Olly’s Prison has been called a play about violence. It’s said the characters show that human beings are depraved animals. Its more accurate to say its about silence. Silence does not cause the violence but it releases it. The characters are not violent because they are depraved. They are violent because of the silence. We need a new word to describe the state in which they live: s-i-o-l-e-n-c-e.

Sheila will not speak to Mike, her father. We do not know why not. Mike kills her but not because she won’t speak and can’t explain why she won’t. He kills her because she won’t drink a cup of tea. He cannot believe he has killed her because as he says fathers don’t kill daughters because they won’t drink their tea. In prison he meets Smiler, a young man who never stops talking. But he never says the one most important thing about himself -- why he kills himself on the night before he’s to be free. The daughter’s boyfriend Frank talks to everyone except Mike. In Mike’s presence he is struck dumb. He takes revenge on Mike not because he murdered his girlfriend Sheila, but because Mike made him the free gift of a place to live in.

None of these people can tell each other the most important things about themselves. They can’t tell them to each other because they can’t tell them to themselves. We are the only species that can speak — and yet we can’t say the most important things about ourselves. And like all frustrated people, when we need to speak but can’t we strike out. When we’re violent it’s not because we’re depraved but because we’re condemned to silence, just as Sheila and Mike and the others are. They are silent because they do not understand themselves, but the play is really saying something far more serious than that: it is saying that it is because society does not understand itself that the people who live in it are violent. It is a question of a community, not of certain depraved, evil criminals. The play describes that community — its people, institutions and culture — in a way that is meant to show this.

Of course the audience may dismiss all this and simply insist that Mike, Sheila, Frank and the others are depraved animals. If they do, it’s ironic. They put themselves in the position of Sheila sitting silently at the table and not listening to what Mike tells them — which is the story of his, Mike’s play. Because if human beings are the only species that can speak, they are also the only species that can hear human speech. Not to listen and hear is a form of silence — and whenever we cannot speak and cannot hear there is and always will be violence. This fact is inherent in our species.

Censorship is dangerous not only because it silences its opponents and prevents them spreading their ideas but because it corrupts the innocent — the naïve and the indifferent who think they can live in society without accepting responsibility for its institutions. No one can do that and be safe. Democracy depends not on its institutions but on democratic minds and customs, on free debate in which lies and dangerous ideas are disproved. Otherwise they flourish in silence and darkness because the innocent have learnt no defences against them. When censorship tries to impose silence it produces the garrulity of ignorance. Censorship builds fortresses of ignorance and ignorance is the cause of violence.

It’s said that in the beginning was the word. No, the beginning was silence, fear and repression. That is why our species learnt to speak. Ultimately all dictatorships — political or theocratic — depend on censorship because it provokes the violence they use to justify their existence. That’s so whether they censor to protect their arrogant privileges, or because of their own genuine — and even humble — fears for the wellbeing of others. No one can be another’s conscience. A church that does not learn that is, in the modern age, doomed. It is the age of mass communication, of the web and the electronic world of aural and visual
media. Now knowledge is spread exponentially – but so is ignorance. Ironically the latter is the most important argument against censorship.

We have exhausted the great theories that for the last hundred and fifty years have dominated our culture. What we reject is not the new natural evidence on which they were based but the cultural interpretations that were placed on it. These interpretations were themselves based on ancient myths that the new evidence destroyed. We -- our society -- are left with nothing coherent and profound to say about ourselves. Physicists seek a “theory of everything” to explain the bewildering physical universal. We need a “theory of everything” that will explain the essential nature of human reality. It would have to combine the natural world and the self-conscious human world. Only drama can do that. Till its done we live in modern bewilderment. At the end of his play Mike says “We are all in Olly’s prison till we understand what it is and why we’re in it.” Till then we’re condemned to live in solitary s-i-o-l-e-n-c-e.