Dear

I understand your concern and frustration. The theatre is in a stage of decline (which will probably be temporary). The situation is perfectly represented by the NT’s fifty years celebration. The media constantly celebrate its vitality and as proof point to its transfers to the West End. The NT was founded as an alternative to the West End and its stage-trade. It has completely changed its purpose, which might be justified except that no one has noticed or intended to change it. It is something that has been done to it by the economy. The immediately economic consequences of the deregulation of finance and the unleashing of capital by Thatcher-Reagan-Pinochet are inescapably obvious. But the cultural consequences are deeper and they, in themselves, contaminate the means of perception and judgement so that the consequences aren’t seen. The stage becomes a stall in the market. Culture no longer has any direct attachment to a human purpose if that means the creation of humanness and civilization. So it has no human-culture structure. instead it has – it is – a mechanism that attaches it directly to the making of profit. So the sellers and buyers of tickets serve the needs of the market and the market’s owners. Only indirectly is the mechanism attached to the human needs of sustenance, shelter and sanity. But needs can be manipulated into wants and if the wants are detached from human culture the long term effects must be barbarous: because we would have abandoned the means of creating humanness. Put more simply, its as if culture were dissolving, becoming amorphous – and especially many young people dont know where they stand. They have no sense of history because Thatcher destroyed the sense of the political. “The good life” means consumption and you buy it on the market and to be poor is to sabotage the system – under a conservative government the poor sabotage the rich and that is being anti-social. But drama is at the heart of the structure of culture, not at the heart of the mechanism of money. And so plays for the market have to be trivial and meaningless because the tools of meaning (that is actors and the characters they play) are not causal on the stage anymore: only “effects” are causal. Theatre has become a market shop window. Can you imagine Harrods or Tesco trying to create life in their shop windows? As the mechanism of money has destroyed the structural social device of fiction the only way Harrods could create life in its shop windows would be to stage real (not fake) murders and terrorism there. Anything else in the shop window would be fake unreality, the world of wants opposed to the need to be human. But there is already a strange consequence for theatres: because the shop window cant produce real murders, say street knifings or the murder of children, then theatres cant stage the dramatic reality of such things as fiction: instead the stage becomes a shop window of puppets and manikins. I dont know if you can understand the logic of this. But when you trace it backwards the logical situation of this is: in terms of the logic of human culture (the means by which we create our morality) the consequence of the commercialisation (the banalisation) of the stage is – in terms of the logic of human culture, remember – the equivalent of killing people in shop windows. In the shop window the effects would be immediate (blood splashed on the pane) but in terms of culture the effect is slow, effect is not identified with cause, and postponed until barbarism (the inevitable consequence of the loss of
human culture) makes it unexceptional because the images of barbarism, of immorality, would have become invisible under the spotlights of entertainment. So we would travel from the theatre of Dionysus in Athens to the Arena in Rome. Only further: because the Roman Arena was a festival, an occasional celebration, but the nouveaux slaugher would be routine. Am I being serious? It seems an exaggeration. The situation is certainly serious. To the nineteenth century the twentieth century would have seemed an exaggeration. I dont want to use an image as an argument: but given the banality of evil how could we know we are evil when we have all become banal? It is not a matter of good will or our “better self.” Kantian reason which was intended to create the enlightenment has been taken over by technology and technology has been taken over by capitalism and the market. Now we reason intricately and use the results irrationally. We are spending our reserve of humanness and not recreating it. I do not know that the shop-window “reality charades” will come about, but even to be able to seriously talk of the possibility is appalling. I shock listeners when I say that our social culture is based on the logic of Auschwitz and that that is the consequence of the structure of humanness being replaced by the parasitic mechanism of money – but it is true, and you can begin with the example of the banalisation of the stage. Humanness is not the consequence of a natural, assured source (biological or theological), which naturally and determinedly expresses itself – humanness or inhumanity is the logic of the situation we share with the other elements of reality. If murders are not committed in shop windows its because that would still offend our sense of propriety. But drama does not show the documentary facts of what happens in society – drama dramatizes the logic of society’s culture. When our culture dies we carry its death within us. It is as if a city dies and a piece of its death is inserted in each citizen where it grows to produce living-ghosts wandering in the fog. And there is at least one sure safe-guard against reality death-shows in shop windows that can give us comfort: the proprietors could not control the sale of tickets and any passer-by could see for free. We are human only to the extend that the relation between imagination and reason can be dramatised to express the human imperative. Technology is nature modified by human reason but “in itself” technology is violent because it extends into society the meaningless laws of nature.

If it is to succeed a doctrine such as Hitlerism – or a practise such as the global market – needs enemies to destroy. It is not that it will encounter enemies, it actually needs the acts of destruction (who is destroyed is almost incidental) if it is to create and validate itself in terms of the morality of its age. So the universal market will buy enmity, it will advertise for enmity, if enmity will not itself freely come out of the ruins of human culture. I dont know how the market will contrive to do this but it will be done if we cant radically dramatise the conflict in our situation. Traditional responses wont help us to do this. We have to understand and describe our present situation accurately. Dramatic violence is justified only when it is put in its social context. If it isnt it has no chance of being useful. If it is then even when it is denounced or denied (“It didnt affect me, ducky, I was bored”) it has its effect. If the situation is fully described then the dramatic violence is justified because it indicts the situation. Then the objections are a flurry of ludicrous self-righteous indignation – because (to go back to the logic above and understand how it is reversed in the responses of reactionaries) you the dramatist are a hooligan who has broken the shop window -- because they cannot understand that in the logic of their own cultural contradiction the barbarous shop window is their own precious sensitive cultural soul. The logic of drama is not understood. We reduce it to an ugly mishmash of biologism, genetics, Darwin and theology. You write that you refuse to be the one who educates theatre because that is not your job. I think we have to save our culture
or it will destroy us. You know that on Wren’s tomb in St Paul’s its written: “If you want to see his monument look around you,” look at the classical edifice. If you want to see our culture look at the ruins. Looking then becomes your education and you will want to write about what you see. If you see it you have to act against it – and for you that is to write. The age of drama isn’t completely over. If what you write is to be useful it will have to be to educate the theatre and so the audience and so yourself. The established theatres are against you. But the deteriorating situation will create opportunities. This letter is about the dangers of the extreme situation – your plays have to be about them. The situation is still new and we have to learn how to dramatise it. If like many playwrights in the sixties we react with flailing outrage and bombast – and worse, fluffy wishful-thinking -- we make ourselves the enemies professional theatre directors use to justify their amateurism. We must respect the traditions of the past but they won’t help us. We have to look precisely at our times and accurately say what we see. At least that is what I tell myself. In drama accuracy is truth.

I hope your writing goes well.