suddenly she is being chased. Authority has got wind of her ‘free-thinking’. We see that she is ‘chipped’. A biological implant which allows authority to direct her movements and inflict pain. She is stilled. Finally, she returns home. She is visited by her dead mother. Her mother isn’t a ghost, she has been cloned and directed to come to her daughter to re-enforce authority’s thought-plan. Can the individual survive?

In the same interview students' own analysis of their work came as,

Stacey: The images told the story, not the people.

Carol: The future had gone to the past. Like the factory, when you think of the future you don't think of people working in a factory, the machines do everything. But, in ours, everyone did everything manually, and they had no choice....

Stacey: because of the power aspect.

Teacher: So they made people work on machines even though they didn't need to just to keep power over them?

Stacey: It's all about power and control.

At this point it may be worth pausing to consider the role of the teacher-adult in the work. It almost goes without saying that the teacher has no special claim upon the understanding that is growing. We have to abandon the role we have developed as an institutional survival strategy. Each individual is the centre of their own meaning-making. Students and teachers are equal in the sight of the imagination. In an interview with students after the project Stacey Appleby was satisfied that, 'The teachers let us be in control. It wasn't a school situation any more. You (the teacher) said, "Right, make some images." But the images were our own.' By an act of group mind our narrative emerges from the wall. In each of the seven constituent institutions parallel work has been progressing with each group generating their own short collection of scenes.

Section Four : Into Public Performance

i. Performance

The Sheet of Glass has been seminal to all of the Tameside work and to each performance. It has set a tone for the nature of all our work. It challenges staff, students and audience. It seems to sit like a mountain on the landscape. Theatre flows from it in strange and unexpected ways. Bond says,

Theatre dramatises imagination in small seemingly insignificant incidents and in incidents of obvious importance. Drama cannot instruct, it confronts, perplexes and intrigues imagination into recreating reality. (Bond, 1995, pxxxiv)

In an attempt to capture a sense of other work resulting from the Tameside projects what follows is a brief account of a selection of moments from the performances. The images here will be drawn from the work of the full range of participating groups. The details of the process in each institution may be different but the spirit and the experiment is the same.

- An inmate is locked in the role of Dr Mengele. He repeatedly drowns baby dolls in a metal bucket. We cannot escape and ignore the storms of history without repeating them. (Stamford High School)
- A starlet paints her face to meet the world. Her hands are angry. She hates the necessity of meaningless actions and her own compliance. (Two Trees High School)
- A Palestinian child sits on her front step after curfew. She holds her knees and rocks back and forth. She repeats over and over, “I’m just sitting here, I’m just sitting her.” She expects to be at home in the world. This is her protest. (Egerton Park Arts College and Astley High School)
- A young person breaks into a shop to steal the object that will give his life value; a designer coat. That which we believe will fulfil our need for meaning, owned objects, will actually destroy our humanness. (Tameside College)
- A young man has gained the technological elixir of life; he will live forever. Then he recklessly cripples himself. He cannot die. Image: he lies helplessly on the edge of a bed, his head is fallen backwards, his face upside down. He dribbles into his own eyes. We chase the wrong goal and damage our-selves. We create our own tragedies and we know it. (St Damiens’ RC High School.)
- A child’s pet dies. A new one is cloned. The pet dies. Clone another one. The pet dies. Clone another one. The child learns the disposability of life. A parent dies. Owned technology fools us about the real nature of life. (Longendale High School).

Earlier in the process we spoke about narrative. It was suggested by a student that the story should be ‘hard’. In this the young person is showing an understanding of Bond’s statement above. In the interview with students quoted earlier a further discussion ensued regarding the distinction between this drama and the ‘popular’ school drama typified for the students by *Oliver!* Stacey: “Our theatre’s not plastic. Our theatre’s wood. It’s like trees. It’s grown from our imaginations. It’s natural. Organic. It’s not had lots of things put into it to make it fancy. It’s just what it is.” We are creating public theatre from individual acts of imagination. We are up against the embarrassment of meaningfulness. In our general culture drama that seeks meaning is an aberration. Bond says,

Drama may lie. Most modern entertainments – films, TV, news programmes (now part of the entertainment industry) – degrade the human image. So does ‘high art’(...) The human image is exploited and sold and integrated into the dynamic of the economy. (Bond, 2000, p191)

It is amidst the meaningless that the young people come to speak. They are not yet at ease with their own authority. They expect the adult world to respond with; “We won’t be lectured at (and certainly not by the young!)”. It is necessary to reassure. In the interview with students it was said,

Carol: It was scary because we thought no-one would understand.
Teacher: But you carried on?
Stacey: Because we knew it was ours. It was right.

The process of development has revealed to our young people the meaning of their activity. They have dared to speak and make sense. The comment above shows confidence in the clear line from question to imagination to the stage. This is the source of students' confidence in what they will offer. Students are willing to recognise that the performance that they hold responsibility for may be tough. The audience will need to listen to its own response. In interview Carol said,

Our play's not been through a machine, not manufactured for people to come and sit and think "Ah, this is good, let's sing along!" Ours was about something. They didn't 'understand' it, it made them think.

To students the important thing is that the performance should provoke. Not just to be effective, which is fairly easy, but to provoke an imaginative response. Through being provoked themselves students have come to value provocation.

These moments of provocation are evident in Bond's own plays. The headline view here is his use of violence. It has been the violence which seeks to cut through to the human response. The creation of this response is a profound moment of individual politicisation. Bond's own explorations of this moment of political aesthetic have, however, been much more diverse and much more sophisticated. Our project has been groping towards realising a corresponding aesthetic as much as it has sought to discover a process.

ii. Reflections on performance

There is a distinctive nature to "Bondian" performance. It is true of his own plays and I think, of plays written under the influence of his concepts. He writes,

In drama imagination seeks the extreme situations which will take us to the limits of meaning where humanness is defined. It takes us into the extremity of the self. It seeks to show how people must finally come to the extreme situations in which they lose every illusion about themselves yet hold onto their humanness or suffer what follows when they know they have lost it *because* that is the only way they can hold onto it. (Bond 2000, p190)

And there's something else to prepare for: silence. Pinter is spoken of as the master of silence. But his silences are functional and simply effective. The silence in a Bond experience is truly aesthetic. It flies in the face of the expectation of an audience trained in cheap tricks, loud bangs and sparkle. The silence is a moment of terror; the terror of the blank canvas. The audience seems to say; "What you have shown me, scares me. It is outside of the site on which I stand. I have no words yet to deal with it. Please leave me."

Bond's theatre attempts to lead the audience to this moment of super-understanding. In discussing the concept of the Theatre Event (TE) he says,

In TE time may be experienced as slower, as in a car accident. TE can be understood by comparing it to a whirlwind or cyclone. The centre of the storm is calm and quiet.... In it everything is seen with great clarity. (Bond 2000, p17)

In a post-show discussion after Big Brum's preview of *Eleven Vests*, Edward Bond responded to a question about the audience laughing when a teacher was stabbed. Part of his response was that he didn't care how his audience responded in the theatre. He may be right. Speaking of my own experience in 'Bond audiences', the work of his theatre is strangely private. An audience watches from the site of the ideologised world. Their responses are limited by the language they are given to speak in public. Their responses are circumscribed by the expectations of their peers; each polices the other. The silence is partly the result of being abandoned at the edge of the socially-possible; Bond leaves us at the edge of the world.

iii. Responses to performance

The Tameside performances have each had an impact. Post-show discussions always reveal surprise and sometimes shock. We have been challenged to justify involving students in such work. However, the abiding feeling has been a generous awe. In interview the students state;

Stacey: The audience learn something...

Kelly: Respect.

Carol Davis gives an account of her grandfather's response in which he is determined to learn from his grand-daughter the meaning of her factory image; keeping her up the same night, followed by a restless sleep, tenacious questioning throughout the next few days. Their relationship was altered. He was now willing to recognise her authority as a meaning-maker.

Julian Hill, a professional actor and writer, saw the second performance, he reported: "I didn't know that such things were possible in a school. They've taught me about the theatre."

Bond writes of the Tameside performances:

Something that struck me when I saw it – and stays with me- is how detailed – and accurately detailed – the acting was. There weren't the generalisations which come from simply releasing energy to animate conventional formulae. I found it almost unnerving. It meant that the young people were examining themselves closely and not just others – they were making demands on themselves. Even if they were acting under the guidance of teachers, clearly they'd been encouraged to act under their own initiatives. An amount of the imagery came from the 'media' – which attempts to define their lives and against which they must inevitably measure themselves. This had another strange effect: I became aware of how profoundly society abuses and harries young people – how badly it treats them. Badly not in the sense of say the depression of the thirties, the Orwellian poverty – but how our present culture tears people's lives to bits.

There was a real sense of oppression. I don't mean that the young people were oppressed or cowed! - but it was strikingly clear how little society offers them

that can make them really happy and content. And so behind the intricate structures of the scenes – individually and collectively – there lurked something ominous. That we don't offer them much of a life.

... the detailed observation and enactment... made it clear – as they acted their 'fictions' – that society could not be a fiction to them, could not successfully deceive them.

Drama is very important to the education of young people. And that now – as the contradictions declare themselves more drastically – it becomes more important. This imposes its burden, also, on teachers. It's easier to see what is wrong in the present state. But now we're also asked, as educators, what world are we asking young people to grow up into.

I was very encouraged. (Bond, an unpublished letter to the author, no date.)

Conclusion

In an article for the Standing Conference of Young People's Theatre (SCYPT) in 1996 Edward Bond wrote,

The aim of the theatre should be to allow the autonomy of the child to pass into the autonomy of the adult – to remain creative. (...) We need passion and dispassion, an adequate metaphorical language, skill in using the images which bind complex ideological assumptions together – sometimes by returning to meanings from which they were purloined. (...) A play must enable the audience to examine and understand the events that are staged – their society. It must also enable them to examine and understand themselves. Otherwise nothing can be changed. This means invoking the crisis of the imagination. (Bond, 1996, p15-16)

The work of the Tameside project is not complete. Our experiments are unsatisfactory in many ways. The reflection that the writing of the current chapter has engendered has moved us on. The processes above will be the starting point for our fourth year. Bond gives us unfinishable business. *The Sheet of Glass* is still our problem.

References

Bond, Edward (1995) 'Notes on Imagination' in *Coffee*, London: Methuen Drama

Bond, Edward (1996) 'Rough Notes on Theatre', *SCYPT Journal* No31, Spring 1996

Bond, Edward (1998) *Commentary on The War Plays, Edward Bond, Plays:6*, Methuen Contemporary Dramatists, London: Methuen Drama

Bond, Edward (2000) *The Hidden Plot*, London, Methuen

Bond, Edward, (Unpublished, no date), Letter to the author, 16.10.01

Bond, Edward (Unpublished, no date), *An Incident in Hedda Gabler and an Actor's Exercise, Extract from The Fourth Story: A short treatise on self, society and Modern Acting.*