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Opening New Pathways: Wesker's Experiments in Drama

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Abstract

The Second World War resulted not only in the re-structuring of the global map but also led to a paradigmatic shift in the British drama. The rise of the New Wave theatre brought into prominence many new voices. In this theatrical revolution, Arnold Wesker emerged as the strongest proponent of change and transformed the English theatrical landscape radically by displacing the enervated Boulevard theatre with his refreshing Kitchen Sink Drama. He brought alive on stage, quite realistically, the existential, social, economic and psychological concerns of the working class in plays which were innovative. Fresh themes, original treatment, unconventional settings and a corresponding novel idiom gave a new direction to the post-war drama. Paying least regard to commercial success, Wesker experimented fearlessly with stagecraft; employed colorful settings, large casts and realistic domestic scenes; introduced flash back sequences, musical interludes and a naturalistic technique, to name a few. This paper is an attempt to explore some of Wesker's prominent experiments and innovations which enriched the post-war drama and opened new pathways for his followers.

Keywords: Collage; Experiment; Film sequence; Innovation; Mime; Montage; New Wave drama; One-actor plays, Unconventional. .

Sir Arnold Wesker is one of the most prominent playwrights of the theatrical revolution which transformed the English drama in the nineteen fifties and sixties. Figuring prominently among the pioneers of the New Wave drama, Wesker carved an enviable place for his unique art in its annals. Hailed as one of the "major dramatists of the English renaissance" (Rusinko 9), and "the strongest voice in the Post-war English social drama" (Gassner and Quinn 912), he played a pivotal role in this theatrical insurrection. Wesker was one playwright who refused to be tied down

by the established conventions, socio-political ideologies or any particular technique of dramaturgy. He experimented fearlessly with both themes and techniques, paying least regard to commercial success. This paper is an attempt to study Wesker's dramaturgical experiments with a view to analyze his creative contribution to the post-War drama in the form of thematic, stylistic and theatrical innovations.

In consonance with the changing times, Wesker sought fresh themes, unusual settings, inventive styles and corresponding new idioms for his plays, thereby leading to the emergence of new dramatic forms and patterns of stage dialogue. Representing an ordinary and non-literary background, Wesker rejected the Boulevard theatre that had lost its creative appeal, had become restrictive, enervated and extremely predictable. He was well aware that the West End drama had become merely recreational and hence, divorced from actual life – a fact he wished to alter. Therefore, breaking the existing trend, he brought alive on stage ordinary men and women from provincial backgrounds, factory workers, farm labourers and other marginalized groups who had never ever been considered suitable subjects for the English stage. Hence, the people who were accorded centrality in his plays had, till then, never been represented on the English stage. They had always been ignored as contemptible and insignificant.

Rejecting the stereo-typical West End drawing room comedies of Noel Coward and the "well made" plays of Terence Rattigan, Wesker shifted the spotlight, for the first time, from the bourgeois to the working class; from the living rooms of the rich to the kitchens of the poor, and from the benefitted to the sufferers. In fact, he delved avidly into his personal life and experiences to present the working class milieu as realistically as possible. Quite like Ibsen, he livened up the mundane domestic activities and daily chores of the ordinary people on the stage. In his early plays such as *The Kitchen, Roots, Chicken Soup with Barley* and others, Wesker candidly laid bare the polemics of class struggle that prevailed in the post World War II England, examined the domestic situations of the working class and highlighted its struggles with varied socio-economic and political conditions in the industrial and agricultural milieus of north England.

Riding high on the pinnacle of the New Wave, Wesker established himself as a bold newcomer and innovator who used theatre to mirror life by employing a curious blend of conventional and unconventional techniques. With a stagecraft that resembled a film sequence, he employed colourful settings, large casts, realistic domestic scenes, flash back sequences, musical interludes, a naturalistic technique and hectic action to create an

impact on his audience.

The first radical change witnessed by the theatre-goers through Wesker's plays was the stage itself, for "gas stoves, creaking wooden chairs, and bare kitchen tables replaced the earlier fashionable decors with their over-stuffed comforts, velvet drapers and stylish paintings" (Cornish and Ketels vii), thus marking the arrival of the Kitchen Sink Drama. Though plays with working-class background were not uncommon on the English stage, yet Wesker captured the essence of the colloquial idiom, monotonous routine and troubled relationships of this class most truthfully. Susan Rusinko very aptly avers in this regard:

> Wesker orchestrates the rhythms of life of a social stratum heretofore ignored as subject for serious consideration on the stage, except perhaps as pitiable victims (Galsworthy) or as suitable subjects for comedy (Shakespeare, Shaw). (Rusinko 152)

His first play *The Kitchen,* based on his personal experience as a pastry cook in a restaurant, was inspired by John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*. A theatrically challenging and powerful work set in the hot, stuffy, and noisy kitchen of a large London restaurant, this play is populated with a cast of nearly thirty characters. The play brings alive on stage the unfulfilled dreams, aspirations, fears and longings of the workers subjected to a soul killing, deadening and monotonously repetitive routine in a setup which is typically capitalistic. *The Kitchen* highlights the plight of skilled and unskilled workers employed as chefs, cooks and helpers in a huge London restaurant where quantity of food prepared takes precedence over its quality. The suffocating atmosphere of their workplace, ceaseless pressure of work and the callous treatment meted out to them by the superiors not only dehumanizes the workers but also impacts their psyche and personal relationships. Consequently, they rebel against the inhospitable life-denying atmosphere, cold indifference of the dominant class and the exploitative system.

The action which begins with the lighting of ovens on the stage itself picks up momentum and the atmosphere gradually becomes abuzz with commotion matched well with fast and hectic pace of dialogues as cooks, helpers and waitresses get involved in an automaton-like impersonal activity of preparing and serving food to 2000 customers. Needless to say, the chaotic activity drowns all attempts and traces of personal contact, and brings divisions at varied levels to the fore. Elaborating upon the uniqueness of Wesker's dramaturgy exhibited in *The Kitchen*, Lawrence Kitchin avers,

> Not only was Wesker's drama associated mainly outside the traditional institutions of London theatre, but the starting point of it was also unorthodox. Instead of serving an apprenticeship to accepted ideas of craftsmanship, he drew his inspiration from the London School of film techniques. Indeed he regards his innocence of technical dogma as an advantage which permitted him to construct in terms of 32 characters, ovens on stage and three acts timed at intervals of ten years. (in Brown, *Modern* 81)

Thus, Wesker's assertion that the world to him was not a stage but a kitchen finds most eloquent expression in this unique and experimental play through a plot and a stagecraft that are "diametrically opposed to the accepted tenets of play-writing which demand regular exposition, definition of characters, development of emotional climaxes and revelation of hidden motives. *The Kitchen* stands as an example of a play that deliberately breaks these 'rules' to make its own kind of demonstration" (Brown, *Theatre* 168).

Wesker's experimental streak is visible in many other plays as well. In *Chicken Soup with Barley,* the opening play of his *Trilogy*, he deals boldly with a historical event of the anti-Jewish demonstrations carried out in London by Fascists in 1936. Unmindful of the unities of time, place and action just like Shakespeare, Wesker spread the plot of this play across two decades. He captured historical events such as the Spanish Civil War, the Cable Street Battle in London between Jews and Mosley's Blackshirts in 1936, the elections of Labour government in 1946, and the Russian invasion of Hungry in 1956 with unmatched brilliance to trace their impact on a Jewish family struggling for its identity and individuality. Complimenting the uniqueness of the play, John Russell Brown avers,

> The play moves across the years as quickly as the film, and off stage, outside the set, a complex activity of filmic proportions is always in process: political meetings, mob violence, strikes, trade union debates, marriage, setting up home, starting a business, a world war, and a life in a kitchen. (Brown, *Theatre* 159)

In fact, the play seems to present a running commentary, through a discussion of characters in an apartment, on the real-life events as they unfold on the strife-torn streets of London in the backdrop.

Another element that defines Wesker's unorthodox style is the adoption of a dramatic idiom that is as crisp, matter of fact and unambiguous as is

practised in a documentary. He deliberately avoids poetic expressions. In fact, his naturalistic technique is heightened by his adherence to local language or dialects which match well with the locales and milieus of his plays. This aspect is brilliantly displayed in *Roots* which was hailed by Walter Allen in *The Statesman* (11 July 1959) as "the best and the most faithful play about the British working class life that has appeared for a long time." Thematically, *Roots* exposes the pitiable plight of rural farm labourers who, struck by unmitigated poverty, lead intellectually and aesthetically impoverished lives. The play brings alive the tale of Beatie's struggle to find her own voice, individuality and liberation despite the regressive stance of her illiterate family. This country play "with its inarticulate and working class characters and gutter documentary emphasis" (Innes 115) echoes Lawrence's *The Widowing of Mrs. Holroyd* (1926). The realistic portrayal of familiar sequence of mundane domestic activities – potato pealing, laundry washing, bread baking in and around the kitchen – woven brilliantly within the action established Wesker as an inimitable practitioner of the Kitchen Sink Drama, markedly ahead of his contemporaries such as Shelagh Delany, Bernard Kops and others who practised the same genre.

Wesker's inventiveness in adopting the provincial Norfolk dialect in *Roots* not only captured the ontological struggle of the rustic, illiterate and uncultured farm labourers convincingly, but also strengthened his reputation as a bold innovator who dared to use a local idiom rarely heard on the English stage. His prime motive behind this move was not merely to highlight the inadequacies and problems of his characters realistically but also establish their alienation from the mainstream life and language as the major cause behind their intellectual emptiness and inability to voice their distress. According to Stephen Lacey,

> Language, in both the perpetuation of cultural deprivation, and resistance to it, is crucial.… Language is both a metaphor for the ideologies that shape the characters' lives and one of the chief means of perpetuating those ideologies. But in the case of these farm workers, their vocabulary is so sparse that it denies them even the power of communication. (Lacey, 87)

Equally ingenious is Wesker's use of silences and pauses. Though he did not particularly subscribe to Beckett's or Pinter's minimalism or absurdism, yet, quite like them, he displayed a very pertinent use of dramatic silences and pauses. In several plays, a harangue or violent outburst/action of the protagonist, usually at the end of the play, is met with a pregnant

silence which, quite paradoxically, serves to 'voice' the fear, helplessness, bankruptcy of ideas and dilemma of the people surrounding him/her. Wesker displays this unique power of quietness brilliantly in the final scenes of plays such as *The Kitchen, Roots* and *Chicken Soup with Barley.* Elaborating on the significance accorded to silence by Wesker, John Russell Brown avers:

> Silences are not used to sharpen attention on particular words, gestures or hesitation that can reveal individual involvement as in Pinter's plays, nor as the still centres of dramatic conflicts as in Osborne's. Here silences are usually corporate, and indications of personal and social limitations rather than clues to hidden power or tension. (Brown, *Theatre* 164)

Thus, Wesker evolved his own theatrical idiom which was at variance with those who shared dramatic space with him. However, his approach remained pragmatic. He preferred showing things on the stage instead of conveying them through discussion.

Wesker's dramatic style continued to innovate and adopt diverse forms, though his thematic concerns never wavered from the real. He displayed this brilliantly in *Chips with Everything* (1962) which Eric Chapman celebrated as "… possibly the greatest post-war play in English" that nobody "remotely interested in the best in modern drama can afford to miss," (Evans and Evans 109). Rooted in Wesker's personal experience as a recruit in the Royal Air Force for a mandatory National Service for two years, *Chips with Everything* is a unique and powerful dramatization of the plight of lower-class conscripts. These hapless young men are at the mercy of upper-class officers who follow a repressive and manipulative system to subdue them. The play conveys a chilling tale of suppression of the liberty, individuality and consciousness of commoners by the hegemonic designs of the ruling class through forced conformity and compliance. An anonymous comment in *Financial Times*, 30 April 1962 hailed it as a "most daring and experimental play" (Leeming, *File* 18).

A distinctive feature of this play, written in the Brechtian style, is Wesker's clever use of silent action on the stage reminiscent of a mime. The climactic scene of recruits stealing coke from the coke-house silently is one of the finest works of theatrical art. Similarly, emulating Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party* (1957), wherein two strangers - Goldberg and McCann - terrorize and un-man the hapless Stanley Webber with a volley of nonsensical and perplexing questions, Wesker also employs the technique of

'stichomythia' to show how senior officers bully Smiler, a new recruit into submission through verbal violence:

> HILL. All right, Smiler, order arms, slope arms, order arms, slope arms, slope arms, slope arms.
>
> The two CORPORALS walk around him.
>
> FIRST CORPORAL. You're a slob, Smiler.
>
> SECOND CORPORAL. A nasty piece of work.
>
> FIRST CORPORAL. You are no good, lad.
>
> SECOND CORPORAL. No good at all. You're an insult.
>
> FIRST CORPORAL. Your mother wasted her labour.
>
> SECOND CORPORAL. Your father made a mistake.
>
> FIRST CORPORAL. You're a mistake Smiler.
>
> SECOND CORPORAL. A stupid mistake.
>
> FIRST CORPORAL. The Queen does not like mistakes in her Air Force.
>
> SECOND CORPORAL. She wants good men, Smiler, men she can trust.
>
> FIRST CORPORAL. Stand still, boy. Don't move. Silent, boy. Still and silent, boy.
>
> HILL. That'll do for the taster, Smiler. That'll do for the first lesson. Tomorrow we'll have some more. We'll break you, because that's our job. Remember that, just remember – About TURN!
>
> (*Wesker's Political Plays* 59-60)

A scrutiny of Wesker's plays that followed *Chips with Everything* reveals his absolute involvement in stylistic experimentation. In fact, his foray into stage direction may be attributed to his realization that the unconventionality of his plays, abstraction of his style and theatrical stylization could pose problems for the established directors. Still, unmindful of the

risks involved, Wesker sought theatrical effectiveness and a striking impact by experimenting with dialogue, stagecraft and narrative framework quite like William Butler Yeats who also conducted varied dramaturgical trials in the early years of twentieth century.

It is important to know that before beginning his theatrical odyssey, Wesker had attended the London School of Film Technique which had left an indelible imprint on his dramatic style. Its impact is apparent in *Their Very Own and Golden City,* a technically difficult and ideologically complex play. In this ambitious work, Wesker experimented with the flash-forward method peculiar to film making. As the dramatic action drifted back and forth in time in the typical *montage* style, he adopted two sets of characters to represent different age groups. A span of 65 years separates the first scene from the last as Wesker innovates even in the structure of this play by covering a period of four decades across a single scene with 12 episodes. John Russell Brown in his essay titled "Arnold Wesker: Theatrical Demonstration," in *Theatre Language: A Study of Arden, Osborne, Pinter and Wesker* (1972) very aptly observes that Wesker has "not only been realistically inventive and bold on all fronts, but also greedy" (Brown 184).

Complimenting Wesker, Ronald Hayman in *British Theatre since 1955: a Reassessment* (1979) attributes his unique style and penchant for experimentation to his dramatic object which was not merely "to tell stories but to break down the facile blind arguments, the platitudinous phrases which are the barricades of the man in the street to anything new" (Hayman, *Theatre* 44). This was Wesker's unmistakable intention when he presented *The Merchant*, a redaction of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* to the theatrical world. *The Merchant*, according to Robert Wilcher, is "much more than an adaptation of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*" and "a wholly independent work of art which draws upon the same sources that Shakespeare used but reconstructs the plot, re-conceives the characters and establishes in accurate detail the economic and political environment that shapes their behaviour" (Wilcher 111).

Wesker's own Jewish sensibility could not accept the portrayal of Shylock in Shakespeare's noted tragic-comedy. Hence, he felt impelled to re-write it from a fresh perspective, and re-modeled *The Merchant* on the basis of the study of a graduate student Lois Bueler's which instated that anti-Semitism was a palpable social reality in the sixteenth century Venice and its laws were grossly unjust towards the Jews. Re-interpreting *The Merchant of Venice*, Wesker inverted the former's presentation of Jewish psyche in his play and wove a poignant tale of a rare friendship (between

Shylock - a Jewish money-lender, and Antonio - a Christian merchant) which is thwarted by unjust and obsolete Venetian laws. By contextualizing *The Merchant* in 16th century Venice, Wesker exposed the ugliness of a socio-legal and political system that perpetuated division on the basis of ethnicity, and deprived the Jews of their basic human rights. Thus, it is evident that in his search and expression of truth, Wesker dared to differ and did not hesitate from going against the flow of the stream.

Wesker displayed his creative ingenuity yet again in *The Journalists* in which he boldly used the technique of kaleidoscopic collage. Based on the topical subject of decline of ethics in investigative and print journalism, and a corresponding rise of blog culture, the play exposes "that human dignity is damaged and democracy imperiled when journalism turns from a necessary watchdog into an agent of destruction" (Billington, *Political* 9). The play brings alive on the stage the activity, atmosphere and tension in the offices of *The Sunday Paper.* The action shifts back and forth crisply from one office to the other – from that of the Editor to the foreign desk to features to sports to business to the arts page and the women's page – like short cinematic takes. Undoubtedly, the richness of dramatic content is iterated by its originality of form.

Ronald Hayman, in an incisive analysis of Wesker's major plays in *Contemporary Playwrights: Arnold Wesker* (1970), calls him a "theatrical reformer" who did not have much regard either for dramatic style, or for the limitations of the medium. Wesker displayed this fact once again in his *One Woman Plays* (written between 1986 and 1994, published in 2001) in which he experimented yet again by eliminating the male figures/characters altogether, and shifting the spotlight on single woman characters trapped in complex situations. By focusing on the issues pertaining to their identity, liberty, sexuality, matrimony, motherhood and subalternity, Wesker also revealed his proclivity towards feminism. While *Anne Wobbler* deals with the individuality of a woman, *Four Portraits*, *Yardsale* and *The Mistress* explore the polemics of man-woman relationship and motherhood among women belonging to different age groups. Wesker innovated once again in *Letter to a Daughter* to unfold the relationship between a mother and a daughter by weaving and blending the six parts of the play with six songs meant to be sung by the actress who played the role.

Thus, Wesker's entire theatrical oeuvre is a vivid testimony to his penchant for experimentation, innovation and originality. He deviated from the norms of traditional drama not only by writing plays on diverse themes but also by adapting generously from films, novels, stories, histo-

ry and his personal life. His predilection for newness can be judged from the fact that he wrote plays which stood apart not only because of their unique technique, stagecraft, idiom and presentation, but also for their varied lengths and forms. He penned plays in one long act (*Love Letters on Blue Papers*); in two parts with an interlude (*The Kitchen*); in three acts (*Chicken Soup with Barley*); in two acts (*Chips with Everything*); in two acts and nineteen scenes (*Their Very Own and Golden City*); another in four parts (*Four Seasons*); a set of three Monologues (*Annie Wobbler*), one actor plays, and several full length plays with a cast ranging from three to one hundred and fifty. Equally varied was his choice of dramatic genres – tragedy, comedy, political satire, social realism, history play, documentary, redaction, musical plays and so on. No wonder therefore, that Michael Billington's hailed Arnold Wesker as a "remarkably diverse dramatist" (Billington, *Political* 7).

It is evident that instead of allowing himself to be trapped in any singular context and style, Wesker evolved with time and responded actively to the changing socio-political conditions and theatrical developments around him. Unlike most of his contemporaries who shone brightly but briefly like glow-worms during the same time in the history of English drama and sought only temporary accommodation in the theatrical revolution, Wesker grew steadily, evolved and adapted – thematically and stylistically -- according to the changing demands of the times, audiences and his own creative urge. Kevin G Asman observes very aptly in this context: "For Wesker writing is a form of political activism, and he has spent much of his life experimenting to find ways in which art could help to bring about meaningful change" (Dornan, *Casebook* 34) in the lives of ordinary people. All along his theatrical oeuvre, he tried to explore, capture and present human situations, familial ties and social relationships steeped in varied hues of political, ethnic, moral and economic considerations, but in new ways.

Hence, to assess him in clichéd terms, as a didactic or moralistic writer; a social realist or a political writer, a kitchen sink dramatist or an Angry playwright, is to deny oneself the joy of unearthing the stylistic variety and experimental streak inherent in his dramatic opus. With a scant regard for commercial success, Wesker was more interested in exploring the flexibility and limits of the art of drama. In this process, he assimilated within his creative acuity, techniques and possibilities inspired from various other art forms. Consequently, in the midst of Osborne's Angry drama, Arden's political stance, Caryl Churchill's feminist-cum-leftist vein, Pinter's absurdism and Beckett's minimalism, Arnold Wesker rejected

the contemporary and conventional trends, established new paradigms of dramaturgy, and enriched the Post-war English drama with his varied and voluminous contribution. His uniqueness, undoubtedly, lies in his presentation of relevant and contemporary social issues through his experimental and innovative drama.

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