The Bochum Talk

The Third Crisis: the State of Future Drama

A version of this talk was first given at Bochum (Mülheim) in June 2012 at a conference of the German Society for Contemporary Drama in English.
(Edward Bond, 22 September 2012)

Both German and English theatre are in a state of decline but for different reasons. English theatre speaks English. It can cater for the world market. A director of one of the recent Olympic ceremonies said (its not verbatim but the intention is clear): “Don’t look for a meaning. Watch the spectacle.” This is the ethos of contemporary English theatre. Its aim is to make money, its dramatic method is “gift wrapping.” Its directing, acting, design -- the mise-en-scène -- and much of its writing are based on the mass culture of TV and Hollywood-Bollywoo-Lollywood film. This controls even the remnants of serious drama that struggle to escape from it. There are many good English playwrights, many of them young. They vividly describe the frustration and despair of life in the cities of no-man’s-land. But it is the theatre of symptoms. They write intimately about society but curiously their plays and they themselves as writers are not in society. They might be writing about medieval China. This is because there is no common understanding of the conflicting forces that form contemporary society -- or of their interaction in what I shall call “the psyche of drama.” How could the Greek and Jacobean playwrights write plays that are still closer to us and our future than the plays of our contemporaries? Those dramatists were in their societies, not victims of confusion or, worse, hirings of a theatre industry intent on ignoring society’s problems. Drama must not be just about society (that is mere reportage) but in it, part of the currents and structures of its dramatic psyche. Then it describes society with a totality that is denied its separate elements and forces -- and this totality levers drama free from society so that society can know itself. Some of the speakers at the conference did not understand this. They spoke of crucial and often lurid symptoms -- the “living dead,” the traumatised body -- as if their intensity made them art, as if the symptoms of the disease were the cure of the disease. But because culture is the interweaving of the web of its causes -- and not a primary cause: the only primary cause is the human being -- the symptoms become not the meaning but causes of the disease. In the practical world effect follows cause -- in culture, and above all in drama, the effect is a cause. This gives imagination its formative grip on reality.

German theatre is as confused as English theatre but in a more interesting way. After the second world war the theatre of the Absurd was created almost out of relief. Reality was too disastrous to be coped with. The more disastrous it was the better for art, the more barbarous reality the more implacably sardonic the theatre. This was the mockery of Ionesco, and Beckett’s joke without a punch-line. The sixties reacted with political commitment, including agit-prop and Brecht. Barbarism had within it the foetus of Utopia but the birth would be by the bomb and the blade -- a Caesarean operation. Only instead of street barricades there was street theatre. And capitalism offered Utopia now. It flourished by developing technology that had had its origins in the war.

We have to get rid of the political theatre that is a Utopian parody of real politics. Agit-prop works only in actual revolution. Otherwise it is an empty aesthetics, the political form of static Noh drama. Brecht could have slipped quietly over the East German border like a character in one of his lehrstücke. He didnt because ultimately his answer to Auschwitz is the Gulag. If I were a German I’d be entitled to call him a war-criminal. Being English I can talk about Pinter. When Pinter stopped writing plays he became acceptable to the cultural establishment. He attacked politicians he saw as responsible for war crimes. He did not write about society. How could he? -- he voted for Thatcher. In the work of a socialist who votes for Thatcher there is more than a total absence of understanding
of politics, there is a misunderstanding about people that vitiates everything he writes. Its because he voted for Thatcher that he is respected as a socialist. In the same way a pacifist could say he supported Hitler, though that argument might be a shade far-fetched but the analogy is useful. We don't understand politics because we don't understand drama. Drama is always about the future. Pinter wrote about the present -- is stuck in it -- because he is afraid of change. A dramatist who writes about society must write about the future. The present is too close to be written about knowingly. The future is the hidden purpose of drama, of all art. A dramatist has only two subjects: the future and the past which is the origin of the future. Pinter changed the subject.

Drama is the most political of arts because it deals in actuality with relations between people. The actor always brings the street onto stage. The reality of drama is politics. But we have no drama because we do not know how it is political. Our problem is that we have forgotten the last century. A hundred years is too much to forget, but we try to forget it. In the twentieth century the nature of being human changed. The imperative to be human did not change but the possibility, you could almost say the chance, of being human changed. It was the most inhuman time in the history of humankind. It created the place of absolute nihilism: Auschwitz. If we survive -- and if say distant planets were ever to be united in shared understanding -- then Auschwitz would be the gossip of the cosmos. After Auschwitz there must be politics in heaven, if there is a heaven. Its not a question of blame or guilt, of this nation or that nation -- those things have already been gone into. The problem is that Auschwitz festers unattended in the psyche of drama. It corrupts culture because it has not been made part of cultural understanding. The question is the meaning of being human, and that is also the subject of drama. By the time of the century of Auschwitz society had created vast new sources of knowledge and power. Its philosophy was progress. How did it become the most destructive and regressive of all times? The destructive yes, perhaps because of the physical power -- but why the most regressive? Why did the human race turn round in its tracks and march backwards? Is it too calamitous to be understood? And why, now, is society anti-human?

These are the questions I came to Mülheim to ask. The last century is the century of darkness and the darkness is still in us. It is as if the human race, in an Oedipus gesture of horror and panic, has blinded itself. This is in the reality of the psyche of drama. Its as if the whole of human society were a collective subjectivity in which the tensions, desires, sufferings, antagonisms, technological power, organisation -- all the phenomena of human reality, conscious and unconscious, articulate and incoherent -- are worked out and resolved in the unstable compromises that enable the restless pursuit of the human vision. It is the great collective and subjective body of drama -- subjective because at its centre is the human being. It’s the way in which the mind understands itself as its limited grasp of reality and it has erected the great monuments, the palaces and prisons, in which civilization has sheltered. That might be a dangerous idealist or even religious way of understanding human reality if we do not understand that it’s the only way we can create humanness in the natural cosmos. To be human, in the place of law there must be drama. Society is dominated by the few salient events of each historic period. As conscious and unnatural beings we create a relationship with the natural world and with each other. History discards nothing, it is always active in the present. In theatre you ask “is the actor in touch with the character?” but in society you have to ask “is the self always in touch with reality?” The answer is no. The dramatic psyche is beyond our conscious control. That is the normal condition of the dramatic species. The bushman tries to come to terms with his life in the forest by believing that forest spirits dwell in the forest. They appear in his art which is of course an image of himself and his understanding of himself because there is nothing else it could possibly be. So the spirits become part of himself, part of his reality. The bushman must face the forest if he is to be human, if the dramatic psyche is to create humanness in him and his tribe. But how do we face the last century? It is too dark for anything in it to be seen. After Auschwitz we have only the shadow of darkness. Yet history discards nothing and the past is always in the present. Animals don’t have this problem because evolution shapes their future for them, but its the problem that offers us humanness.
We are the first generation of humankind that cannot contemplate its past. Science is silent and myth would be parody. In the last century -- in that specific place -- we became as nearly inhuman as humans can be. One small thing left open an edge of humanness for our children to climb on -- and I shall return to that. The last century is literally unthinkable and so we try to forget that we -- even the unborn -- were at Auschwitz. I say history discards nothing because the repressed always returns. The past remains in the psyche of drama and seeks expression because as reality is a totality the past is happening in the present. In history civilization always leapt forward in great revolutionary outbursts -- the Neolithic revolution, the Athenian revolution, the renaissance, the reformation, the Enlightenment and its industrial revolution. But the last century created the first obstruction that is comparable to these revolutions -- a mass grave in which the future is born. And yet, as I shall show, in the psyche of drama it is also a little impediment, a little catch that fastens the door-- such as the wounded feet of Oedipus that caused him to stumble into darkness. Like Oedipus we must face our reality: we live in the false triumph of the capitalist revolution and the actual catastrophe of Auschwitz. The problem is the human species’ but here for an obvious reason I relate it to Germany.

Auschwitz cant be remembered but cant be discarded. The drama psyche cant countenance it, face it, to integrate it into our present reality, to collectively give it a cultural countenance, a human face. Yet it must be given a human face. It is unimaginable and since drama is the imagined, then Auschwitz never happened. This is one of the ambiguities of the psyche of drama, but its ambiguities are what give it its power: if Auschwitz did not happen in the past it must be happening now and is already happening in the future. What does this mean? How is it happening now? It is happening in the symptoms that are the return of the repressed. They are the symptoms that distort our culture. They debase it and make it anti-human, not because Auschwitz is inhuman but because we cannot humanly countenance it. And I shall be specific about the symptoms of Auschwitz in present German drama. If we could allow Auschwitz to happen now, it could happen in the past and not happen now and in the future because we wouldn’t need it to happen now. We need it to happen now because that is the only way in which we can cling to our humanness. That’s the paradox of drama. And as we are the dramatic species its the paradox of our daily lives, in fact of our reality.

If that is a bit complicated its because I’m pointing out the relation of drama to reality. Drama is our reality and so it has its own psyche. If this sounds alarming, I can explain it by saying that the psyche of drama is human necessity. Then its easy to see Im simply asking what is the meaning of Auschwitz. That is, what is its meaning in the psyche of drama? That isn’t its meaning in terms of economics, technology, sociology, culture and so on -- not even of politics. They are all forces in the psyche of drama -- but at the centre of this psyche is the human being, you. The meaning of Auschwitz is in every breath you take. But Auschwitz is the fact that didn’t happen. You have to go to Auschwitz to allow it to happen. Would it be difficult for you to go there? No. As drama is about the past and the future and as the future is still unoccupied we can use it to go to Auschwitz. The future comes after the present -- a second after, to be precise. Drama is always falling into that second. No animal can enter that second -- it’s the site of the imagination and the means it has to make reality human. Because of the last century that second is the site of Auschwitz and if you can fall into that second you will be -- and know -- the meaning of Auschwitz.

Auschwitz is not only a time, its a place. We have to bring the place here for you to be in it. How do we do that? In a place there are objects. We need the object that is Auschwitz. There are lots of guards, dogs and bodies there. The bodies are no use to us because a body is just a body not Auschwitz, and in Auschwitz you wouldn’t notice it. We need an object that is in Auschwitz but is out of place there. If it is out of place in Auschwitz it would be in the right place in the psyche of drama -- the logic of drama is that it notices what the day doesn’t see, what daylight reality hides. If we have the right object in the wrong place then we have the place as well as the time and you are in Auschwitz. Its simple. Auschwitz is a cup of coffee. Its a particular cup and the coffee is spilt.
Before I explain the cup I must say a little more about drama. I’ve talked about changes in time and place, about remembering, forgetting, mistaking, imagining. Some of what I’ve said sounds extravagant, but all these things are commonplaces in madness, hallucination and imagination. They are also commonplaces in your life in the form of culture, religion and ideology. They are social reality. We notice their oddness only because I relate them to their place in imagination and drama. In your life they cause great confusions: injustice, racism, fanaticism, hysteria, war -- and Auschwitz, actually. They are forms of social madness, national fanaticism, cultural psychosis. But when they are used in drama the logic of drama turns them into sanity. Drama enters insanity to make it sane. In it we retrace the steps of our cultural psychosis. The process of understanding the insane obliges us to understand ourselves. It is as if we met ourselves face to face in the first second of the future, in the time and place of drama. Drama fashions our consciousness. All great civilizations create the drama that sustains them. And a civilization is created when it comes to terms with its past.

But we have forgotten a hundred years and cannot imagine the unimaginable. It is buried in the psyche of drama, in its struggles to create our common humanness. The self represses it through fear. But even that is a sign of humanness because fear of the self is the beginning of wisdom. Perhaps its the great glory of human beings, that each of us may live in fear of our self. No other animal has the dignity of that fear. But if the fear is not faced it drives the individual mad or into complicity in social psychosis, and if a society doesn’t face its fear then its fear, and what it fears, corrupt it. The repressed returns in obsessive symptoms. The dramatic psyche is always in a state of urgency because it struggles to hold onto our humanness. That’s why the German theatre is obsessed with Auschwitz. But Auschwitz is in its unconscious and its unconscious controls it in a way that is obsessive and all consuming. It is in everything it does. And I say German theatre, but its the unconscious of the whole of Western culture.

I use Auschwitz as a collective name for all the extermination camps. But there were other camps where prisoners were concentrated and simply expected to die. They can have the collective name of Belsen. In comparison to the nihilism of Auschwitz they were benign -- upper circles in Dante's hell. In fact there was something medieval about them -- so much flesh, so much nakedness, so much personal sadism. Luther gave the medieval a special place in German culture. He made culture static and pictorial. Religion is a parasite on drama, it destroys it. If Luther had not been a monk but a dramatist, a Shakespeare, German history would be different. There would have been no Auschwitz because the dramatic psyche would have had no use for it.

For German theatre Belsen comes as a relief, a stroke of good luck. It can avoid the ultimate nihilism of Auschwitz. Instead the repressed returns from the world of Belsen -- the medieval world of flesh and sadism. The relief is subtle and manifold. Belsen eases part of the overall burden of repression. In comparison with Auschwitz it troubles the audience less. It offers an appearance of intellectual honesty in showing that we can be violent, but the honesty is spurious because it places violence in limbo by ascribing it to human nature not to politics. And its obscenity can be sanitized as eroticism. But its keenest subtlety is that it gives the audiences the status of both victim and victimiser. Audiences share the prisoners’ suffering and indulge in the camp guard’s sadistic pleasure. This enhances catharsis -- the audience don’t depend on the actors to create pity and terror, they create it for themselves, pity themselves as victims and terrify themselves as guards. It combines the sanctimonious and the lascivious, condemns the worst and indulges in it, relieves the conscience and satisfies revenge, and unites the brothel, the church and the box office. Its the cause of the remarkable sense of simmering euphoria you notice when German theatre deals with human suffering. That, of course, was precisely the purpose of medieval carnival, the reversal of roles with impunity, the all licensed fool and the return of the repressed in freedom. The Russian philosopher Bakhtin made medieval carnival prominent in contemporary literary studies. It was another instance
The return of the repressed -- Bakhtin wrote under the dictatorship of Stalin. Contemporary German theatre is driven by an unacknowledged nostalgia for Hitler, when life and death were simpler -- and so was art. Its drama is based on the death camp and the brothel. That is its ethos. It acts it out unconsciously and obsessively. And it is also the unconscious of Western Culture. What Rome was to Christianity and Mecca to Islam, Auschwitz is to Capitalism.

The art of Beuys is full of the desolation of death camps. His commitment to green politics was a reaction to his own art. The repressed returns in the heaps of rubbish, emptied dust bins, mutilated fragments, the filthy rags shown in art galleries -- and even in excreta, because after all Auschwitz was the cloaca of the world. Its also, by contrast, in the art of the arid and rigidly mechanical and technological -- it suggests SS discipline. It reduces the human image to the menacing or to sentimental kitsch. Its in the art gallery “installations” -- most of them are cartoons of third-rate theatre. The English artist Damien Hirst exhibits chemically preserved animal corpses and collections of pharmaceutical objects and surgical instruments that might be weapons or torturers’ tools -- the duality of victim and victimiser in the laboratory of Dr Mengele. Hirst is later than Beuys and so more extreme. Its said in the camps lampshades were made of human skin -- Hirst covers a skull in diamonds (but only a cast of the skull -- nihilism can be hinted at but not stated).

Punk Rock, Rocky Horror, the Living Dead, Zombies, the entertainment and Pop industries . . . Modern Western society’s most significant contribution to culture is to unite the roles of victim and victimiser in one, to combine license to transgress with the prescript of morality. The inability to retain the distinction between victim and victimiser is the mark of decadence.

Simon Stephens is an important English playwright. He vividly records life and death in the cities of no-man’s-land and in its wars. But his plays have no practical holding philosophy. They belong to the theatre of symptoms -- but the symptoms are not his, they are society’s. He writes of the damaged and abandoned with rage and compassion. Much of present day English theatre is nostalgia for the political commitment of the sixties but -- as Germany is now united and the market (till recently) flourishes -- it can be as truculently assertive. Its socialism is as ineffective as Pinter’s, though less self-deceiving. But its writers are not driven by the unconscious that drives German theatre, partly because they are less adjacent to holocaust sites. So their plays are full of gaps. The problem is how to fill them. What happens next is uncanny. Its as if the points of the compass did not exist but you could watch the compass inventing them -- the psyche of drama knows exactly where to turn. Simon Stephens enters a standing collaboration with a German director. The ethos of Auschwitz and the ethos of Capitalism are one.

Recently Simon Stephens asked the German director to direct his play Three Kingdoms. In it a young Estonian woman is abducted, taken to London and forced into prostitution. While she is alive her head is slowly sawn off with a hacksaw. The director might have drooled. It could have been written for German theatre, for the brothel and the death camp. What he added was the carnival. It is a thriller, a detective story, and as with that genre it is about the law’s search for guilt but not the search for justice -- because it places violence in limbo and relies on the cliché of “the devil in all of us,” which might even be subliminally at work as an excuse for Auschwitz. I will say little about the production. The effects came from the catalogue of contemporary German Theatre’s gimmicks -- though the murderer spared the audience the chain saw. In the last act the actors moved in syncopated rhythmic jerks to a constant percussive musical beat that seemed to combine the catatonia of camp Muselmänner with the involuntary twitches of the dying or the spasms of the dead. The director would not have intended this, though it may have been the working of the unconscious. Some of the young audience clicked their fingers and jerked along with his death-animated zombies. At the end they whooped with joy, the satisfied victimisers-victims of contemporary culture. John Donne: “No man is an Island, entire of itself, every man is a piece of the Continent, a part of the main” -- and in our world everyone who suffers is a piece of Auschwitz. I think you dont whoop at Auschwitz. I think the director did not know what he was doing with these young people and the
writer did not seem to know what the director had done to his play. I imagine the murderer did not know what he did when he sawed off the woman’s head. Auschwitz did not happen.

Sarah Kane told me that the only time in her life she’d felt she’d written something obscene was when she saw her play Blasted staged in Hamburg. She asked how anyone could get everything — everything! — so wrong. After the last three German productions of my plays that I’ve seen I felt degraded as a writer, though to be fair none of them was as frantically self-congratulatory as the direction of Three Kingdoms. How is it that in a few short years corruption became so insidious that a writer now approves of it? There is a sense of violation and outrage consoled by sniggering. Its most blatant illustration comes from music, which in German culture is more important than drama. Stockhausen said the 9/11 attack on the two towers in New York was a work of art. If it was a work of art then so was Auschwitz and on a more grandiose scale . . . is that what any sane German could believe? Europe is a less decent place to live and work in when people like Stockhausen are in it. In drama actors act out every detail and contrivance of our lives, there is no hidden back-of-the-canvas to support what they show, they show it all. This makes drama the art closest to the human condition and gives it the greatest human responsibility. Why didn’t German actors, directors, all theatre workers, mass in protest against Stockhausen and close the theatres for at least one night? German theatre takes itself very seriously — but that is not at all what I mean when I ask it to be serious.

The coffee wasn’t spilt at Auschwitz. It was at Babi Yar. Soldiers had machine-gunned civilians all day. Then it was over — at least for that day. The soldiers stood down and brewed coffee. No one screamed, in the silence you could hear people talking. A soldier put his cup to his lip. And a lorry turned up with more civilians to be shot. They couldn’t be stored overnight and shot next morning. In disgust the soldier threw his coffee on the ground. Well, it had been a long day. They’d worked hard. Done their best. But you can ask too much of human beings. They’re not beasts. They’re entitled to their free time, their rest, their coffee, a fag . . . The incident is true. When I heard it I waited fifteen years before I could write the play. Talking today, because perhaps it was the darkest moment in that century I’ve related it to Auschwitz. There were uncounted greater horrors but it is this moment that is at the centre of the psyche of drama. And if as I said you stand at that centre then you are in that soldier’s place. You do not become the soldier — that would be too easy, and drama demands more of you — the soldier becomes you and the cup is in your hand: now do you throw the coffee on the ground? Drama takes each member of the audience to the extreme edge of things, the edge of reality, the edge of the cliff at Babi Yar. The skills of drama define the situation and when that’s done the situation defines the question — and the question at the edge of things compels the audience to answer. Their answer defines them by creating their meaning and that meaning gives the soldier what he did not have — the meaning of Auschwitz. Auschwitz is the absolute nihilism of the human race. If we cant go to Auschwitz we cant survive. The means of our destruction are ready to hand.

There have been two great crises when the means of living became too powerful for the purposes of living. Human beings had to understand themselves and live in a new way. Only drama can change human reality so radically. It did it in Athens and Jacobean London. The first created the classical world and in time Roman Christianity. The second led to the industrial revolution. That world no longer exists. We live in the third crisis. Our drama is full of the holes we fill with debris of Auschwitz. We do it more and more now. History sets no precedents but drama will still allow us to live and be human if we rid it of the debris and create a new drama. It will be severe but ample beyond what we can imagine before we create it. It will be Tragic. It will take us to the edge of reality where we and the soldier will recover our innocence.