

DRAMATIC STRATEGIES  
IN THE PLAYS OF  
EDWARD BOND

JENNY S. SPENCER



CAMBRIDGE  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Published by the Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge  
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP  
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA  
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Victoria 3166, Australia

© Cambridge University Press 1992

First published 1992

Printed in Great Britain at the University Press, Cambridge

*A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library*

*Library of Congress cataloguing in publication data*

Spencer, Jenny S.

Dramatic strategies in the plays of Edward Bond / Jenny S.  
Spencer.

p. cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0 521 39304 3

1. Bond, Edward – Technique. 2. Drama – Technique. I. Title.

PR6052.05Z92 1992

822'.914 – dc 20 91-45931 CIP

ISBN 0 521 39304 3 hardback

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## CHAPTER I

### *Introduction*

In 1965, Edward Bond's *Saved* made legal history as the last play to be successfully prosecuted by the Lord Chamberlain before his powers of censorship were rescinded by Parliament. At that time, *Saved* aroused the kind of controversy one associates, especially in drama, with the "revolutionary" qualities of avant-garde literature. As with Ibsen's *Ghosts* before him, and Brenton's *The Romans in Britain* more recently, Bond's play confronts the audience with a profoundly disturbing image of its own world. Such examples suggest that in the theatre formal innovations may first be recognized as challenges in subject-matter – that to a work's content audiences most easily and vociferously respond. By shaping the viewers' horizon of expectation, the institutional context of a performance further contributes to the play's meaning. Productions by state-subsidized or national theatres, for example, can lend more immediate and powerful authority to a script than can other venues. In addition, plays that directly challenge the views of reality an audience brings to the theatre invite a different kind of response than plays which do not. The uproar over *Saved* involved what could (and should) be shown on the public stage. If nothing else, the divided and outspoken response to Bond's earliest plays made the complex relations of cultural production at a particular moment in history unusually visible. A number of converging factors were highlighted: the Royal Court's artistic policies under George Devine and his successor William Gaskell, the favorable working conditions provided by the English Stage Company, a newly educated class of London theatre-goers, an archaic theatre censorship law, the dominant conventions of narrative and stage naturalism, and the barely submerged issues of a politically charged decade.<sup>1</sup> More sensitive to struggles outside the theatre than admittedly apolitical playwrights, Bond's plays often thematically incorporate the very social and cultural contra-

dictions that the strategies of plays, and their formal innovations, address in different ways. By constantly bringing into question the function of literature, Bond's work can uncomfortably challenge an audience's unexamined habit of attending the theatre.

Bond's contribution to theatre history did not end with *Saved*, nor has the controversy he engendered entirely died. Though Bond's reputation as one of Britain's most important living playwrights is now relatively secure, critics still feel compelled to take sides about his work, and from play to play little consensus of opinion reigns. The terms of debate often reveal as much about the conventions and constraints of contemporary drama criticism as they do about the plays themselves. On the one hand, students of postmodernism may feel justifiably uncomfortable with a playwright who defines his artistic activity as "telling the truth."<sup>2</sup> The contemporary qualities of Bond's work owe nothing to the anti-textual aesthetics of performance art nor to the dislocated verbal gymnastics of self-consciously scripted postmodernist work. Indeed, the more self-reflective theatre becomes, the more difficult the problem for the politically committed playwright. In order to "truthfully" represent onstage the forces affecting reality offstage, Bond must avoid the impasses of an increasingly hermetic, "high modernist," literary practice. His plays tell stories about a world that really exists in language that still communicates to audiences who don't need critics.

On the other hand, Bond is not reticent about his work. By 1982, more than a hundred interviews and discussions with the playwright had seen print, not to mention letters, program notes and play prefaces written by Bond himself. The extent to which the use of Bond's statements can reveal a critic's own political stance makes the difficulty of "objective analysis" more than usually apparent. In the face of such risks, many have chosen to ignore Bond's work altogether, while the more sympathetic rely heavily on Bond's own explanatory information in their approach to the plays. Regardless of the attitude taken toward the playwright, Bond's own statements usually provide the starting-point for discussion of his plays.<sup>3</sup> Understanding how easily production choices can undermine the intentions of an author, Bond has also become increasingly involved in the production and direction of his own plays. Among English theatre-folk, such concerns have earned him, perhaps unfairly, a reputation as a difficult author; but the problems point to issues more fundamental, and more political, than are usually indicated in struggles



over interpretive latitude. Bond's relationship to his public is equally affected by the status ceded him as a "literary heavyweight" – that is, a playwright whose works are intellectually demanding, require more economic and artistic resources than usually available, do not have broad appeal, and rarely pay for themselves. The self-fulfilling nature of such prophecies should be apparent.

Since the commentary that accompanies the published texts is necessarily part of reading the scripts (and permission to perform a play must still be granted), Bond has successfully managed some control over the production and critical "consumption" of his work. For actors and readers alike, the useful context he provides is always one in which politics and aesthetics cannot be disengaged. Although Bond's critical writing may limit the plurality of meanings otherwise to be found in the plays, his writing has also generated political discussion outside the theatre – often within the institutions that define and legitimate what passes for "literature" in the first place. Bond's critical writing, continued productivity, and notable generosity towards students, scholars, and would-be directors has in fact facilitated his embrace within a European literary establishment and by an international network of theatre practitioners. But what pose as "critical keys" to the plays are far more frequently political and social analyses of the world to which the plays ultimately refer. Despite the depth and quality of Bond's writing for the stage, textual analysis is rarely his concern; and the abstract, philosophical arguments of his polemical essays can as easily confuse and confound a reader as provide illumination. The belief that Bond is his own best explicator not only short-cuts critical analysis, but may unnecessarily inhibit the production of his work. In order to adequately describe or properly theorize Bond's dramatic practice, a different kind of critical discourse is needed – one that neither ignores Bond's stated intentions, nor simply appropriates his own theoretical vocabulary. In this regard, the plays themselves prove richer than any single perspective can possibly reveal.

Despite virtual neglect in the US and perennially mixed reviews in Britain, Bond's plays found immediate and enthusiastic acceptance on the continent, especially in Germany, where his profound influence on a generation of contemporary German playwrights is readily acknowledged. Again, the fact may have less to do with the quality of playwriting than with national arts policies and politically embedded cultural biases that the plays themselves often address.

Bond is, after all, a firmly committed socialist playwright who fully acknowledges his debt to Brecht. By both necessity and choice, his international reputation has been earned outside both American and commercial theatres in independent, state-subsidized, or university funded sectors where art can claim a certain autonomy from the economic forces of the culture industry. More significantly, perhaps, Bond's work is often East European in its perspective. Unlike his American counterparts, Bond assumes that the stage is an appropriate and serious forum for the discussion of cultural issues. In addition, the vocabulary and concerns of Bond's essays signal a deeper connection to the premises and methods of Marxist theoreticians than one might otherwise suppose. If we can say that postmodern (or high modernist) literary texts incorporate critical consciousness in regard to their own operation, then the consciousness that Bond's work displays is of a distinctly dialectical turn. Without belaboring the question of influence, it is important to point out here a difference between playwrights who haphazardly borrow from the Brechtian legacy, and those who seriously and substantially build upon it. In the final analysis, Bond's contribution to modern drama will lie in his development of a dialectical theatre along Brechtian lines, in the creation of a materialist poetic that addresses the most significant political issues of his time.

Bond may have first called his theatre a "rational theatre" in response to the apparently irrational reaction provoked by the violence of *Saved's* scene in the park.<sup>4</sup> Like most critical labels, the usefulness of the term lies in economy rather than precision, inviting audiences to see broad similarities of intention across a corpus of stylistically diverse work. But the term "rational theatre" also places Bond in a tradition of realistic literature with its own history of struggle since the nineteenth century. In one sense, all of modern drama can be seen as a history of formal experimentations aimed at providing a more adequate representation of social, psychological, or existential "truths." But the Brecht-Lukács debates of the 1930s gave shape to theories of realism that, however defined, depended on a dialectical definition of reality. Recent developments in psychoanalysis, semiology, and popular culture have further complicated the terms and issues of that debate by focusing on the functioning of ideology in the construction of the subject. Thus Brecht has been frequently called upon to foster the distinction between "classic" and "critical" realism. Both denote a reflection of reality that produces

recognition, but classic realism naturalizes (or conceals) the conventions on which it depends, obscuring dynamic contradictions that could lead to radical change. Classic realism may support the dominant ideology by (a) posing problems too limited or too easily resolved to be significant, (b) presenting social contradictions in terms of psychological conflicts, metaphysical dilemmas, or symbolic oppositions, (c) representing reality and human nature as ahistorical, eternal, or essentially unchanging. To prevent the audience from immediately perceiving this constructed reality, classic realism depends on narrative continuity and audience identification. In film and drama, such techniques produce a readable discourse with an entirely appropriable meaning addressed to an audience fixed, unified, and rendered immobile in the act of seeing.<sup>5</sup>

The aesthetics of Brecht's epic theatre took shape against the illusions of classic, "culinary" realism as described above. But despite the formal characteristics associated with Brecht's drama, "critical" realism is defined in terms of its overall project and political stance rather than by strictly formal criteria. In response to Lukács' narrower definition of realism, Brecht wrote:

Our conception of *realism* needs to be broad and political, free from aesthetic restrictions and independent of convention. [. . .] Realism is not a pure question of form. [. . .] Reality alters; to represent it the means of representation must alter too.<sup>6</sup>

Brecht's insistence that "time flows on" and "methods wear out" not only recuperates the experiments of modernism for the "realistic" project, but should historicize for us his own epic models. What sometimes gets lost in such a formulation is the implicit assumption that if reality alters, so too do audiences. Any discussion of the effects upon an audience of formal, stylistic strategies needs also to recognize that audiences themselves are not a unified, undifferentiated whole, but vary in gender, over time, and across cultures.<sup>7</sup>

To expose, in theory, the limits and effects of certain naturalistic conventions is not the same as constructing a more adequate artistic account. Moreover, a literary practice that exists – through alienation-effects, parody, or quotation – by virtue of what it opposes, rarely attempts nor often achieves the kind of aesthetic power we associate in the theatre with the "classical" repertory. When such power *is* achieved, as Brecht noted with chagrin, it is often for the wrong reasons.<sup>8</sup> While Bond writes in critical opposition to his own

society and its dominant aesthetic practices, he also writes as a confident member of an emerging social class whose “classics” have yet to be written. In other words, Bond writes consciously artistic plays (fictional, structured, and participating in a tradition of literary forms) in behalf of a society that does not yet exist. The desire to speak *for* a society rather than always and only *against* one is increasingly present in Bond’s work. That Bond’s drama must address audiences in the process of change within a society that urgently needs changing may help to account for both the distinctiveness and the so-called contradictions of his aesthetic practice.

Although Bond shares with Brecht his critical aim and several of his “epic” methods, their thematic concerns differ with their historical situation, and their strategies are not identical. Like Brecht, Bond attempts to orient the audience toward action with plays that demand active interpretation in lieu of passive consumption. Both view reality as historical, contradictory, and subject to human intervention; and they write in order to change it. Both are centrally interested in the relation between history and the individual, a concern that manifests itself in the choice of subject-matter, the internal dynamics of the plays, and the relationship of the plays to their audiences. Both acknowledge that lived experience of reality is mediated by ideology in ways that affect the capacity for action, and both incorporate a “critical” stance in the formal structures of their plays. The most important distinctions between Bond’s theatre and Brecht’s lie in the specific, material reality of the plays themselves, in the different rhythms and references that Bond constructs for his audience. Indeed, Bond’s wide choice of genres and rich theatrical idiom have a particularly British inflection. It registers in the colloquial accuracy of Bond’s working-class figures and the epigrammatic wit of his mannered aristocrats; in the literary precedents of *Lear*, *The Woman*, and *Restoration*; and in the historical referents of *Early Morning*, *Bingo*, and *The Fool*. Whether the cultural and artistic codes are aggressively foregrounded or contextually implicit, the recognition that they are being consciously and adeptly manipulated for “rational” ends is one of the social pleasures both Brecht and Bond offer their audiences.

Claiming “human consciousness is class consciousness,”<sup>9</sup> Bond pinpoints a central problematic shared with Brecht, one affecting character development, narrative construction, and theme. Thus conflicts and relationships between characters frequently arise from,

and in turn illuminate, the contradictions of a society based on class. But Bond shares with most latter-day Marxists the belief that history does not move automatically toward socialism or any other pre-determined end. Because social progress often depends upon acting against the very forces that have determined one's mental and physical life, it can be neither easy nor inevitable. Nor are the difficulties limited to a particular class. Bond's plays implicitly acknowledge the complexities involved in the historically determined subject as the location of political practice. Although all of Bond's characters are in some way victims of an unjustly ordered society, their subjective responses to it notably differ. In *The Pope's Wedding* and *Saved*, the narrative itself is woven from the subtly differing responses of characters who come from the same social class, speak the same language, and face the same environmental conditions. In *Bingo*, class position separates Shakespeare and the Son, but both find their situations intolerable. Shakespeare internalizes his anger in guilt, despair, and suicide while the Son externalizes his rage in self-righteousness, paranoia, and murder. In *The Fool*, Patty adapts and survives, Darkie resists and is killed, Clare observes and goes mad; yet all three share the same class perspective toward enclosure and industrialization. In *The Sea*, Evens isolates himself from society in order to save his sanity, and Hatch loses his in the effort to fit in. In *Jackets II*, one working-class youth joins the army while the other struggles against it; but the divided society results in pain, loss, and deep personal sacrifice to both. The list of examples could include figures from each of Bond's plays. Clearly, Bond's concern is not only with how individuals perceive and understand their historical situation, but with the ways in which that perception affects their capacity for political action.

As the damaging effects of a class-structured society are reiterated from play to play, Bond's analysis of appropriately "human" responses becomes increasingly focused, clarified, and developed. Variations of fear, apathy, remorse, and despair plague Bond's most articulate characters (Clare, Shakespeare, Lear, Evens, Trench), draining their energies and distorting their vision. Anger, on the other hand, allows Darkie, the Son, the Dark Man, and Tiger to become, however temporarily, energetic forces of protest and change. Ineffective as isolated figures, and rarely the focus of the narrative, their gut-level class-consciousness positively affects other characters and directs the audience's attention to stark social

contradictions in the play. While the actions of Bond's "dark forces" always serve a crucial narrative function within the plays, they also provide a radical measure of the limits and consequences of other characters' actions. Through them Bond encourages a political reading of events without resorting to traditional methods of empathetic identification.

Indeed, the dynamic between play and audience is at least as complex as the internal dynamics of each play. All of Bond's plays provide narrative contexts that call for social change, situations which demand some moral action from the characters, and by extension, the audience as well. But none of Bond's characters are automatically endowed with an enlightened perspective; they come to it through the concrete social interactions recorded in the plays. The dialectical learning process involved begins and ends in action, and is similar but not identical to the process experienced by the audience. If objective conditions change faster than subjective consciousness – if there is always a lag between external stimuli and the responses dictated by habit and ideology that make one's objective assessment of oppression more difficult – then there is some justification for the sense of urgency Bond writes into the tempo of the plays. The calm, analytical pace that gradually builds to isolated moments that seem shocking, intensely emotional, or naturalistically compelling has become an identifiable Bondian strategy. The baby-stoning sequence in *Saved*, the torture scenes of *Lear*, the velvet-cutting or corpse-stabbing scene in *The Sea*, the parson-stripping scene in *The Fool*, Trench's murder of the chauffeur in *The Worlds*, the body identification scenes of *Jackets* all provide protracted moments of threatened or explicit violence remembered by the audience long after the performance. What compels is the disturbing imagery and real menace involved in the experience – when a character the audience understands, or a clearly recognizable situation, is viewed "on the brink" of destruction or increasingly out of control in a moment etched in memory with powerful stage imagery. Fully playing Bond's extreme images is crucial to the vision inscribed in the plays, which may explain one difficulty in getting them more widely produced. Bond calls such deliberately choreographed moments "aggro-effects" as opposed to Brechtian alienation-effects, but both fulfill a didactic function. Often they represent the character's own subjective experience of history as an inexplicable concatenation of events, an overwhelming flow of experience. As one

might expect, such traumatic events are “determining” for the audience, and lead characters to various kinds of reflective assessments (more or less adequate, depending on the play), which foster further action. In later plays, Bond uses the term theatre event, or “TE,” to mark the complex, deliberately non-naturalistic social analysis upon which such moments depend. While a viewer’s own analysis may relieve a scene’s nightmarish qualities, the sense of urgency remains. The resulting rhythm provides a constant pull on the movement toward abstraction, even in plays that reflect a structure of logical argument.

Since the beginning of his career, Bond has questioned, examined, and extended the perimeters of theatre after Brecht, developing a body of dramatic work that is both politically engaged and aesthetically complex. What follows is an attempt to define and describe the nature of Bond’s contribution more closely and critically than an overview usually allows. Without being inclusive (Bond has written more than twenty plays and shows little sign of slowing down), this study considers together plays that share similar dramatic strategies. Though roughly chronological within chapters, the analysis of particular plays should lead to insights that work in both directions across the corpus of Bond’s work – prefiguring later “problematics” as well as forcing reexamination of earlier plays. Chapter 2, “Violence and voyeurism,” begins with the reception of Bond’s earliest work and looks closely at the possible psychodynamic operations these productions made visible. Here a discussion of the scopophilic drive and its relationship to curiosity, the acquisition of knowledge, and the theatre situation itself provides an approach to the complex issue of violence and its relationships to the passive or appropriative gaze of the viewing subject. While *Saved* and *The Pope’s Wedding* work on conscious and unconscious levels to involve and implicate their audiences, the question of what the stage should make us “see” gets thematic elaboration in *The Sea*. Likewise, Bond’s brief and reluctant work in film, with its different economy of the look, may suggest the importance of the theatre situation itself in any reading of Bond’s scripts.

Chapter 3, “Rereading history,” takes up the issue of Brechtian historicization in two plays that construct their narratives from historical fact. The psychosexual realm explored in Bond’s earliest plays is in *Bingo* and *The Fool* more explicitly connected to the social and economic ground that gives it meaning. With the development

of the multi-focused stage, Bond invites the audience to fill in with discursive analysis what these plays only structurally suggest, to actively “read” the gaps and contradictions exposed by the knots of epic narrative. Whereas the 1970s revival of interest in revisionist history provides a context for the writing of *Bingo* and *The Fool*, *Lear* and *The Woman* return to literary classics during an era in which the parody and dismemberment of the classical texts has become as common as their recuperation for nostalgic purposes. Both plays use and examine the tragic genre, but their strategies of adaptation differ to reflect in interesting ways the politics of their own production. Chapter 4 hardly exhausts the discussion of tragedy and adaptation to which *Lear* and *The Woman* can contribute, but an examination of their formal techniques may prove useful to understanding plays written within and against other genres (comedy, Noh, farce) and to those like *Restoration* and *Jackets* with different “counter-texts” behind them.

Since Bond’s plays are usually described, and often judged, with pointed reference to their didactic impulse, chapter 5, “Political parables,” discusses Bond’s use and development of the parable form in relation to Brecht’s experimental *Lehrstücke*. Here *The Bundle*, more so than in its earlier version, *Narrow Road to the Deep North*, provides evidence of Bond’s appropriation of Brechtian concerns and techniques, while self-consciously didactic parables like *Stone* prove to be more complex and interesting than their overt political stance may suggest. Clearly an audience member’s own political tendencies must be considered in gauging the effect of the play’s formal strategies. The importance of the position taken up by the viewer proves central to the examination of the “Social pleasures” provided by Bond’s comedy. In chapter 6, Freud’s definition of “Witz” and Bakhtin’s notion of “carnival” contribute to a discussion of the characters’ humor in *Saved*, the “class-inflected” satire of *Early Morning*, and the comic techniques of *Derek*. *The Sea* and *Restoration*, on the other hand, offer an opportunity to look more closely at Bond’s use of the comic genre for specific political ends.

Chapter 7, “Reading the present,” considers Bond’s appropriation of the popular, naturalistic forms through which current events are made familiar to their audience in order to reanalyze and reformulate contemporary issues. Whereas *The Worlds* critically responds to a news-saturated public world, *Summer* works within and



against inward-looking, psychologically focused dramatic forms. In chapter 8, "Remembering the future," both *Human Cannon* and *The War Plays* trilogy extend and ultimately undermine the notion of isolatable dramatic strategies on which this book is organized. Given the scope and complexity of the trilogy, the focus on dramatic strategies delimits the discussion and provides some sense of closure to what must surely be the ongoing project of assessing Bond's contribution to modern drama.

The premise on which this book takes shape is that Bond's political project, historical position, and dramatic talent combine to provide the scholar and theatre practitioner a unique position from which to survey the problems and potential of post-Brechtian, political drama. While Brechtian strategies may prove an appropriate entry to an understanding of Bond's plays, they are not enough. Certainly the "epic" vs. "illusionist" terminology introduced earlier limits the use to which Bond's plays can be put, as well as the kind of interpretation those plays can sustain. Without further development of a critical discourse appropriate to Bond's drama, and without closer, more subtle readings of actual plays, scholars run the risk of repeating the mistakes of popular reviewers and of reproducing the very divisions between politics and aesthetics that so many playwrights since Brecht have tried to move beyond.

While Bond describes his work as the creation of a "rational theatre," I would describe his plays as experiments in poetic materialism. Fredric Jameson has warned that "materialisms" always seem to end up projecting a determination by matter/body/organism rather than by mode of production, a warning echoed in Terry Eagleton's criticism of Bond – that in writing about his own plays, Bond dangerously confuses nature/culture issues with those of economics, failing to think through the logic of his position carefully enough.<sup>10</sup> Without a doubt, Bond's stage images evoke an ecological realm in which nature and culture, individual and species, history and subjectivity inseparably collude. Yet Bond's appeal as an artist, rather than a philosopher or theorist, may lie precisely in this merging of terms. In his most recent plays, Bond suggests that the category of "the human" cannot simply be jettisoned – that without a better definition, we may ultimately forfeit the right, as a species, to exist. Given the scope of the problem and the speed of change, older socialist categories of analysis may or may not prove useful. If

what distinguishes Bond from many of his socialist contemporaries is an insistence on writing "literature" in the first place, and of keeping his eye on posterity, what distinguishes his plays from the literary norm is their passionate concern for the future, and the revolutionary vision they impart on its behalf, for audiences now.