1. Your play “The Crime of the 21st Century” begins with the quotation “There is no such thing as society - M Thatcher.” How do you interpret reactions to Thatcher’s death in the streets of London and other places in the UK? In spite of these street parties, paradoxically for the growing right wing in Europe (including Serbia and other post-socialist countries in Eastern Europe) Thatcherism is not dead. What are the consequences of Thatcherism for culture and drama today? Are the celebrations of her death an example of what you call “revenge replacing the need for justice”?

The social, economic and ecological consequences of Thatcherism are catastrophic. Instead of money being a useful means of exchange it turns it into a parasite with a virulent life of its own. It (as a form of monetarism) is the direct cause of the present financial and economic crisis. This crisis is too well-known to describe here. Instead I’ll deal with its effects on drama. Let me spell this out in a way which is novel but illustrative. Thatcherism turns everything into marketable products. Theatres become consumer shops. When you consume food the body changes it into something creative, it uses it to create the body. The body is evolved to do this automatically. But the mind has no evolved automatic means of dealing with what is put into it. Whatever is put into it becomes part of a cultural process. But when a play is “put into it” it is itself already part of a culture. The body turns food into itself, but when a play (anything cultural) is put into the mind, it can turn the mind into itself, into its own form of culture. This is why we are in history and not in evolution. It causes the huge historical, social and political differences in culture. Everything depends on how the mind “receives” the play. Does it receive it creatively or as a passive victim? This is the difference between drama and theatre. Theatre is a passive consumer product and its consumers are victims even if -- especially if -- they feel satisfied. The body automatically makes itself when it consumes food, but when drama confronts the mind it makes the mind creative, and then the mind is in fact creating itself -- and what its really creating is its humanness. There are surface similarities between theatre and drama but they are absolute opposites. Theatre is a passive bromide, drama creates humanness. Thatcherism -- Reaganism, Friedmanism, monetarism -- now controls theatres. Thatcherism is capitalism’s form of totalitarianism. All totalitarianisms begin with a promise and end with a threat. In a destructive economy there can be no creative drama, no enduring ecology with a destructive industry, because all these things inter-relate. And so drama is part of the present catastrophe. At first it led to a consumer theatre and plays of a “theatre of symptoms.”. But in the last four or so years the problem has become all but terminal. Theatre has become an autopsy. Fresh young writers don’t yet know it but they are writing their plays on the backs of death certificates.

Serious drama no longer has any “structure of meaning” that is able to engage with society. How could it, when market culture has no human meaning? Plays cant leave their starting place, they go nowhere. Directors hide this from themselves and audiences with desperate gimmicks and empty effects. Plays must still try to deal with serious human problems but they trivialise the seriousness -- and so you can say that modern theatre is depraved.

Drama’s only subject is justice. That is why society created the institutions of drama, the public stages. All cultures -- all individuals -- must seek justice. If they don’t seek it they betray their humanness, and then there is a strange consequence: they must take revenge on themselves. That is the profound paradox built into the
structure of drama and into humanness itself. If this were not so we would have
destroyed ourselves at the dawn of history. In time human beings must become
disgusted at their own self-betrayal. Then their consciences react in the rage and
bewilderment in which they destroy themselves. But the market has no conscience.
Instead it treats its audiences with cynical disdain and puts on stage imitations of the
reactionary money-makers of Hollywood and TV. This is Thatcherism’s revenge on
the people who worship it. Let’s be clear. There is something so profoundly
humiliating about Thatcherism and debasing about the market, that if you believe in
these things and live by them, you are destroying yourself. Its the logic of
Thatcherism and the truth of politics.

2. You say in your introduction in “The Chair Plays” that the form of drama is the
structure of the mind. Since the eighties you have had remarkable feedback to your
“War Plays” in Paris but not an equal response from London audiences. When you
broke up with the Royal Court Theatre and other established London theatres you
began work for young people with the Big Brum theatre company in Birmingham. You
have an enormous amount of experience of Theatre-in-Education. What is the best
way to help young people develop an understanding of drama and through it of the
structure and state of their own minds? How can the logic of imagination help them to
understand (and change) the paradoxes of unjust society?

Human experience is too complex and multifarious for nature to organise. Its because
we are complex that we must live in cultures and history. And its why we have drama.
We can turn our complexities, our experiences, into viable liveable forms only by
dramatising them. We have to combine the practical with the moral so that the herd
turns into a community. The process is individual – each of us dramatises our own life
– and social. That’s why the public institutions of drama are necessary -- its how the
dramatic species creates its humanness.

Children are self-dramatisers. They learn their part in society pretty much as
an actor learns his role in a play. But the stage itself is now corrupt -- and
increasingly society is damaging the processes of childhood. It does it cruelly by
making children consumers in the market. But, more insidious, there is a growing
anxiety about children. Its mixed up with the age-old frustrations and tantrums of
fitting children’s spontaneity into social conformity – but the new anxiety is on the
edge of panic. Now alienation begins in childhood. Adults can no longer answer
children’s questions because they don’t believe in the answers themselves -- they are
too devious and irrational. The market is a feral place where authority seeks to retain
its power by enforcing discipline. It replaces children’s creativity with the
acquisitiveness of the market, and their spontaneity by mechanical discipline and
commercial slickness. This destroys their moral responsibility for the community and
inevitably this destroys their moral self-regard.

So its necessary to give young people a new sort of drama. It creates situations
-- appropriate for their ages -- that confront them with the extreme problems of being
human. These situations themselves make young people conscious that they are being
confronted not to show them their inadequacy and ignorance, but to use and allow to
flourish the knowledge they already have of their own humanness. This is
consciousness of the human tragedy. We don’t have to justify doing this. Without this
consciousness the comic is degrading. Once they have this consciousness they can
never lose it. If they are not given it when they are young they will never find it and
never really be in control of their lives. Instead they will live by taking orders and
giving orders. These are the plays I write for the Big Brum Theatre-in-Education company. Our plays don’t teach young people not to take drugs or steal from shops. Drama teaches nothing. Instead it creates. Big Brum performs plays and runs workshops that confront the paradoxes and dilemmas of human and social relations. We show that imagination is the basis of morality and that when imagination is dramatised it has the logic that makes us human. I don’t write plays for children but for the adults that they will become. And we find they are always a little ahead of us.

3. At the end of “Saved” Len mends a chair. This is seen as an act of hope for him and the sixties audience. Can you say how and why the meaning of chairs in your plays has now changed?

At the end of Saved Len mends a chair in a working-class living room. I’d seen a play in which a similar character in a similar room jumped onto the chair and orated about the coming Utopia. This was part of the political euphoria of the sixties. I thought the euphoria was unrealistic. Len has learnt that if he opened the front door to walk out of the house, the door would open directly into a similar house. Obviously drama is a place of illusions but its greatest power is that it ruthlessly strips away all illusions. That is the logic of drama, which theatre cant produce. Len mends the chair because it is broken. He has learnt practicality. Politics is not the art of the possible, it is the craft of the practical. This is absolutely the basis of my drama. If Len had jumped on the chair I hope I would have been honest enough to make it collapse.

Political, social change is difficult. The euphoric playwrights stopped writing or became disillusioned and wrote for the market. The euphoria was one of the causes of Thatcherism. I am not disillusioned because I have no illusions. I write plays to show the situation and if I use drama properly it makes the situation unbearable. I call this “drama of the centre.” It is a creative discipline. Given that the situation is unbearable, anything in the text, direction, design or acting that is outside the centre is frivolous. If the situation is unbearable it becomes the responsibility of the audience. And if we have used drama properly audiences will have the will and know they have strength to accept responsibility. Sometimes Im asked where the hope is in my plays. The hope is in the audience.

4. Your War Plays from the eighties, your nuclear cycle, can be read as plays of warning. Your set of war plays from the nineties, The Paris Pentad, are about wars past, present and future. Are these later anti-war plays plays of memory? We seem to learn nothing from history. The last century is evidence that “we are all in the same story” -- to quote what the woman in the play “People” says to the soldier who has lost his memory and is seeking his identity. Why is the human ability to learn from history so badly blocked?

The Paris Pentad is about a young man’s search for his identity. It’s a story I often use. For instance its in the plays I write for Big Brum, which are shortened versions for young people of the problems in The Paris Pentad. In the Pentad the young man is a sort of modern Hamlet. In each of the five plays he is a different person, and really what he is seeking is not his identity but how to be human in the modern world. That allows the audience to identify with him -- because they seek the same thing. My plays are about the audience, and all of them are about this search. I set many of them in the future because Capitalism will make it dangerous and violent. They aren’t “plays of memory” about past wars. All my plays are written on the map of the future.
Change is difficult because each new generation forgets what earlier generations have learnt. The human situation is complicated, it must be if we are to be human. We have to combine need with want, freedom with co-operation, our infancy with age, life with mortality, and undo our catastrophic inheritance without making the future even more catastrophic. We can't do this well if we don't protect drama.

5. One thing is obvious. Thanks to you more and more contemporary theatre artists see the role of drama as “mending chairs.” Your play “Existence” is staged in several theatres: a suburban fringe theatre in New Belgrade, the National Theatre in Montenegro, La Comédie-Française in Paris, and as far afield as Colombia. You have said this play is one of your favourites. Can you say something about it for “Scena,” the most important theatre magazine in Serbia?

In a way “Existence” demonstrates all my plays. In it a man called “x” breaks into a stranger’s room to steal money. Halfway through he escapes from the room. Then he returns to it and barricades himself in. Many of my plays change halfway through when the search changes. “x” returns not to get money but for something else. His problem is not how to live humanly in the midst of so much inhumanity. His problem now is that he has no life. Its as if its been taken from him and put up for sale somewhere in a shop. This gives the play its modern simplicity and purity and makes it a proto-type of a modern drama. That is not a boast because after all the play is very simple. At La Comédie-Française there is a moment of great theatre when Benjamin Jungers, who plays “x”, quietly says “Kill me.” In our time “x” can be human only when he creates his own extreme situation, he can live only in the moment he appoints to be his death. He is the logic of our time.

When “Existence” was rehearsed in Paris I wondered how the audience should understand this. The theatre is in the palace of the Louvre. In the mornings I crossed the huge shopping mall that is the entrance to the museum. Marble, glass and glittering shops. There were always crowds of young people. Tourists, school parties going to the museum to see the marvels of the past. On their faces and in their clothes I saw they were “x.” All of them. They knew this but did not say it even to themselves. They are modern. “x” speaks the unspoken.