Dear -----------

Thanks for writing to me. Of course I understand your frustration at attitudes to your work. The theatre is in a state 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 the market 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 arent seen. The stage becomes a stall in the market. Culture no longer has any direct attachment to a human purpose if that purpose is the creation of humanness and civilization. So it has no human-culture structure – instead it has a mechanism that attaches it directly to the making of profit. The buyers serve the needs of the market and the market’s owners. Only indirectly is the mechanism attached to the human needs of sustenance and shelter. 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 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: the poor sabotage the market and the rich. But at the heart of the structure of culture there is drama -- not 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 Tescos trying to create life in their shop windows? As the structural social device of fiction has been destroyed (by the mechanism of money) the only way Harrods could create contemporay 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 stage 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 human culture (the means by which we create our human morality) the consequence of the commercialisation (the banalisation) of the stage is – in terms 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 immorality, of barbarism, would have become invisible under the veil 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 slaughter would be routine. Am I being serious? It seems an exaggeration. To the nineteenth century the twentieth century would have seemed an exaggeration. I dont want to mislead and use an image as an argument: but given the banality of evil how can 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 the market and capitalism. Now we reason adroitly and use the results irrationally. We are exhausting 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 talk of the possibility is appalling. Listeners are shocked 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 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 determinately 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 social decorum. But drama does not show the documentary facts of what happens in society – drama dramatizes the logic of society’s culture even when it is still hidden. 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 the living-ghosts who wander in a fog. We become the symptoms of the future. But there is at least one certain safe-guard against reality death-shows in shop windows: 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 contingently 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. The market would buy resistance, would advertise for violence, if they did not themselves come freely out of the ruins of human culture. The market depends on social discontent, opposition and violence. This is our present situation. We have to understand and describe it accurately so that we can dramatise it radically. Traditional responses wont help us to do this. But 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,” “I was bored”) it has its social effect. If the situation is fully described then the dramatic violence is justified because it indict the situation. Then the objections are an indignant flurry of ludicrous self-righteousness – because (to go back to the logic above and understand how it is reversed in reactionary responses ) you, the dramatist, are a hooligan who has broken the shop window – and the objectors 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 biology, genetics, Darwin and theology. You say 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. On
Wren’s grave in St Paul’s it’s 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 do something about it – and for you that is to write. The age of drama isn’t completely over. If you are to write anything useful it will have to be to educate the theatre and so inform the audience. The established theatres are against you. But as the situation deteriorates it will create opportunities. I’ve written about the dangers of the extreme situation – but those dangers have to be the subject of what you write. Avarice may motivate establishment artistic directors and they are certainly the victims of ignorance. The present situation is still new and we have to see how to describe and dramatise it. If (like some playwrights in the sixties) we react with frothing outrage and flailing bombast – and worse, wishful-thinking -- then we make ourselves the enemies theatre directors use as self-justification. The traditions of the past have to be respected but alone they cant help us. We have to look and be accurate, accurate, accurate about what we see – and then write about it. At least that is what I tell myself. I hope you’ll find it useful.

Good luck with your writing, Edward.