

**A CHALLENGE FOR
EDUCATIONAL
THEATRE: DIRECTING
EDWARD BOND'S *THE
CHILDREN***

**AN INTERVIEW WITH
DAVID ALLEN**

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David Allen is the Artistic Director of the Midland Actors Theatre. He has produced plays such as *Waiting for Godot* (2000), *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (2001) and *Macbeth* (2004) but undoubtedly his greatest challenge as director was the production of *The Children* by Edward Bond in 2003. The experience took place at Washwood Heath Technology College in Birmingham with a group of Year 10 and 11 pupils. As part of the Theatre in Education paradigm, the play demands the involvement of young people in the problems of their own lives.

Since 1993 with *Tuesday*, Edward Bond has directly focused his plays on young people but this interest was evident in the long prefaces of his early plays. His theories of radical innocence and corruption of the child in an institutionalised world have been largely explained in essays, articles and more recently in the book *Edward Bond and the Dramatic Child*. This volume edited by David Davis and published by Trentham in 2005 explains specifically his plays written for young people: *At the Inland Sea*, *Eleven Vests*, *Tuesday*, *Have I None*, *The Balancing Act* and *The Children*. Bond has unceasingly developed his theatre techniques to find a social forum with a direct objective: to change society. *The Children* stands as an example of how a play can transcend fiction to educate those living in the real world. This interview offers the reader the possibility to live this experience and embark on a unique journey to understand the work of one of the greatest British playwrights.

Susana Nicolás: First of all, I'd like to speak about the play as a dramatic text. In *The Children*, the morality of parents is in doubt. Joe seems to be forced to grow up very quickly in order to understand his mother's manipulation. Do you think that this is a criticism of the responsibility placed upon children?

David Allen: I'm not sure it's that; although I remember one group who said they thought the play was about "being forced to grow up too soon."

In Scene 8, as it is written, Bond seems to hint that Joe has come to understand his mother's behaviour. (He says, "She was confused.") He wants to show Joe maturing, becoming an "adult." But it's hard I think to help young actors to understand and get inside that process (especially in a week...). It is as if you are asking them to "grow up" and learn, and achieve that level of insight and maturity, through the process of working on the play. I asked one young man who was playing Joe if he thought the character could begin to understand and even forgive his mother. He said that it would take Joe a long time to be able to do this. (He confided to us that he had still not been able to forgive his own mother for putting him up for adoption.) So we changed the lines in the play: when Jill asks him why his mother wanted him to burn down the house, he replied angrily, "I don't know." I thought it was right at that moment to honour what the actor was bringing to the role, his understanding of the character and situation, rather than try to make him follow Bond's lines.

SN: As the rest of his plays, *The Children* has a social message. What was Bond's aim?

DA: Before we began rehearsals, we tried to define the "centre" of the play. Bond says that every play has a "centre," and that rehearsals should take the actors into the "centre." We decided it was the tension and dialectic between caring and destruction. This guided our thinking in staging the play: we were always looking for the contrasts, from one moment to the next. It also informed the discussions we had with the young actors. For example, if some of them said that the mother was "evil," we asked: "Does she love Joe? Why does she treat him so badly if she loves him?" etc.

SN: So, we could say that the play is a journey to self-knowledge...

DA: I think that all Bond's work is really about this: about one character's journey. You could say that Joe by the end discovers his "radical innocence," he decides who he is.

SN: You know that scene 2 (when Joe's mother asks him to burn the house) is particularly cruel. Trying to understand this behaviour could be difficult for a child, how was the emotional impact on the young actors?

DA: I think the reaction of the young people in the cast, when they saw this scene for the first time, is more interesting. As I've suggested, they usually said things like, "she's mad," "she's a bitch," "she's evil." This reaction was understandable but we felt we needed to try to push them to go a bit deeper –to try to see that she is not just a monster.

SN: There are two central images in the play: the connection between food/love and the symbol of the puppet. Could you please explain them?

DA: Feeding is always connected with caring and love. This was why it was necessary to focus on moments such as when one of the Friends offers the Man a drink –everyone should watch this moment, to see if he accepts it.

As regards the puppet, the first time we toured the play, it was like a child's toy. I saw another production recently where the puppet was even a teddy bear. I think this is wrong. I think that the puppet should look as human as possible. This is because the play was inspired, in part, by the murder of a young boy, Jamie Bulger, in Liverpool. I believe he was bricked to death by two older boys, by the side of a railway line. When Joe stones the puppet, it should be horrible to watch –it should be as if he is killing a real person. (And of course, the puppet is "real" to Joe. He treats it as real. It is like a younger version of himself.) So for the second tour, we used a mannequin that looked much more real. This helped the actors playing Joe, as well. We told them to think of puppet, not as a toy, but as if it is a younger brother or sister.

SN: As the preparation of the play had to be made in one week, what strategies did you use to overcome the pressure hovering over the young people?

DA: I think we felt the pressure more than they did! Doing it in a week seemed to concentrate their minds –it gave a real intensity to the whole experience. For us, though, the frustration was that we only felt we could go so far in really exploring the play with them.

We used certain strategies to help them to remember the work that we did on each scene. Someone in rehearsal would sit and write down a summary of some of the things that people said in improvising the scenes. This was especially important where we had "cue" lines, which led the group into a new

part of the action. These were written on A3 sheets and pinned up in the rehearsal space for the cast to reference when they needed to.

SN: I suppose that the relationship between Bond and the children should have been very close...

DA: Bond did not participate in rehearsals for our production. He sent us copies of his letters on the play, which include detailed notes on the staging of scenes. We used these as the starting point for our production. Also, we took quotes from the letters and read them at times to the cast. On one occasion, we sent him a list of questions that the cast said they would like to ask him, and he replied.

SN: I'm especially interested in the theatre device of using the collective as one force. Could you explain if this reinforces the idea of unity against injustice?

DA: I'm not sure that it is about "unity against injustice." The "collective" actually falls apart as the play goes on. (They are already fighting among themselves before the man starts killing them.) The only person left at the end is Joe. So in that sense, it is about one individual's journey to learn about "what it means to be human."

SN: One of the most innovative elements of *The Children* is that there is a combination of adult actors and young performers (Man and the Mother are the adults). What was the intention of that strategy?

DA: I have seen productions where the parts of the Man and the Mother are played by young people –and it doesn't really work because you lose that sense of the "gulf" between young people and adults. The combination of adults and young people on stage brings across, in an immediate way, Bond's idea about adult "corruption" and the "radical innocence" of young people.

Beyond that, I think young people like the experience of working and performing with professionals.

SN: Another difficulty of your production is that many aspects were improvised. What amount of improvisation played a part in the final performance?

DA: We did two tours of the play. On the second tour, we did not allow young people to see the script at all –apart from those scenes involving Joe where he had to learn the lines (1, 2 & 4). We took them through the action step by step, and

they improvised it. The only problem was that we had to watch that important points that are in the script (as Bond has written it) were not missed out.

The fact that young people did not see the script meant that they were experiencing the action as it unfolds. They did not know who the Man was when they decided to pick him up and take him on their journey –just as the characters don't. They didn't know he was planning to murder them. We only told them this when we came to the scene where he kills someone on stage (i.e. the same moment the audience learns about it in performance). This always caused a sensation, and really got people talking.

The final performance was improvised, although by then, young people knew the sort of things they said at each point –and as I have mentioned, they had agreed certain “cue” lines which would take them from one piece of action to another.

SN: As you say, reality was the greatest maxim... One of Bond's reasons to use young non-professional actors is that *The Children* was a preparation for real life. Could you explain the “real” applications that this play may have in a teenager's mind?

DA: That's a big question. I'm not sure you can ever define exactly how people apply the lessons they draw from drama experience to their own lives. It's not quantifiable –you can't tick boxes and say, “well, now they have learnt this, and this...” Bond hopes, I think, that young people will be changed through the experience; it should help prepare them for their lives and responsibilities as adults. But that's a lot to achieve in a week!

We were always keen that young people should make their own sense of the play, and decide for themselves what it meant to them. At the end of the process, we asked them to try to say what they thought it was about. A lot of them focused on the sense of loneliness –on the idea of setting out into the world on your own, and the loneliness and fear you feel. I would sometimes read the quote from Bond to them, that the play is about the “journey to humanness,” and ask them what they thought it meant. Sometimes they said it meant “growing up.” I remember one girl saying it meant “making choices – because the choices you make define who you are.” I thought that was brilliant.