To: Tom Erhardt

Dear Tom

What’s happening to my plays in the UK and what’s happening to UK theatre itself. The last three main-stream productions of my plays were of The Sea, Restoration and Bingo. They were bad, some worse than others. Last year six of my plays were staged at the Kilburn Tavern. At the management’s request I took over direction of two of them. For three of the other four plays the directors and I had good working relations. But my experience over recent years makes one thing ice-cold-clear to me. Its not that directors don’t know how to stage my plays but that they no longer know how the stage itself works and how plays use it. The basic reason for this is the “commodification” of theatre. This is driven by the commodification of film and TV. And its most dangerous consequence is the “commodification of the audience” -- who are habituated to respond in “commodified ways.”

Now directors don’t ask “what is this?” but “how do I to make this work?” I’ll give one example: the prison scene in The Fool. Five men wait to be by hanged. The sister of one arrives full of compassion. She’s bought her brother a good coat to be hanged in so he doesn’t show up the family. Within a few lines she is angrily rowing. She doesn’t know why and so she doesn’t know how to apologise. So she apologises by collecting the prisoners’ used soup bowls – that is, doing a bit of housework. How do the director and the actress use this? What is it saying? A priest arrives (the condemned had stripped him naked in a riot). He says he hasn’t come to condole but to congratulate them on leaving this vale of tears and going to heaven. He announces that God is in the room and literally tries to get the condemned to touch God and thank him for being hanged. The governor announces that all but one of the condemned are reprieved. The reprieved are hysterical with laughter. The priest is shocked. Outside the whole prison begins to laugh as others learn of their own reprieves. The reprieved men in the cell try to console the condemned man – and burst into laughing in his face. The priest almost has an orgasm of religious lust – he will accompany the condemned man on the scaffold. He runs off to arrange official permission (its usually the prison chaplain’s job). The prisoner warden becomes violent and threateningly – the uproar and disorder will mean he will get the sack (it’s a leitmotif of the play). The poet talks to himself (roughing out a poem) about a fly buzzing in the window – until he too collapses in laughter at the feet of the condemned man who is his closest friend. He controls himself enough only to ask him about a woman he, the poet, is having an affair with – and this in the presence of the condemned man’s sister who he is intending to marry. And so on. And all this gets smeared over by the crudest clichés about how people would behave in a condemned cell when a man’s told he’s going to hang. Only they wouldn’t. Years before I watched a rehearsal of the first production of this scene. The director was worried because the clearing up of the soup plates wasn’t running smoothly enough . . . at that moment I saw that the years stretching out ahead were grey.

Ive sketched some of the things that happen in the scene. They are marked out by stage directions. These don’t tell the director or the actors how to act them. They say only what is happening. If they are ignored then nothing happens. Instead the scene just seems badly written. So then you add music or film-clichês or tricks to pump it up. One of the directors at the Tavern was actually using a choreographer to organise things to “make them flow” – the choreographer hadn’t even read the play. By ignoring what’s in the text directors change the meaning of what its saying – and as the texts are about important things they are deceiving the audience. Yet an audience easily understands the written scene if the performance allows it to because everything in it is simple. Acted properly it has the profundity that only creative simplicity has. The actors release the audience’s creativity -- and that is the liberating
experience people say they have when the plays are properly staged. All my scenes tend to be like this, and -- more -- there are cross-references between the scenes so that the constant stream of events accumulates into "great" blocks of human experience and insight -- I say "great" because we are dealing with life and death realities of the audience's life. Our theatre brushes all this aside for the crudest effects. Its as if directors staged a football match before vast crowds of spectators they have first blinded.

I saw no rehearsals of Restoration. I saw a few of The Sea at the Haymarket but left before the play opened to the public. In this country I don't hang about. At the Tavern I saw as many rehearsals as I could (and took over two of the plays) because I thought a "season" of my plays could have some significance. The opportunity was wasted. I've been demonised in London theatres -- but that's been done by inadequate directors. Apart from Saved the Lyric can afford to do only some of my (in scale) minor plays. But plays such as The Under Room are worth doing properly (this morning I learned that one of the French productions will go to Africa) and I can't allow them to be half-done. The Lyric can't touch the Paris plays, though to be in the modern world these are the plays directors and actors need. Saying that seems arrogant. Let me make it worse: until our theatre can properly tackle my plays it can't enter the modern world. Let me make it even worse: the future of younger writers now depends on what happens to my plays. Its not that my plays are good enough, I know others could write far better plays -- only now, here, they won't get the chance.

I could write my plays only by going abroad. That's how till now I've kept my involvement in drama. When I started to write theatre was trivial -- middle-class angst and fake poetry. The Royal Court changed that. At that time playwrights had their great disasters behind them, the world war and the death camps. They could not avoid asking urgent questions. Some of the answers were rehashes of out-dated "left wing" formulas. But it was still possible to ask the profoundest questions that are the origins of drama, about how self and society create each other. The problem for new writers now is that the great disasters are ahead of them and theatres will not allow them to be asked. The Royal Court stages the sort of plays it was founded to abolish. And the RNT and RSC don't exist. I'm not sure theatre can survive the relentless trivialisation. It may be beyond the point of recovery. There is a structural change that has its origins in the widest reaches of society and the economy. It's a change in how we can be human. And as we are essentially the dramatic species that is a cultural disaster.

A French publisher is making recordings for a book of interviews with me on my plays and how to stage them. Two series of sessions have produce sixty hours of recordings and there will be more series. I've found the questions really illuminating --some deal with detailed analyses of plays and scenes in the way I've described the prison scene in The Fool.

Best wishes
Edward