

# **JOHN ARDEN'S LONGER PLAYS**

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This is to certify that the dissertation entitled "John Arden's Longer Plays", submitted by Jaba Basu in partial fulfilment of eight credits out of the total requirement of twenty four credits for the Degree of Master of Philosophy (M.Phil) of the University, is her original work to the best of our knowledge and may be placed before the examiners for evaluation.

  
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## Chapter I

### INTRODUCTION

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John Arden was one of the three major British playwrights to be born in 1930, the other two being Harold Pinter and John Osborne. All three began their play writing careers in the 1950s, though in differing ways.<sup>1</sup> And they came to represent what is now termed "New British Theatre". These playwrights are very different from each other, both in style and content, and yet they, in the fifties, seemed to share certain attitudes towards theatre. All three of them rejected the popular commercial theatre of their time and most critics mark a change in the history of the British stage with the advent of these three playwrights. Ronald Hayman marks 1955 as the cut-off year in which new theatre emerged in Britain.<sup>2</sup> And John Russell Taylor considers the staging of the play, Look Back in Anger by Osborne, in 1956, as the factor which changed the course of British stage history.<sup>3</sup> Like Pinter, Arden has been a prolific playwright and has so far written fourteen plays, for the stage, the radio and for television.<sup>4</sup> He has also collaborated with his wife, Margaretta D'Arcy, in writing eleven other plays.<sup>5</sup> And though badly received initially, Serjeant Musgrave's Dance is now considered a classic, along with Osborne's Look Back in Anger and Pinter's The Caretaker. In this light it is surprising to note that Arden has not received as much critical attention as the other two playwrights.<sup>6</sup>

Nor are his plays performed with any regularity at the major theatres, and articles or scholarship on him are few and far between. The reason for this is not far to seek--Arden has fallen foul of the establishment which was always uneasy about him, and since the seventies downright dismissive. Critics have pointed out a change and decline in his dramatic prowess. Hayman says that Arden "hasn't given up writing plays. He's just given up writing good ones".<sup>7</sup> Actually, as Anderson points out, unlike Osborne, who represented the 'Angry Young Man' of the British stage and travelled in a different direction through the decade--moving from anger to detachment--Arden, a more detached playwright at the beginning of his career was the 'angry' playwright of the seventies and eighties. It is this anger that manifests itself in his later plays, and his views on theatre and theatre management, that have alienated Arden from mainstream British theatre and theatre criticism.

Arden has in actuality been part of two major changes in British theatre. The first was the one which took place in the fifties, and a second which took place in the late sixties. Catherine Itzin holds that along with a changing consciousness, theatre in Britain also underwent a transformation in 1968. The change she mentions is of a political nature--theatre became more politicized.<sup>8</sup> Frances Gray also holds 1968 as the beginning of the change in political outlook within theatre. She writes, "The year before The Bagman, 1968, marked the beginning of that change. It was also a watershed year for

British theatre."<sup>9</sup> Frances Gray, further writing about Arden, points out Arden's movement towards a "firmly committed left-wing stance".<sup>10</sup> Catherine Itzin, on the other hand, does not think Arden's politicization around the late sixties as a change, she holds the view that "John Arden was always a political playwright in the broadest sense of the word." She went so far as to say, "With hindsight it was possible to see revolutionary politics latent even in Arden's pre-1968 plays."<sup>11</sup>

Critics who have been able to accept the first change in British theatre with the advent of Osborne, Pinter and Arden, have been unable to accept the change which took place in the late sixties. Taylor describes Arden as "one of our few complete originals" and while praising his work from the late fifties to the mid sixties, he simply glosses over his newer work, which is different in terms of both content and style. Arden has changed his focus from the proscenium-arch to more fluid forms, often working with amateurs, improvisation groups and child actors. This change, which occurred around mid to late 1960s, is not seen at all favourably by Taylor. He writes, "Though this pattern of activities seems to bring him much satisfaction, it is disappointing to those who eagerly await his long-delayed breakthrough to wider acceptance in the everyday professional theatre."<sup>12</sup> Hayman has absolutely no sympathy for the change which occurred in the late sixties. He brackets Arden with Bond, Wesker and McGrath in a chapter titled, 'The Politics of Hatred' in his book on British Theatre and accuses them all of having "sacrificed artistry to activism".<sup>13</sup>

Though Arden's critics differ in ascribing reasons for a change in the late sixties, the implication that some change has taken place is evident. Arden's earliest plays, The Waters of Babylon (1964), Live Like Pigs (1964) and Serjeant Musgrave's Dance (1960), were not considered political plays--they were categorised as 'Social Plays'. Although Serjeant Musgrave's Dance is based on a real political situation (The Cremean War), and sparked off by a more recent political incident in Cyprus, it is not interpreted as a political play.<sup>14</sup> But when Arden's later plays, especially the ones written with Margaretta D'Arcy, gained in political stature, critics began to feel uneasy about his work. Arden began dealing with political subjects more directly and the plays are not political in content only, but also in intent. Arden writes, "Twelve years ago I looked on at people's struggles and wrote about them <sup>for the stage</sup> / sympathetically, but as an onlooker. Without consciously intending it, I have become a participant."<sup>15</sup> Frances Gray writes about Arden's changed position: "Throughout the seventies he has been moving towards a clearly defined political position and his newer work, whether written in collaboration with D'Arcy or alone expresses this position."<sup>16</sup> Based on the evidence of his plays, the 'movement' appears to be more of a progression, rather than a sudden turnabout. But the progress seems to have hurried its process during and after Arden's visit to India in 1970-71. He writes of the Indian experience in the preface to his play, The Bagman where he underlines the various effects the visit

to India in turbulent times had on him. The Naxalite movement was on the wane when Arden visited India, and yet its ideals touched him enough to glorify necessary violence as against non-violence or pacifist ideals which he had previously upheld. In 1969 Arden resigned from his position of Honorary Chairmanship of "Peace News". The reason he gave the board was that he was to travel to India. But in 1971, in the preface to The Bagman, he gives another reason. He writes, "There was another reason, however, which I did not give to the Board because I did not really give it to myself until a good deal later. A prestige position on a pacifist newspaper was, I came to feel, at any rate for myself, a classic piece of fence-sitting."<sup>17</sup> In India Arden also recognised the power of literature--he was surprised when the Forces of Law and Order in India--The police--concluded that he was a person of obvious communist bent and further astonished when the books he carried were declared to be of an 'anti-state' nature. Arden comments, "the dangerous potentialities of literature were, for the first time in my life at first hand, made clear to me. In a country where possession of the works of Mao and Lenin--though this is not exactly forbidden--can get a man into prison for an unspecified length of time, the writer begins to take a more encouraging view of the value of his craft than he can normally do in Britain."<sup>18</sup> India may have afforded Arden first hand experience which sharpened his own deeper convictions, for Arden has always shown keenness for the writer and his craft, the relationship of the writer and society has always been one of Arden's major

preoccupations. Certainly, in India, the whole concept took on a shape--as Arden says, writing about his experience in an Indian jail in which he had had to spend some time, "while I was held in the jail, I had conversation with the other prisoners in my ward... I talked to them about the Relationship of the writer to his Public in Times of Social Upheaval and this typical Western seminar-subject took on an altogether different appearance than it could possibly do in London or even Chicago".<sup>19</sup>

After his return from India, Arden was more strengthened in his commitment towards society. He began concentrating on Irish politics, and almost all his plays deal with the question of British imperialism in Ireland, and the position taken in these plays leaves no doubts as to where Arden's commitment lies. But Arden has always had a keen interest in the political stage--he had always held the view that the manipulators actually practice stagecraft. The stage is larger, the figures real, but the craft is much the same. There is not much doubt about the fact that Arden saw theatre as being closely allied to society in general. So while discussing the relationship between statecraft and stagecraft, Arden is aware that one imbues the other. As Frances Gray points out, Arden "is calling for<sup>a</sup> revolution in the theatre".<sup>20</sup> But he was aware that this "will be hard to achieve without political and social revolution too".<sup>21</sup> The politics of theatre is then, inextricably intertwined with the theatre in the political arena, and if revolution can be brought to one area, the other is bound to be affected.

Surprisingly, though some critics have mentioned this theme being present in Arden's plays, they have made fleeting references to it. Michael Anderson writes, "Arden's poets tend to be public men, involved in affairs of state."<sup>22</sup> Arden's poets are not those who withdraw from society "to explore an aesthetic world of strictly private sensibilities", Anderson says and goes on to write, "Arden, by contrast, sees the poet as another public figure contributing as much to the social framework as the policeman or the politician".<sup>23</sup> But Anderson has not developed this theme which he did note to be an interesting and a recurrent one. Frances Gray too writes about Arden's preoccupation with the theme of the writer and society, but does not talk about the figure of the manipulator and the figure of the poet. She writes, "A question which has preoccupied him frequently over the last ten years or so is...the responsibility of society to the playwright; and in particular, the responsibility of that area of society with which the playwright is most closely concerned, the theatre as a whole."<sup>24</sup> She goes on to describe the various issues which led to the dispute between Arden and D'Arcy and the theatre companies. She has not examined this theme in relation to the plays themselves.

This dissertation attempts to fill the gap in critical examination of Arden's plays by examining closely this theme of the juxtaposing of statecraft and stagecraft. The "poet and public man", who runs through Arden's plays will be discussed

at length in terms of Arden's longer plays and focussing primarily on the plays written by Arden alone.

A major contribution by Arden to new British theatre has been in his techniques of stagecraft. Arden has, from the earliest years, theorised about matters relating to the stage. His plays are invariably accompanied by a preface and he has published a book of essays, a compilation of his writings covering many areas--mainly theatre and its public.<sup>25</sup> Arden has experimented at length with modes of presentation of his material on stage. He has also written plays for the radio and for television, for professionals and for inexperienced amateurs. Julian Hilton writing about Arden's work says, "he has explored a wide spectrum of staging techniques," and goes on to link the reason for this to his conflict with the established theatre. Hilton writes, "it may be that one source of Arden's inventiveness lies in the fact that, through his long-standing conflict with the theatre establishment, he has had to improvise."<sup>26</sup> It seems unlikely that Arden's spectrum owes itself to such a source for inspiration, primarily because even in his earliest plays, Arden has used various forms, sometimes within the same play. Many critics have found a similarity in Arden's approach to theatre with Brechtian theatre. But that similarity is on a superficial level only, in terms of methods used. As far as Arden himself is concerned he says he owes his style to British tradition. He believes the 'historic and legendary tradition' of one's own country is the most useful

method to employ on stage.<sup>27</sup> As far as British tradition goes, Arden seems to have covered the entire repertory--the ballad, the circus and the music hall, the language is very often poetic, even when verse is not employed. Verse and songs are liberally used, sometimes to break the action and create the alienation effect or at other times to carry the plot forward. This aspect of Arden's work--his theories and techniques--will also be examined in the dissertation.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Osborne's first performed play, Look Back in Anger, was a runaway success. Pinter is best known for his earliest plays, The Birthday Party (1958) and The Caretaker (1960). Arden, though now best known for Serjeant Musgrave's Dance (1960), even this play, which is not his first performed play, had been given a luke-warm reception at its first run at the Royal Court. Harold Hobson reviewing the play in Sunday Times described it as "another frightful ordeal" and Punch called it a "lump of absurdity". Not only this, but between 1956 and 1961 Osborne's plays earned the Royal Court £ 50,000, and Arden's plays cost the Royal Court around £ 15,000.

<sup>2</sup> Ronald Hayman, British Theatre Since 1955: A Re-assessment (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), pp.1-2.

<sup>3</sup> John Russell Taylor, Anger and After: A Guide to New British Drama, 2nd Edn. (London: Methuen, 1969), p.1.

<sup>4</sup> Plays by Arden:

Serjeant Musgrave's Dance (London: Methuen, 1960).

The Workhouse Donkey (London: Methuen, 1964).

Three Plays (The Waters of Babylon, Live Like Pigs and The Happy Haven) [with Margarett D'Arcy] (Harmendsworth: Penguin, 1964).

Armstrong's Last Goodnight (London: Methuen, 1965).

Left Handed Liberty (London: Methuen, 1965).

Ironhand (London: Methuen, 1965).

Soldier, Soldier and Other Plays including Wet Fish, When is a Door not a Door? and Friday's Hiding [with Margarett D'Arcy] (London: Methuen, 1967).

Two Autobiographical Plays (The True History of Squire Jonathan and his Unfortunate Treasure and The Bagman) (London: Methuen, 1971).

Pearl (London: Eyre Methuen, 1979).

The Old Man Sleeps Alone in Best Radio Plays of 1982 (London: Methuen, 1983).

<sup>5</sup>Plays written by Arden in collaboration with  
Margaretta D'Arcy:

The Business of Good Government (London: Methuen, 1963).

Ar̄ Longa, Vita Brevis in Eight Plays for Schools (London: Cassell, 1965).

The Royal Pardon (London: Methuen, 1967).

The Hero Rises Up (London: Methuen, 1969).

The Island of the Mighty (London: Eyre Methuen, 1974).

The Non-Stop Connolly Show, five vols. (London: Pluto Press, 1977-78).

The Ballygombeen Bequest (Scripts 9 |New York|, No.9, Sept. 1972).

Vandaleur's Folly (London: Eyre Methuen, 1981).

The Little Gray Home in the West (London: Pluto Press, 1982).

<sup>6</sup>Full length studies on Arden have been rather too few, and conspicuously absent in Britain between 1974 and 1982 and 1982 onwards. In 1973 and 1984 two books appeared in the U.S.A. The five full length studies on Arden are:

Ronald Hayman, John Arden (London: Heinemann, 1968).

Simon Trussler, John Arden (New York: Columbia University Press, 1973).

Albert Hunt, Arden: A Study of his Plays (London: Eyre Methuen, 1974).

Frances Gray, John Arden (London: Macmillan, 1982).

Malcolm Page, John Arden (Boston: G.K. Hall/Twayne, 1984).

<sup>7</sup>Ronald Hayman in a radio broadcast, "The Conversion of John Arden" (1980). Quoted in Frances Gray, John Arden, p.16.

<sup>8</sup> See Catherine Itzin, Stages in the Revolution: Political Theatre in Britain Since 1968 (London: Eyre Methuen, 1980), p.1 and p.3.

<sup>9</sup> Frances Gray, John Arden, p.81.

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*, p.83.

<sup>11</sup> Catherine Itzin, Stages in the Revolution, p.24.

<sup>12</sup> John Russell Taylor, Anger and After, p.105.

<sup>13</sup> Ronald Hayman, British Theatre Since 1955, p.88.

<sup>14</sup> "A soldier's wife was shot in the streets by terrorists, and according to newspaper reports... some soldiers ran wild at night and people were killed in the rounding-up. The atrocity which sparks off Musgrave's revolt... is roughly similar." Arden, in an interview in Encore. July-Aug. 1961, p.31. Quoted in Catherine Itzin, Stages in the Revolution, p.28.

<sup>15</sup> Arden, To Present the Pretence: Essays on the Theatre and its Public (London: Eyre Methuen, 1977), p.158.

<sup>16</sup> Frances Gray, John Arden, p.15.

<sup>17</sup> Arden, Preface to Two Autobiographical Plays, p.13.

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*, p.16.

<sup>19</sup> *ibid.*, p.16.

<sup>20</sup>Frances Gray, John Arden, p.77.

<sup>21</sup>ibid., p.77.

<sup>22</sup>Michael Anderson, Anger and Detachment: A Study of Arden, Osborne and Pinter (London: Pitman, 1976), p.59.

<sup>23</sup>ibid., p.58.

<sup>24</sup>Frances Gray, John Arden, p.72.

<sup>25</sup>To Present the Pretence: Essays on the Theatre and its Public is a compilation of essays by Arden written over the years. It also includes two essays written in collaboration with Margareta D'Arcy.

<sup>26</sup>Julian Hilton, "The Court and its Favours: The Careers of Christopher Hampton, David Storey and John Arden", rpt. in John Russell Brown, ed., Modern British Dramatists: New Perspectives, Twentieth Century Views (Englewood Cliffs, N.J. Prentice Hall, 1984), pp.62-3.

<sup>27</sup>John Arden, "Telling a True Tale", Encore, May 1960, rpt. in Charles Marowitz, Tom Milne and Owen Hale ed., The Encore Reader: A Chronicle of the New Drama (London: Methuen, 1965), p.126.

## Chapter II

### RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN STATECRAFT AND STAGECRAFT IN ARDEN'S PLAYS

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"Not least among Arden's major characters there stands the poet or artist", writes Michael Anderson.<sup>1</sup> There is proof enough for this statement if one were to look through Arden's plays. Beginning with the poet-diplomat Sir David Lindsay in Armstrong's Last Goodnight (1965), almost every new play Arden wrote included the character of the poet or playwright, that is, the artist. This character appears as the central character in many of Arden's plays, and at other times this character appears as the intermediary between the action and the audience, as the Bargee in Serjeant Musgrave's Dance, or even as a natural performer, as Butterthwaite in The Workhouse Donkey (1964). There are the two principal characters who are playwrights--the first ironically named John Arden in The Bagman (1971), and the other Tom Backhouse in Pearl (1979). What sets Arden's artists apart from the usual conception of the artist who withdraws from society and cultivates a detachment from the real-tangible world, is that Arden sees the poet "as another public figure contributing as much to the social framework as the policeman or the politician".<sup>2</sup>

while they unfold their own political drama. Their audience is the inhabitants of that town, now snowed down and in the grip of a collier's strike. There is no crowd on stage, however, the theatre audience substitute for the townspeople. The message they seek to spread among the townspeople is an anti-war message, pointing out the evils of war, in the words of Musgrave, "a war of sin and unjust blood", and they have come to this town to "work that guilt back to where it began" (Act I, scene iii).

To do this Musgrave chooses the form of a spectacle in the middle of the market place--with boxes of rifles, a Gatling gun and the skeleton of a local boy, Billy Hicks, who has been killed in the war for stage properties. Musgrave's speeches are made directly to the theatre audience with the Bargee acting "as a kind of fogleman to create the crowd reactions" (stage directions, Act III, scene i). But Musgrave's performance turns around against him, as the dragoons (agents of the State's forces of law and order) enter the town and with a little assistance from the bargee, who has stuck a rifle into Musgrave's back, lead him off, with Attercliffe, the only one of the three soldiers now alive. Musgrave's performance fails, defeated by the forces he was up against the mayor, the parson and the constable and their agents, the dragoons. Musgrave's defeat, then, is in the hands of the State's political forces.

'The role of the writer in society is not only an aesthetic or private one--according to Arden, the poet is a participant. Arden's poets, likewise, participate in the life of the society, they are manipulators and sometimes the manipulated. On the other hand, each individual also plays roles in his or her day-to-day life. The difference is that some people's performances are public, others mainly play private roles. The politician performs publicly, and is seen by Arden as the manipulator. The super manipulator who also manipulates the lives and works of artists--poets and playwrights--who in turn manipulate lives of people on stage or in books. The manipulator of the characters on stage is himself manipulated by the politician. This almost invariably leads to a clash, in Arden's plays, with the politician, more often than not, scoring a point.

To examine this theme more closely, one needs to deal with Arden's longer plays individually. To begin with, there is Serjeant Musgrave's Dance (1960), Arden's best known play. In this play there is no one single character who stands out as an artist. But, as earlier mentioned, there is the Bargee, Joe Bludgeon, who stands between the action and the audience. And there is Musgrave himself, along with his supporting cast of the three soldiers, Sparky, Hurst and Attercliffe, who dramatize the message they have come to spread in the northern coal mining town. Their style is based on their military training (pointing the Gatling Guns at the audience),

In the case of the play, Armstrong's Last Good-night (1965), the characters of the poet and the politician are found within one person, Sir David Lindsay. He is a poet, and a diplomat, as set out by the Scots Clerk in Act I, scene ii, "Sir David, D'ye see, is ane very subtle practiser, he has been tutor to the King, is now his herald, ane very pleasurable contriver, too, of farces, ballads, allegories, and the like delights of poetry." Apart from these offices, that of poet and public affairs, Lindsay is also the manipulator of the major part of the action within the play. The play begins with Sir David Lindsay setting forward the proceedings, indeed scene i sets out his role as it unravels the plot. Through the opening scene Lindsay stands on the roof of the palace while the English and Scots commissioners hold discussion, after he has introduced the matters at hand to the audience in a fairly brief prologue. The diplomat in Lindsay, as also the poet in him is introduced to us in these opening scenes. The language he speaks is that of <sup>a</sup> court poet, he speaks in an urbane sophisticated style. Lindsay is also a performer, as he dons his costume, in this case by removing his "rags and robes" which express the "function of our life" and without the aid of the robes of his office, goes forward to win over Armstrong of Gilnockie, the border chieftain "as ane man against ane man", and "with this sole body and the brain within him" (Act I, scene ii). The stage is set for the action. The polished Lindsay trying to win

over the crude Gilnockie, by 'craft', and not through 'humanity'. He has acted his part well, though his advances as 'ane man against ane man' have failed and he has had to resort to a betrayal, to the full use of the manipulator's string. He has Gilnockie offered the King's pardon, and, deceived, as Gilnockie goes forward to meet the King, he is tricked and hung from a tree. His life is tricked away from him.

This reminds one of a play within a play. Indeed in most part Armstrong's Last Goodnight is like a play within a play. Each encounter between the two men is like the staging of a play and the climax comes with a major spectacle on stage. The last performance, in the last scene, is in contrast to the first performance, that of Lindsay's setting forth to win over Armstrong. Here Armstrong puts on his fine clothes, and dresses himself up in a gaudy costume, complete with accessories, badges, and a collar, to meet the King and his herald, Lindsay. But Lindsay, on the other hand, is dressed in his official robes which he had cast off during the first performance. Armstrong, in all his finery walks into a trap, to learn that the safe conduct promised him is only a bait to bring him into the power of the King. Feeling betrayed, he goes forward to his hanging spouting bits of poetry. This too is in contrast to Lindsay's learned language and poetic speeches. The learned courtiers do not even let him finish his blatantly direct song, "But had I wist ere I

cam frae home/How thou unkind wodst be to me/I wad hae keepit  
the border side/In spite of all they men and thee" (Act III,  
scene xiv). The play thus ends with a performance within  
another. Each act is a performance, private or public, so if  
these scenes seem like performances, plays within the play,  
Arden is pointing out that politics is performance, with  
politicians playing public roles. All through the play Arden  
has built up the image of the poet-politician overpowering a  
less cunning, less shrewd, a rather crude man. The object  
with which Lindsay set forth was to bring Armstrong "intil  
the King's peace and order... through my craft and my humanity/  
I will save the realm frae butchery" (Act I, scene ii). The  
'craft' of the poet and politician is the same. Both, the  
state and the stage, look upon human beings as the materials  
of their craft. Lindsay did not give Armstrong any more  
importance than as the material of his craft, whom he would  
bring into the King's peace and order. The state dictates,  
in this case, how the stage is to be set. What is important  
is, of course, Arden's assertion that the tools of the poli-  
tician and the poet are the same. Lindsay, after removing his  
robes of office, goes forward to encounter the border outlaw,  
Johnny Armstrong with one apparent purpose--to convince  
Armstrong to leave the border safe by not springing attacks  
on the English on Scottish borders. But he has made one  
mistake, he has not taken into consideration that he is dealing  
with human beings, who act differently, not according to his

own plans. His secretary, Alexander McGlass, tells Lindsay of his mistake. While he is dying (stabbed by a protestant, evangelist, who introduces Martin Luther and his doctrines to Armstrong, and is, thus, a danger to the design of Lindsay). "Ye did tak pride in your recognition of the fallibility of man. Recognize your ain, then, Lindsay: 'ye have a certain weakness, ye can never accept the gravity of ane other man's violence" (Act III, scene ix). But Lindsay is the manipulator, on being given the warning by McGlass, he just changes the ending. He had set it out quite differently, 'humanity' was to have been the essence of the dealings between Armstrong and himself. But Lindsay has no qualms about rewriting the end. Now he merely promises Armstrong a safe-conduct from the King, till he can go, consult with the King, and come back prepared with technicalities, to betray the trust of the man he had set out to win over peacefully. The diplomat in Lindsay has scored a point over the poet in him, because of the demands of the state. David Rabey has pointed this out succinctly, "Lindsay's 'craft and humanity' come to assume the derogatory connotations of the word 'politics' when compared to Armstrong's bluff integrity".<sup>3</sup> Political necessities, or 'necessities of state', have set the stage for Armstrong's hanging scene. The play ends on a very cold-blooded note, the border is safe, and the young Scottish King, James V, has come of age. The play ends with the sentence, "He [James V] had been weel instructit in the necessities of state by that poet

that was his tutor" (Act III, scene xvi).

Almost five years later Arden wrote what he calls an autobiographical play, a play for the radio--The Bagman or The Impromptu of Muswell Hill. In this play again there is the artist, a playwright, ironically named John Arden. He is introduced to the audience as "John Arden (thirty eight) of an ancient family, /Writer of plays for all the world to see, /To see, and pay for, and to denigrate:/ such was my work since 1958" (The Bagman, p.37). He adds by way of describing the playwright's function, "He covered sheets of paper with his babble, /He covered yards of stage-cloth with invented people, /He worked alone for years yet was not able /to chase one little rat from underneath the table" (The Bagman, pp.37-8). One questions whether Arden actually sees himself as the character in the play is portrayed. On the evidence of the play itself the answer would be that it is an ironical presentation--a satire on playwrights in general and probably even a satire on himself. But the question arises owing to the preface, which was written about two years after the play had been written and following his visit to India, where, as he says, he recognised the value of his craft (literature). In the preface he writes, "It will be obvious that if I had written The Bagman after, instead of before, the events I have here outlined [the bomb outside Ulster House and the Indian visit], the play would not have turned out at all in the same way. I considered re-writing the last part of it but I decided

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against this, because it does reflect fairly enough the state of my mind in the spring of 1969..."<sup>4</sup> What is confusing is why Arden should need to have given this clarification. It follows from a reading or hearing of the play that the position taken by the playwright at the end has been laughed at, ridiculed, satirised. Equally confusing, when one reads what Arden has said about The Bagman in 1980, "I was interpreted by some critics at the time as absolving the playwright from having anything to do in society. I don't believe that and I didn't believe it then. The play is a satire, a self satire; if I were writing it now I would try to make that clearer."<sup>5</sup> In 1971 he had considered changing the last part, in 1980, he still felt he needed to come out more strongly about the satirical element in the play. But if everything is spelt out for the audience, what is satirical about the play?

The position the playwright within the play takes is definitely a political position--perhaps the position taken is that of a pacifist as the creator of the character, Arden, professed to be in 1969, (what Arden probably means by referring to the state of his mind in the spring of 1969). Arden has said about himself at around this time, "I was a militant war resister... perpetrating civil disobedience at every flourish of my coffee cup."<sup>6</sup> In 1980, Arden considered himself a political activist. As Catherine Itzin points out "Arden

had changed political direction--from pacifism to political activism".<sup>7</sup> But the play, The Bagman, written in 1969, if it did fairly describe the state of his mind at that time, indicates a healthy satirical approach towards his own work. The play deals with a very important topic, a topic which has interested Arden from the beginning of his career, the relationship of the writer to his public in times of social upheaval.

A very interesting point about the play, The Bagman, is that the playwright John Arden (the narrator) is portrayed as a helpless, even ridiculous figure--not a 'fence-sitter' by choice. But rather out of helplessness, being manipulated by the political and public figures. In this respect, this playwright is like all other writers in an Arden play--he is not a private man. He is a social being and has social responsibilities, the only difference being that this playwright does not believe in active socialism. He is still a believer in the poet maintaining a distance whatever his personal political views, to gain objectivity. He has therefore shown himself incapable of participating in the affairs of men. He even believes his craft to be of little use, he had much rather "carried a bag full of solid food." (The Bagman, p.88)

In the preface to the play Arden has added a clarification, "I should note, for the benefit of the reader, that the attitude of the central character at the end of the story

is reprehensible, cowardly, and not to be imitated."<sup>8</sup>

A question arises around this, is the stand taken by the narrator visible only at the end of the story, not throughout? For one thing reality is not any more established at the end, when the narrator is unable to take up arms, than it did at any point of the story. The helplessness, the innocent at the hands of society, this figure has grown rather than emerged at the end. The dream quality is maintained throughout, reality is established only at the very end, when the narrator shakes himself out of sleep and proceeds homewards, with an assertion, "If I had been defeated it was all in a dream." (The Bagman, p.87)

Throughout the story, the narrator never does have control over his craft. The plays his 'little people' perform are never by his own command. Even the voice is not his own, the little people who perform before the multitude are accompanied by a strange voice--not so strange since it is recognised as Hilter's voice--but an unreal, disembodied voice none-the-less. The play these 'little people' perform is one of those which Arden hates, yet the characters are too closely Arden's own creations to escape notice. The soldier, the policeman, the doctor, the pretty little blonde popsy all belong to Arden's repertory.

None of the actions of the narrator is voluntary, he is dragged about, woken up violently from his sleep, goes

to sleep all the time within the dream (within your dream you fell asleep again) and is asked to do this and that by the ministers and the young woman. And above all he is being manipulated by the state to suit their own purposes. As always in an Arden play, the state is more aware of the power of literature, the power of theatre, than the writer or playwright himself. The state decides to let him go on with his business of presenting plays. "In my view, the professor is a young man to be encouraged, though of course we must be careful" (The Bagman, p.65). The conversation between the two ministers which ends in this declaration is a glorious pastiche of commonly used cliches by theatre critics and politicians; especially in the framework of the subsidised theatre. This thoroughly manipulated playwright with a nickname like 'Professor Inkspot' conferred upon him can hardly call upon anyone to consider him a mighty serious fellow, despite the fact that he wears spectacles and looks like a "gentleman of learning". The helplessness of the narrator is genuine, he is just not allowed to follow his own dictates, he is continually tossed here and there.

The land in the dream where the narrator is led into is given a ridiculous identity. The descriptions sound funny, the economics (as explained by the young woman) is all topsy turvy, yet one cannot miss the parallel. It is real, no matter how funny it appears, the economics is real

enough (fat men living off thin men). The condition of the playwright is real (the two ministers decide what is to be done with the person who writes subversive plays and yet whose works are enjoyed by the public), and the audiences are real (they "will allow anything to be said in books or on stage" as long as their own possessions are not diminished. They enjoy seeing themselves portrayed on stage, they are relieved that the revolution on stage fails and everyone dies and immediately afterwards go to witness a public execution without batting an eyelid). Within this world the narrator has never taken a decision regarding any matter. At the end too he is not given a choice. The young woman just tells him to join hands with the revolutionaries. In these terms the end follows the build up of the entire story. The state has let him go on with his work, they only kept vigil around the content (in the presence of Royalty the performance turns out to be a totally different affair--'Not at all the same story... They were not even the same sort of people as before. There was a King and a Queen and a Bishop, yes, but the Soldier and the Constable and the Housewife and the ragged men were all gone, their places had been taken by a crowd of posturing exquisites, dolled up in peacock feathers and waterfalls of gold and silver lace. And there was no fighting in the story. Nothing but extraordinary variations of erotic postures and intrigues, couplings and triplings and quadruplings..."(The Bagman, p.78). Even the playwright's

control over his 'little men' his craft, has been in doubt, the Unpopular Minister asks, "The question is: how much is him, and how much is his little men?" (The Bagman, p.63). And at the end the 'little men' let him down. They huddle together and refuse to have their little wooden bodies mutilated by joining the war. And the final statement made by the young woman is a statement of his failure, "We are betrayed by this fool with his bag--he has wasted our time and distracted our attention..." (The Bagman, p.86). The ridiculous helplessness of the narrator definitely cannot be sympathised with. His portrayal from the beginning to the end is ironical. This playwright (the narrator) then, is not a public figure in the same way as Lindsay is. He does not manipulate the action; he drifts with the events, the events being his own dream sequence does not alter the fact that the playwright is not a manipulator.

It is not often that illusion and reality get so easily compounded as in this play. Everything seems to stem from illusion, (the staple of an artist, as it is supposed to be). In the face of reality the manipulator is not really a large figure, even the park-keeper at the Muswell Hill Park overpowers him with his outsized notebook and pencil. He buys a bag from an old woman who says it may hold a soft young woman--reference to the Muses, no doubt--but it turns out to be a bag full of small wooden figures without much

inspiration for the playwright. He concludes that the "bag must hold something that was known to be obnoxious to the guardians of the public amenity" (The Bagman, p.42). He decides therefore to take it out of the reach of "nosey-parkers, bureaucrats and my fellow-men in general" (The Bagman, p.42). The instant <sup>he</sup> heaves the bag upon his shoulder he has transcended reality for the second time, for the park and its familiar surroundings disappear and he is in a dream land. This is the first transformation within the dream (he buys the bag in a dream). From this second level of illusion he goes on to a third where he thinks he has fallen asleep again and remembers being transported to another room onto a bed, "At any rate there was a bed and I was on it: and I slept" (The Bagman, p.65). Within this dream he has a conversation with the young woman, apparently sent to gratify his personal desires. And within this sleep or dream, she tells him about the place where he is and draws his attention to the ills of that society. She says, "Oh, the whole economy of this region is entirely ridiculous--you would'nt credit it if you met it in real life: but then you are in a dream, and you have entirely abdicated, have you not, from the regiment of common-sense?" (The Bagman, p.70). This dream finds him waking up (still within the original dream) to a harsh situation, "I staggered up and down, piercing my feet upon the splinters in the rough-cut floor" (The Bagman, p.71). He is then made to present himself before the King and Queen who

desire to see his 'little people' perform, and the erotic performance is put up for them. When this performance comes to an end, the palace and its surroundings vanish and the narrator finds himself once again with the young woman who reminds him, "Within your dream you fell asleep again" (The Bagman, p.80). The playwright is truly at a loss, "But when did I fall asleep, when did it go wrong" (The Bagman, p.80). His preoccupation with his sleeping and waking have to be pushed aside because the young woman has more important things to show him--the true king, he finds is chained to the wall. Their position is imminent--they are being pursued by the guards. The young woman, obviously one of the revolutionaries, tries to yoke in the writer who is unable to go into the underground gutter without his bag. She tells him, "You'll have to leave your bag--you idiot you" (p.82) and later demands that he fight "just the same as the rest of us" (p.83). But the narrator does not think himself capable of leaving his bag. "Whatever would I do without it?" he asks. When asked to throw it down and take up a weapon he replies, "This is my weapon." But his 'little people' "were all clustering and huddling together, some of them struggling to get back into the bag" (The Bagman, p.85).

The plight of this playwright within the play, according to Arden, is the plight of playwrights depending on the Subsidised Theatre. The state almost owns the craft of the playwright and the stage affairs are in the hands of the

state. The playwright in this situation can only try to 'look at what he sees'. The playwright will be used by the state to further their own interest. As ironically stated by Arden in The Bagman, if the fed men are fat it is because the unfed men are thin and only in comparison are they in an excellent condition. And as the minister points out, "they know themselves fat because the outlandish men are thin: they suffer now and then in their consciences for this" (The Bagman, p.63). Which is the reason why these people (the public of the prosperous land) must be reminded occasionally by plays and playwrights of their prosperity. "Let them feel a temporary pang, and their discomfort is assuaged" (p.63). So, here again, in The Bagman, the state knows the value of theatre, therefore, they keep it in their hands rather than make playwrights into martyrs by suppressing their works altogether. The suppression, however, is complete.

Catherine Itzin has pointed out one of the reasons for the "angry generation" of playwrights who emerged in the late sixties; their anger arose out of the plenty they had, at the cost of the impoverished third world. And as Arden has said, in the preface to The Bagman, his fight is against the fed, clothed and sheltered men, "whose food, clothes, and house are obtained at the expense of the hunger, the nakedness, and the exposure of so many millions of others: and who will allow anything to be said, in books or on <sup>the</sup> stage, so long as the food, clothes, and house remain undiminished in his

possession."<sup>9</sup> What the state wants a playwright to do (as the ministers in the play decide) is to give occasional reminders to the people about the source of their riches. Let them feel the 'pang of conscience' let them of wallow in it, deep, but keep them from acting upon it. Perhaps even within the play, without intending it (as the preface suggests), Arden has moved to a clearly defined political position regarding theatre. A playwright can participate in social change, even effect it, if he uses his craft. The distance between what the relationship of the playwright to society is, and what it should ideally be, existed when Arden wrote The Bagman. And even when he wrote the preface in 1971, he was not very certain about the relationship of a writer to society during times of social upheaval. Almost a decade later, in Pearl (1979), however, he has worked out for himself the relationship of the writer to society in politically and socially unstable times. Pearl centres around this principal theme and once again, Arden has set out the relationship between statecraft and stagecraft, this time choosing a historical event to highlight this theme.

Pearl falls into the category of Arden's plays, now commonly referred to as the "Irish plays". The change which every critic has noted, purportedly took place in the years around the writing and publishing of The Bagman. Also noteworthy is the fact that after 1971, Arden has collaborated

more and more with Margaretta D'Arcy, and has written plays upon the Irish subject. With Pearl came a break. The subject is Ireland, but the play is not written in collaboration with D'Arcy and it reverts back to Arden's stock character, the artist and the performer, involved in the affairs of the state,

One cannot help but notice the autobiographical element in this play. Tom Backhouse, the playwright, "comes from Yorkshire, writes plays, has been perhaps disappointed in love as a young man", says the descriptive entry in the *dramatis personae*.<sup>10</sup> Arden, we know, was born in Barnsley, Yorkshire, he writes plays, and if the preface to Squire Jonathan is to be depended upon, has indeed been disappointed in love. Apart from that, as an English playwright of a liberal nature, Backhouse needed to be politicised by another, to actively participate in the life of the nation. The person who politicizes Backhouse is Pearl, "a messenger, from the west... she invents her own shape as she goes, and has earned money from it upon public stages."<sup>11</sup> Margaretta D'Arcy, we know is Irish and is an actress, we also have evidence that her influence had much to do with the change noticed in Arden. Arden admits this himself, "I've never regarded myself as anything but a writer... I've always wanted to be involved with more practical activities without having to initiate them and so, in that way, our collaboration |his

and D'Arcy's] has enabled me to do a kind of writing which otherwise I would never have done."<sup>12</sup>

At the time of writing Pearl, Arden had already contributed greatly to fringe theatre, he had been allied with political parties, with the avant garde and with the Rough Theatre movement. Arden writes political plays with conviction, and he has defended this position on a number of occasions. In 1975 Arden said that people "prefer not to have plays about society, because it worries them. I mean, the fact is that society is in a bad way, and its always more comforting to see plays that don't go into this, but instead go into the private troubles of the individuals because the audience can identify with those... I do believe that the theatre is a public place, and I do believe that it ought to deal with historical and public issues. I don't believe anyway, that emotional experiences of individuals are particularly valid if detached from a perspective of the society in which the individuals live, and from the background in which they are formed as individuals."<sup>13</sup>

The narrator in the play The Bagman has political consciousness but finds himself unable to use his craft to instigate direct action. The playwright Backhouse, in Pearl has learnt through the actress and political activist Pearl, that his craft is more powerful than he had previously known. Backhouse had an academic approach to his craft when

Pearl first met him. Her influence changes his views of his own craft, and in the end he is killed because he has not compromised, he has used his material as his weapon, to try and bring about social change. Within the framework of Arden's plays the character of the artist has grown and developed. Though Arden has been preoccupied with the figure of the poet-politician since his early plays, the function of this character has changed and progressed. The Pearl-Backhouse duo is aware that they are creators and manipulators. They are aware of the value of their craft. But the forces of the state, according to Arden, are better aware of the power of literature. The politicians in the play The Bagman realised the potentialities of literature and so decided to patronize the bespectacled playwright whom, they thought, they would manipulate for their own ends. The manipulator of characters and events (the artist), in turn being manipulated by the forces of the state is not new in Arden's works. Lindsay, the poet, had to bow down to the demands of the diplomat within him. The tools being same, he manipulated the life of another to suit his own purposes. Musgrave had set up a little pageant to demonstrate the ills of war, with an indigenous stage of boxes and the skeleton of Billy Hicks, the local boy, as stage property. But what Musgrave did not realise was that the dragoons (agents of the state) would move in and crush the miner's revolt and in the process, dislocate all his plans and even kill him.

In the case of Pearl and Tom Backhouse, events in the play take on an autobiographical element, just as the characters do themselves. Arden and D'Arcy, who had faced suppression by the establishment theatre managements and from the forces of law (again agents of the state's political forces), give vent to their anger against the suppressors in this play. The realization about the state suppressing the affairs of the stage has been a personal experience for Arden and D'Arcy. The suppression led to Arden's continued absence from the London stage since 1972, after the production of The Island of the Mighty.<sup>14</sup> Arden and D'Arcy utilised the opportunity of the self-imposed exile to turn their attention towards plays upon the Irish political subject. Arden said in 1975, "The more I write or have written, on the topical Irish themes, the more I feel that I am fulfilling some sort of function in a community which is something that I was beginning to lack very much when I lived in Britain."<sup>15</sup>

The story of Pearl does not belong strictly to the group of Irish plays. The events take place in England around 1640. Pearl, a messenger from the west, has come to England bringing with her messages from the Irish rebels and the Scottish Presbyterians. She has no roots, Arden has pointed this out, and therefore has no prejudices in the matter she is pursuing. Her aim is to gain the support of the English Puritans, to join forces against the King. She has journeyed to England in various guises, arriving in the guise of a courtesan

to deliver a message to Lord Grimscar--a fellow sympathiser of the cause. She needs Grimscar's help to mobilise support, but finds it difficult to do so directly, as Grimscar has made an enemy of the Puritan preacher, Gideon Grip. Grip does not trust playacting, it is an immoral act according to his belief. But Pearl, an actress, joins hands with Tom Backhouse, a playwright, to use this very medium to woo the Puritans. Here is a double-edged sword: trying to gain support of the Puritans through theatre and at the same time prove to them the worth of theatre.

Gideon Grip, of course, is not to be ignored. He has strong views about theatre, and says so to Backhouse, "Thomas Backhouse, I believe you are a man of brain, so think on... If you make claim/that mutual intercourse is all your aim/To show folk how they live, I tell you--well./Present to them a picture of their own living hell/And they will wallow in it, deep./why not? Know that from this pit/There is a ladder out/And we must climb it, clamber, storm the blood-stained wall/And fight to death its keepers" (Pearl, sc. iii). The kind of theatre Grip talks about is exactly that which the ministers in The Bagman wanted the playwright to write. But that is exactly what Backhouse and Pearl will not write. Their play will aim to encourage positive action from its audience not aim for them to see their miseries portrayed on stage and "wallow in it deep". Backhouse and Pearl want to

provide the 'ladder'--a worldly ladder to climb out of the pit.

Grimscar, Pearl and Backhouse have joined forces against a common enemy--The King, the Lord Deputy and the Archbishop--as Backhouse says, "We believe that the King and the Lord Deputy, and the Archbishop, have in mind to erect a tyranny in this land that will destroy all English freedom until the old age of our great-grand children" (scene v). And to this purpose they need the support of the English people, all English people who hold out against the King. Backhouse has an assignment on hand, ironically it is arranged by Belladonna, a Royalist who is trying to woo Grimscar into the Royalist faction. If not, she wants to crush any design he may have to recall the absolute power of Parliament. Pearl and Backhouse think of this as a good opportunity to reach out to the people, but as Backhouse says, "it'd be no good without Gideon in person and all his flock among the audience--or at least their equivalent out of the mean streets of royal London" (scene ix). The problem is that "the like of those lads'd never dream to go into a stage play. Yet without them to cheer out their throats for me, I find nowt any more in the whole of England fit for the tip of my pen." (scene ix). It is Pearl who solves this problem, instinctively. She suggests basing a play on a story, if there are such, in the book she has seen Grip carrying. Pearl has assumed that

the book is a book of scriptures and if it has stories to tell, they would be the best ones to perform, in the light of their present situation. As she puts it, "out of his own book an acted play: out of his own politics a victorious struggle" (scene ix). Thus grew the story of Esther, in Backhouse's new play. Pearl would be playing Esther, with a secret last speech in which to make a direct appeal to Grip's flock to join forces with them against the King. But the project seems a very difficult one right from the start. Jack Barnabas, "the best actor in England" would be playing Hamaan, and Barnabas, of course, only cares for his own role, image and all things that go to make a 'star'. Pearl would rather not have him play the role, for he lacks their commitment to the cause, and the project, in its entirety, would have to remain secret from him. Apart from these problems, there is also fear of their purposes coming into the open through Dr Sowse, a man of indifferent morals, or even though the company of actors. With all the fears, Pearl and Backhouse make the mistake of not realizing the potential of the brain working behind Belladonna, namely the Duchess, who is "relied on by great men for her intuitive statecraft".<sup>16</sup> The Duchess, representing statecraft, like all such forces knows quite well what the outcome of a powerful play can be. She realises soon enough that one of her own men must get into the project and keep Grimscar's party from succeeding in their design. Once again the forces of the state is more aware of

the potential of theatre than either the playwright, Backhouse, or the actress, Pearl, and they do not take <sup>sufficient</sup> precaution against betrayers. The Duchess learns from the traitor, Dr Sowse that Grimscar is steeped in parliamentary politics, and that Pearl is none other than a messenger from the O'Neills in Ireland who are already joined with the Scottish Presbyterians, and are only waiting for a believable sign from Grimscar to act towards their set goal, that is, impeachment of the King's Lord Deputy and successfully give power to Parliament. So from the Duchess's point of view, all that has to be done is to sabotage Backhouse's play, ruin it so completely as to make them lose the support of the Puritans forever. Her task is easier, since the Puritans would anyway be against a stage play of any nature. The job that Pearl and Backhouse have undertaken is an uphill task, for they will have to break the barriers before reaching out to Grip and his followers.

The person whom the Duchess employs for this purpose is a mercenary blackguard, Captain Catso. This man enters the company as the constructor of the movable scenery for the stage--as part of the management. He sets to work immediately, working changes everywhere. So eventually there are two contradictory plots being hatched simultaneously. Captain Catso directs the girls, who were required to dance personifying the virtues and vices, to wear the scantiest costumes and has them follow his line for their dances, "Put out your belly, revolve your haunches" (Pearl, scene xiv) while Pearl

is trying to change into a habit after removing Esther's costume in the briefest possible time so that she can step out of the character played and directly demand verbal support from the audience to further the plan to impeach the King's men.

This is not all, however. Both parties have a climax in mind, entirely in opposition to one another, since the ends wished to be achieved are opposed to each other. Pearl's success in her plan would depend on the success of the climax of the play, for, once the Puritans give their support to Grimscar, she would only have to deliver the news to the O'Neills in Ireland, and she would have succeeded for her part. But it all hinges on her changing into a "black gown and white strached collar" and read out names of those they seek to impeach and have the audience join in repeating "impeach, impeach". It is important to note that more than theatre is at stake here. Grimscar represents the liberal forces who believe in the parliamentary process. And Grip does not agree, that the parliamentary process can lead anywhere or that the liberal faction is of any use. But if Grimscar can convince Grip and his followers, of the seriousness of his project, there is always a chance of their project succeeding. Grip does not take Grimscar seriously and he does not agree with Grimscar's plan of action, since it involves a play and Grip views theatre as immoral. He says so to Grimscar, "I have told you what I think about stage

plays" (Pearl, scene xvi) but he is willing to go ahead if Grimscar "can prove such profanity can indeed be set to work in the cause of righteousness, we are prepared to regard you as a justified instrument in the hand of God. If that proof is not given, if London and all England are not immediately made aware that through this stage-play the gentlemen of Westminster have declared their whole-heartedness in the fulfillment of our liberty, then we look for another sign: we travel our own road... (scene xvi). Giving him a warning and some hope if Grimscar can prove himself: "Grimscar, we will wait and watch", Grip leaves Grimscar's party with a singularly difficult task.

Poised as things are, Arden has given tremendous importance to Pearl's being able to transform herself and speak as one of the people. Arden has also pointedly illustrated the lengths which theatre managements can go vis-a-vis production of a play. Catso has everything ready, at the instigation of the Duchess, even Belladonna is not aware of the counter-plot hatched by Catso and the Duchess when she says, "This play should not take place" (scene xvii). If the play is stopped, Pearl and Backhouse lose half the battle; but will be left with hope of another chance. The Duchess' politics does not allow for chances--if the whole plan is jeopardised and twisted around so that they make enemies of the Puritans their chances are wrecked forever.

And this is what happens to the plan set afoot by Grimscar's faction--the fate of the common people has been sealed, the course of history has been established, with power remaining with the King, and the chosen few--the Royalists.

Statecraft has used the tools of stagecraft. What the Duchess has done to the play, the Royalists have done to the entire movement. Betrayed it and crushed it. The blame falls heavily on the political forces and also on the likes of Jack Barnabas, who can think only in terms of roles, starcasting and his own stature. His objection to Backhouse's play is not aesthetic or political, it is merely selfish.

Success in this project, centering upon the play contrived by Pearl and Tom Backhouse, may have effected major changes in the history of the nation, as also in the history of theatre. Arden sees a breakdown in English theatre's involvement with common people and their issues. After the Elizabethan age and the early decades of the 17th century, the theatre no longer addressed the common man. And this, according to Arden, has crippled English theatre. A potentially powerful instrument is only a plaything now. But, what power could it have had, what can the theatre do, or attempt to do? These questions, which Arden has raised in The Bagman, he tries to answer in Pearl. If drama could have played a decisive role at a crucial moment in English history, if theatre had been progressive enough, then both the history

of theatre and theatre of history could have been different.

What must be noted in Arden's plays is that though Arden's repertory has included the common man, and though he has addressed the common man, Arden's major characters are more often than not, not of the multitude. The poet-dramatist, to take the case on hand, is not one of the common people, he is an intellectual and hierarchically above them.

Since the 1970s Arden has moved further away from the London stage, because he could not reach the common man. He has found the answer in the fringe theatre in later years, though he has been aware of the potentialities of non-formal modes of theatre from the early years. That the artist is a participant in society has had to be spelt out again by Arden's generation of playwrights. Arden took the initiative to point out the fact that artists are workers, and must get the rights which are their due. The establishment of the 'Theatre Writers Union' proved the urgency of Arden's demand, "all playwrights in Britain should, as a matter of urgency, organise themselves into some sort of Union to protect their artistic as well as their financial interests".<sup>17</sup> So the answer to the questions thrown in up such plays as The Bagman and Pearl, find a solution outside the boundaries of Arden's plays. In Pearl he did attempt to answer some of those questions, but the tussle between the state and the stage goes on, and as Arden is still writing, one hopes to find an answer within his forthcoming plays.

Notes

<sup>1</sup> Michael Anderson, Anger and Detachment, p.58.

<sup>2</sup> ibid., p.58.

<sup>3</sup> David Ian Rabey, British and Irish Political Drama in the Twentieth Century (London: Macmillan, 1986), p.103.

<sup>4</sup> John Arden, Preface to Two Autobiographical Plays, p.16.

<sup>5</sup> John Arden, quoted by Mathew Hoffman in Sunday Times, 29 Jan, 1980. From Malcolm Page, Arden on File (London: Methuen, 1985), p.62.

<sup>6</sup> Arden, To Present the Pretence, p.48.

<sup>7</sup> Catherine Itzin, Stages in the Revolution, p.28.

<sup>8</sup> Arden, Preface to Two Autobiographical Plays, p.17.

<sup>9</sup> ibid., p.17.

<sup>10</sup> John Arden, Pearl, p.7.

<sup>11</sup> ibid., p.7.

<sup>12</sup> Arden, in an interview in The Guardian, 28 Nov, 1972. Quoted in Malcolm Page, Arden on File, pp.89-90.

<sup>13</sup> Arden, in an interview with Maria Kreisler, "Theatre of Argument but a Theatre with a Point of View". Quoted in Malcolm Page, Arden on File, p.90.

<sup>14</sup> Arden and D'Arcy were involved in a dispute with the Royal Shakespeare Company around the production of their play, The Island of the Mighty, in 1972, which Arden has written of in an essay titled, "Playwrights on Picket" (included in To Present the Pretence). It became a major issue for the writers and for the theatre company and eventually lead to Arden and D'Arcy leaving things as they were and returning to Ireland, Arden saying as he left, "We will never write for you again", and keeping his word on this issue.

<sup>15</sup> John Arden, Interview with Maria Kreisler, Quoted in Arden on File, p.90.

<sup>16</sup> John Arden, Pearl, p.7.

<sup>17</sup> John Arden, To Present the Pretence, p.156.

### Chapter III

#### ARDEN'S THEATRE: HIS THEORIES AND TECHNIQUES

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John Arden, "Writer of plays for all the world to see",<sup>1</sup> has also written a substantial amount of prose usually connected with theatre. In various articles, essays and prefaces he has set forward his views on theatre and politics, where they co-mingle one gets the theories of Arden's theatre--the political theatre. He has compiled many of his essays, some written in collaboration with his wife and co-writer, Margaretta D'Arcy, in a volume titled To Present the Pretence: Essays on the Theatre and Its Public. The title speaks for itself. Between the covers one discovers the theories, beliefs and convictions of the playwright--John Arden. One cannot discount the prefaces which accompany Arden's plays either. A wealth of theories on theatre and on his own craft are to be found in them. According to Michael Anderson, "Arden's approach" to his craft is "an academic one", meaning thereby that he has well thought out reasons for what he does.<sup>2</sup> For Arden is one who writes his plays with an objective, his understanding of theatre precludes the assumption that theatre can fulfil a social objective, it can be used as a vehicle for communicating with the public. Hence his prose writing gains an added importance. For proper appreciation of Arden's plays we have to examine his theories

and the techniques that he uses. But they have to be discussed together. His objectives rule the methods used on stage. The stylistic demands of his plays are a result of the contents of his plays. Being so closely interrelated they will have to be dealt with in one single chapter.

Arden has had various skirmishes with his critics and the theatre managements owing to the fact that his views on the presentation of his plays often clashed with their well-set ideas on the subject. These clashes went beyond the mere academic, and had Arden and D'Arcy fighting for their rights as writers during the presentation of their play The Island of the Mighty on the London stage.<sup>3</sup> Albert Hunt gives a detailed description of the confrontation between the writers and the management of the Royal Shakespeare Company around their play The Island of the Mighty. Hunt says that the "story of the production illustrates the thesis of this book--that the revolutionary content of Arden's plays makes stylistic demands that are outside the normal range of the established British theatre".<sup>4</sup> So, once again, one is faced with the fact that the content of Arden's plays makes demands which cannot be fulfilled by the production system of established British theatre. This is what Arden wishes to rectify. Why should the parameters of established theatre be as rigid as they are? As Hunt puts it, the rigidity is akin to "the rigor mortis of those who controlled--and, for the most part, still control--

British theatre".<sup>5</sup> He goes on to quote Arden who said that there "is a sort of solemnity about people in the theatre".<sup>6</sup>

Apart from rigidity in terms of form which would mean an aesthetic cloister, there is another reason why the managements of 'established British theatre' closed their doors to Arden. And that reason is political. As discussed earlier, Arden holds the view that the state has always been aware of the power of the stage. The politicians who are the statutory heads of Boards of Subsidised Theatre are better aware of the power of the playwright's craft than the playwright himself. One finds an example of this in Arden's play, The Bagman (1971), where two local politicians discuss the fate of the playwright they find in their midst:

Popular Minister : In my view the Professor is a young man to be encouraged: though of course we must be careful.

Unpopular Minister : Oh, whatever you think best. We can encourage him by all means. And control him.

Popular Minister : Not control. Suggest directions: that is all...

(The Bagman, p.65)

The relationship is too one-sided. Politics and politicians have kept plays and playwrights under control. Arden's basic desire has been to break these shackles and reach the common man. Only by reaching the man in the street can theatre work

as a medium of social change. The question is whether Arden was aware of the potentialities of his craft when he began writing plays or whether he has developed and progressed with the years. Considering his allegiance to Ben Jonson and Bertolt Brecht one is tempted to claim that he has always been aware of it, but needed the external forces--that of the influence of his wife and co-writer, and his visit to India--to put this into sharp focus.<sup>7</sup> But first Arden's position vis-a-vis his critics who have misunderstood his techniques and social stances must be made clear. 'In the fifties, Arden's plays have given rise to the belief that he is a "detached" playwright. Serjeant Musgrave's Dance (1960), The Waters of Babylon (1964), and Live Like Pigs (1964), have given rise to serious misgivings within the critical circles that Arden is "indecisive as the most despised of liberals".<sup>8</sup> Arden's comic presentation and unsentimental views on the characters or groups of characters leads to the assumption that he is not taking sides, and this has prompted Harold Hobson to say, "the doctrine that Mr Arden <sup>preaches</sup> is not comfortable, least of all to those who imagine that he is unequivocally on their side."<sup>9</sup> This misunderstanding between Arden and his critics lies in Arden's refusal to take the obvious stand in terms of his characters. John Russell Taylor, one of the foremost names in theatre and film criticism, seems to have misunderstood Arden's major differences with the usual technique, the Stanislavskian method, employed on the commercial stage. He blames

Arden for not clarifying his position and writes of his being the least committed of the post-war playwrights.<sup>10</sup>

The seeming non-commitment stems from the fact that Arden does not take sides with his characters. He usually sides with an issue, a principle, a stance. But most people make the major mistake of expecting to see a character on stage who is the author's mouthpiece. As Hunt puts it, "The usual assumption is that a play's 'message' is carried by the character with whom the spectator is invited to identify."<sup>11</sup> Arden makes no such demands upon his audience. But not taking sides has proved to be difficult for many important reviewers and critics, including John Russel Taylor. Taylor says, "We can stand a little uncertainty about which are our heroes and which are our villains, but where do we stand in a situation which seems to deny the very possibility of heroism or villainy?"<sup>12</sup> He goes on to describe Arden's work in this respect, "Arden brings us face to face with it in its baldest form by writing plays which appear to be about general social, moral, and political issues... Arden the man no doubt feels strongly about all these subjects, or he would hardly choose to write about them, but his dramatist's instinct absolutely prevents him from stacking things in favour of the characters whose opinions most closely resemble his own..."<sup>13</sup>

The characters are not the author's mouthpieces-- correct. But that is not to say that Arden does not take a position. His position, vis-a-vis "general social, moral, and political issues" are clear enough. The plays in question which seem to give rise to these misgivings are Serjeant Musgrave's Dance (1960), Armstrong's Last Goodnight (1965) and The Workhouse Donkey (1964). In all of these Arden's position is clear, although neither Musgrave nor Lindsay or even Butterthwaite or Feng can even remotely be called the author's mouthpiece. The author's message is there all right. It is carried across by the events, speeches, action and all other elements contained within the play--not just carried by one single character. Arden says, "I never write a scene so that the audience can identify with any particular character. I try and write the scene truthfully from the point of view of each individual character."<sup>14</sup> In fact, in an interview he has expressed "grave objections to being presented with a character on the stage whom you know to be the author's mouthpiece".<sup>15</sup>

In the play Armstrong's Last Goodnight, neither Lindsay the poet strategist, nor Johnny Armstrong of Gilnockie, the border outlaw carry the message of the play on their own. They are presented to us truthfully from the point of view of each 'individual character'. Arden has taken pains to avoid 'stacking things in favour of' any of the characters. That Johnny Armstrong is not the favoured party is made clear in Act I, scene iii, where Armstrong betrays the trust of Wamphray, another clan chief, and plots his death (he later meets the same fate at the hands of a much more polished politician, Sir David Lindsay)

Act I, scene iii, opens with Wamphray entering the stage" arm in arm with Gilnockie" and the scene ends with Wamphray's death at the hands of another clan, the Elliots resulting from the plot laid by Johnny Armstrong. Arden has also taken precautions to see that Wamphray is not pitied or thought of as wronged-- for then Armstrong would appear to be a villain.

The text of the play Armstrong's Last Goodnight, as Arden wrote it, opens with the Council of English and Scottish ministers conferring upon the possibility of peace returning to the border without either of the two Kings having to get involved in a war of suppression. Sir David Lindsay is introduced to us here as a diplomat, a poet-diplomat. He is the writer of a play, The Three Estates, and tutor to the young Scottish King. He sets himself to work "upon ane man alive, and turn his purposes and utterly win him" (Act I, scene ii). He is to be the man to bring peace. He has decided to go as one man against another without his robes of office to bring the border outlaw, Armstrong, "intil the kings peace and order" (Act I, scene ii). It is with this background that the text goes on to the third scene which introduces the cunning of Armstrong whom Lindsay is about to encounter and try to harness, as it were, through his 'craft' and 'humanity'.

In the first production by the National Theatre in 1965, the scenes were rearranged. It opened with scenes iii and iv and were followed by scenes i and ii. Arden writes about this in a note on the production: "This was done in order to make an English audience familiar with the language before

the more complex exposition of the plot had to be embarked upon... I think this readjustment of scenes justified itself, and producers who wish to use it may do so: but from the point of view of the overall shape of the play, I prefer my original arrangement."<sup>16</sup>

If the writer can give so much freedom regarding the arrangement of opening scenes, then it clearly indicates that neither of the two characters is the pivot around whom the play's message is built. Albert Hunt praises Arden for exactly that quality which Arden was being asked to defend--his objectivity--in the chapter dealing with Armstrong's Last Goodnight, he writes, "as in The Workhouse Donkey, Arden doesn't identify with one rather than the other. He presents them and their actions clearly and objectively", the problem was in Arden's taking for granted that his audience shared his world view.<sup>17</sup> Taking for granted that his audience shared his world view has perhaps been a problem as regards this play, and Arden says so himself. He writes that he finds the whole sequence of events in the play so alarming and hateful (and at the same time so typical of political activity at any period) that I have--perhaps rashly--taken for granted a similar feeling among the audience."<sup>18</sup> But in all fairness to Arden, even if taking his audience's response for granted may have been rash, the play itself makes Arden's position clear. Arden has said that his "views on the Armstrong story are positive enough--Lindsay was wrong", he carries on to say, "I know I have not

not said this in so many words in the course of the play, but it was, I hoped, implied by my treating of the story and the persons involved in it."<sup>19</sup> The play reveals instances where Arden has implied that "Lindsay was wrong". In Act I, scene ix, Lindsay, while discussing his tactics in trying to win over Armstrong, lays a devious plot--an "indirect" plot, which he says will "set them a'to wonder what in the de'il's name we're playen at, I think our wee King will enjoy this business... He was aye ane devious clever knave in the school-room". And the 'wee' King's tutor in the schoolroom had been Lindsay himself. In Act III, scene i, Lindsay admits that he "did ever tak pleasure in ane devious activity", and when the plan for Armstrong's hanging has been set, he goes forward to Armstrong and personally offers him the letter from the King, and assures Armstrong, "I wear my Herald's coat the day: it is ane surety of Royal honour that there will be nae deception" (Act III, scene xii).

Arden's fault does not lie in the treatment of the story--it lies, if fault it may be called, in the overestimation of the audiences' political and even theatrical awareness. As Albert Hunt puts it, some critics have begun "by accepting the argument that Arden refuses to take sides, and that therefore he has no points to make". He quotes from a review by Edwin Morgan who writes that "the plays' theme... would suggest a strong current of sympathy, perhaps even tragic directed

towards Johnnie Armstrong. But--this is an Arden play! Sympathy never develops very far... we are never asked to identify with this character, which indeed is presented very largely in a comic light. Conversely, we don't find ourselves blaming Lindsay overmuch."<sup>20</sup>

Hunt, in defence of Arden's position, goes on to add a scathing comment on Morgan's criticism--"Morgan's conclusions tell us more about what he expects from a play than about Armstrong's Last Goodnight. He would like to be able to feel sympathy with a tragic hero whose actions he can admire... Above all, he wants to be able to identify himself with a character whose fate he can pity... Morgan is asking for a heroic tragedy, which will offer him a sense of catharsis".<sup>21</sup> This is what Morgan or any other audience will not find in an Arden play. Not in his earlier plays, nor even in his later plays (after 1970), when Arden does take strong political stances. But before 1970 or after, Arden's stance has always been political. If after 1970 his position emerges from the entire play, more strongly perhaps, it could be because he has learnt not to take things like audience awareness for granted.

As regards the case of The Workhouse Donkey and Serjeant Musgrave's Dance, Arden was equally misunderstood. Butterthwaite and Musgrave are both larger than life figures, who could easily be branded "heroes". This is the case of Lindsay too--who has some of the finest poetry to speak on

stage. But to be fair to the character, Arden would have to give him those lines. In Lindsay's position, both as poet and diplomat, he would be expected to use refined speech. Besides which, Arden has based much of the speeches in Armstrong's Last Goodnight, on a play by Lindsay, The Three Estates. In The Workhouse Donkey, there are two characters, either of who could be misunderstood to be carrying the author's message-- Butterthwaite, the "Napoleon of local politics", and Chief Constable Feng, "a man of excessive integrity". But neither the corrupt Butterthwaite nor the excessively honest Feng carry the writer's message across. In fact, Arden almost certainly does not approve of Feng. He writes, "I feel he is a good man, who behaves in a way dictated by feelings of the utmost integrity, and concludes by doing a tremendous amount of damage."<sup>22</sup> About Butterthwaite he says that "Butterthwaite is a pretty scoundrelly sort of person... But my view is that the type of corruption he represents does a great deal less harm to a community of people where it is understood and lived with than the type of ferocious integrity implied in the figure of the Chief Constable."<sup>23</sup>

What is very noticeable in terms of Arden's critical responses is that the critics who have blamed Arden for not taking sides, have later praised his earlier plays (in which he apparently did not take a political position) because of the political motivation of his later plays, that is, because he takes sides!

The revolutionary content of Arden's plays is a matter for concern among the 'solemn' theatre people. Catherine Itzin writing about the hostility towards Arden's work says, "it is arguable that the initial hostility and lack of comprehension was a response (however subconscious) to the radical and disturbing political implications of the plays, and that the criticism levelled against Arden--that his style or aesthetic was alienating--was a way (again subconscious) of avoiding the political issues."<sup>24</sup> But the avoidance of Arden the playwright began in earnest now. Most of those who think of Arden as a spent force, put the blame on his wife, D'Arcy, who has supposedly 'politicized' him. Ronald Hayman, in a radio interview has said that Arden has not given up writing plays, he has only given up writing good ones. In fact the writers have not had any of their plays presented in London since 1972 and the decade, the 70s, saw Arden collaborating more with D'Arcy and concentrating on the Irish plays. As Itzin puts it, "The main theme of their lives and work in the seventies was concerned with Ireland--with disastrous results professionally."<sup>25</sup> After this change which, according to Gray, was a direct result of Arden's Indian visit, Arden has moved more and more away from the proscenium arch of commercial theatre (whose limitations he had felt even in 1965 while presenting The Workhouse Donkey) to smaller audiences in smaller venues, outside the bounds of established, or as Hunt calls it, 'Legitimate Theatre'.

Writing plays upon Ireland is not common even among the "new wave" writers. Frances Gray writes that "some of Britain's leading political dramatists have not written about Ireland at all".<sup>26</sup> She goes on <sup>to</sup> describe a sort of censorship applied to Irish plays, she writes that Arden "has complained that some of his work with D'Arcy has been rejected in favour of what is described as 'genuine Arden work', and that this is essentially a way of censoring, indirectly, his Irish material".<sup>27</sup> Catherine Itzin has also written extensively about this rejection of Arden, after he began concentrating on the Irish material, by the English stage. She writes that "from 1968 the history of John Arden as dramatist--or rather John Arden and Margaretta D'Arcy as co-dramatists... was not so much what they wrote, but what happened to what they wrote. It was a history of unstaged plays, production problems, critical hostility and downright neglect".<sup>28</sup> The curious thing about this whole question of censorship, rejection and neglect is that this playwright had, at one time, been hailed as potentially the greatest playwright in post-war Britain. That the subject of Ireland could earn him so much disfavour tells clearly why Arden has not given up on the subject. It is obviously one of the topics where the state feels touchy enough to debar it from stage. Arden has his own views upon this particular subject: "The great difficulty is that dramatists will rarely be told: 'Your play is subversive: we are imposing a political restriction upon its performance': an aesthetic or bureaucratic reason will rather be advanced."<sup>29</sup>

Arden's political commitment, then, had much to do with his shift from 'Legitimate Theatre' to exploring the possibilities of alternate or 'Rough Theatre'. Writing about The Workhouse Donkey, Arden has expressed dissatisfaction with the play being presented on stage with all the proprieties intact. Even the time limit for a regular performance did not appeal to him at this time. He writes in the preface to the play, "Two-and-a-half or three hours is normally regarded as the maximum permissible length for a new play, and under the conditions at present prevalent in our theatres it is not easy to dispute this. But I would have been happy had it been possible for The Workhouse Donkey to have lasted, say, six or seven or thirteen hours, and for the audience to come and go throughout the performance, assisted perhaps by a printed synopsis of the play..."<sup>30</sup> He goes on write about what he calls 'vital theatre', "I am convinced that if what we laughably call 'vital theatre' is ever to live up to its name, some such casual or 'promconcert' conception must eventually be arrived at."<sup>31</sup>

These are the bases of Arden's later experiments with 'Rough Theatre'. And the reasons for these experiments, though partly aesthetic, were mostly political. Arden and D'Arcy have aligned themselves to left-wing theatre companies and present plays in smaller venues to select audiences. But they came closest to Arden's version of free-form theatre at the New York University, where they presented The War Carnival which according to Arden

was "something of a turning point" in his career as a playwright. While Arden and D'Arcy were at the New York University, some students who had read Arden's suggestion on the six or seven hour play in the preface to The Workhouse Donkey, offered him a challenge--"could it actually be done? The class was very troubled about Vietnam and wanted to tackle the matter of war as part of their college theatre-work."<sup>32</sup> And that led to The War Carnival with Arden participating, pretending to be a CIA agent and even desecrating an American flag. It was really D'Arcy who organized the show and since then their contacts with the avant-garde or 'fringe' theatre has gone on. Arden writes, "She thus began a series of contacts in the avant-garde or 'fringe' theatre which we have never relinquished, and which have virtually kept us alive as dramatists when the more formally-organised subsidised theatres have been unwilling to accept our notions."<sup>33</sup> The formal theatre has not accepted the Arden of the seventies and eighties. They want him to return to his earlier forms of playwriting, though, even in the sixties he did not exactly enjoy tremendous patronage.

Arden's politicization has been a much discussed topic but one thing worth noting is that though his fight, as Arden says, is with the clothed, fed and sheltered man, because of his various fights with theatre managements, his anger has come to be directed against the producer-director-administrator team who do not allow him to reach out to the unfed, unclothed, unsheltered men. Though Arden discovered the theatre of politics,

his preoccupation with the politics of theatre did not cease. In 1979, he wrote Pearl for the radio in which, while dealing with the history of Britain in the mid 17th century, he has crystallised the issue of the state being so closely allied to the stage that at certain points of history the fate of the one depends on the other. Thus, if the Pearl-Backhouse play had been successfully presented, the history of theatre would have been different--and the theatre played upon the political stage would also have been different. But because the course of history did not allow for this, theatre lost out on an opportunity to assert itself as central to the political life of a nation.

In order to go on with his career as a playwright, Arden has allied himself strongly to the 'Rough Theatre' movement and though there have been some plays on B.B.C. Radio, the plays of Arden and D'Arcy have mostly been presented outside the bounds of legitimate theatre. In his later plays, whether written alone or in collaboration with D'Arcy, Arden has asserted his position as an active socialist. His earlier work is branded "genuine Arden work" and his later plays "non-genuine" Arden work. As Arden has succinctly put it, "a genuine Arden work in fact meant 'a play like Sergeant Musgrave's Dance, which does not come to any very positive conclusion'--whereas non-genuine Arden would be 'Arden at last affirming from his own hard experience the need for revolution and a Socialistic society: and moreover convinced that his artistic independence and integrity will be

strengthened rather than compromised by so doctrinaire a stance...'  
 Twelve years ago I looked on at people's struggles, and wrote  
 about them for the stage, sympathetically, but as an onlooker.  
 Without consciously intending it, I have become a participant."<sup>34</sup>

We have seen that in the seventies and eighties Arden has moved away from the 'established' stage to the area referred to as 'fringe' theatre. The long drawn tussle between Arden and his co-writer with the managements of established British Theatre is a story of a bitter struggle which culminated in Arden's proclaiming that he would never write for the English stage again, and really leaving the London stage not to turn back. The next two decades found Arden working within the framework of what Peter Brook calls "Rough Theatre". The Rough theatre movement was bound to attract Arden who was against the concept of squeezing a play to fit the production demands of the proscenium arch. The reasons, as has been said, were both aesthetic and political. According to Michael Anderson, "It was inevitable... that such an author should end up at loggerheads with the structure and organization of the contemporary theatre. As is natural in a dramatist whose artistic principles go hand in hand with his social convictions, Arden's objection to the theatre is partly aesthetic, partly political."<sup>35</sup> The essentials of Rough Theatre as Peter Brook explains it, are somewhat similar to what Arden had in mind when he wrote the Preface to The Workhouse Donkey.

Peter Brook writes, "putting over something in rough conditions is like a revolution, for anything that comes to hand can be turned into a weapon. The Rough Theatre doesn't pick and choose; if the audience is restive, then it is obviously more important to holler at the trouble-makers--or improvise a gag--than to try to preserve the unity of style of the scene... The popular theatre, freed of unity of style, actually speaks a very sophisticated and stylish language: a popular audience usually has no difficulty in accepting inconsistencies of accent and dress, or in darting between mime and dialogue, realism and suggestion."<sup>36</sup> Similarities between Brook's conception of rough theatre and Arden's theatre can be found in a study of any of Arden's plays. For instance, in The Royal Pardon, the card-board crown is pointed out to be so. Everyone knows all kings in plays wear theatrical properties but Naturalist Theatre wills its audience to forget it during the performance, so that an illusion can be created on stage. Arden's earliest plays use masks. The old people in The Happy Haven wear masks. The actors could all be young, the masks--visible masks which are really caricatures of old people--are donned during the performance. Arden does not want his audience's involvement with any of the characters on stage. But this has been misunderstood by most critics and Arden has been accused of fooling around instead of presenting plays in the standard of Serjeant Musgrave's Dance. Speaking to the audience is another factor not acceptable in the pristine precincts of established theatre. There is a chorus, or a bard or narrator who stands between the action and the audience. But the audience is one big collective body sitting

in a darkened room. There is no scope for direct communication. Arden uses this very effectively in The Royal Pardon, in the production attended mainly by children. The clown, in circus and music hall tradition, overdoes the splitting of the breeches act which annoys the preserver of law and order, the constable (in this production played by Arden himself), who points out "twice, no less, was breeches mentioned and each time they was removed: to the scandal of the populace... why children might have been present" (Act I). This statement was bound to be very funny indeed. This brings us to that aspect of Arden's work seemingly unpopular with the managements--the sheer fun of it all. Most of Arden's plays are funny--not the tongue in cheek variety--rather, what can best be described as <sup>of</sup> the slapstick kind. In the same play, The Royal Pardon, there is a ridiculous chase all over the stage by the constable who earlier had pulled at the crowns and beards of Royalty, to assure himself they were playing roles (funnier still because they really are) and doing a knock-about on stage which is mistaken for a rehearsed play by the King of France who actually awards it a prize of one hundred guineas after calling it "intellectual".

But Arden's capability as a playwright should not be assumed to be restricted to fringe theatre only. Most of his plays are also very well written, both from the point of view of the reader and the audience. Most of his longer plays follow a structure which Arden has evolved for himself. As regards his style or technique even his most adverse critics have never

had anything but praise for him. Even Ronald Hayman, who disagrees with Arden in terms of his socio-political views speaks well of his technique.

Arden's choice of methods of tools was a conscious one which was, as mentioned earlier, a result of his 'social convictions'. In May 1960, Arden wrote, "to use the material of the contemporary world and present it on the public stage is the commonly accepted purpose of playwrights, and there are several ways in which this can be done."<sup>37</sup> In 1960 then, Arden was still trying to find a suitable style for putting his material on stage. He goes on in the same essay, "what I am deeply concerned with is the problem of translating the concrete life of today into terms of poetry that shall at one time both illustrate that life and set it within the historical and legendary tradition of our culture."<sup>38</sup> The preoccupation seems to have been, at this time, with setting the contemporary life within the bounds of history, and tradition. Arden's knowledge of history and tradition cannot be challenged --he was conversant enough with history to sometimes consciously distort it or highlight necessary events, to gain his end. In the preface to Armstrong's Last Goodnight, Arden writes that the play "is founded upon history: but it is not to be read as an accurate chronicle. The biggest liberty I have taken with the known historical facts is in connecting Sir David Lindsay with the events leading up to the execution of Johnny Armstrong in 1530. But these events must have involved

considerable political and diplomatic manoeuvring, and it is known that Lindsay was not only the author of The Three Estates but also regularly employed upon diplomatic missions for the Scottish Crown."<sup>39</sup> This bit of 16th century history has been employed in this play, changed around as if may have been, to accommodate a contemporary event which had affected Arden enough to base a play upon it--'political manoeuvring'--the role of the U.N. in Congo. In the same preface Arden writes, "In writing this play I have been somewhat influenced by Conor Cruise O'Brien's book To Katanga and Back: but I would not have it thought that I have in any way composed a 'Roman a clef'. The characters and episodes in the play are not based upon originals from the Congo conflict; all I have done is to suggest here and there a basic similarity of moral, rather than political, economic or racial problems."<sup>40</sup> Arden put the two events in different centuries in one category because, as he says, political manoeuvring is "typical of political activity at any period".<sup>41</sup>

The reason Arden gives for relying on the historical and legendary tradition of one's country is that popular "tradition is the one that will in the end reach to the heart of the people, even if the people are not entirely aware of what it is that causes their response".<sup>42</sup> This is why Arden has relied very heavily on British tradition (including Scottish and Irish history and legends and popular tradition) in terms of the tools of his craft.

The marked effect an Arden play has on its audience is that it is drawn from the tradition of ballad, the music hall tradition and the bardic tradition. His characters break into song quite often. Verse is liberally used and cuts from prose to verse are sudden and sharp. There is no reason why this should not be so, considering the fact that in the tradition Arden talks about, a familiar story was always told attended by verse and song. He writes, "The ancient heroic legends were told at dinner as prose tales, of invariable content but, in the manner of their telling, improvised to suit the particular occasion or the poet's mood. When, however, he arrived at one of the emotional climaxes of the story..., then he would sing a poem which he had by heart and which was always the same."<sup>43</sup>

Arden links this to a play, "in a play, the dialogue can be naturalistic and 'plotty' as long as the basic poetic issue has not been crystallized. But when this point is reached, then the language becomes formal; the visual pattern coalesces into a vital image that is one of the nerve-centres of the play."<sup>44</sup>

Tradition, we find, is necessary in Arden's theatre, aesthetically and also politically. Even in 1960, as this essay suggests, Arden was thinking about ways to reach out to audiences--to have them share in the play. And tradition seemed to Arden to be the best way of doing so--because as he said it would be understood. "Social criticism" writes Arden, "tends in the theatre to be dangerously ephemeral and therefore disappointing

after the fall of the curtain. But if it is expressed within the framework of the traditional poetic truths it can have a weight and an impact derived from something more than contemporary documentary facility."<sup>45</sup> But even though Arden has found a way of presenting "social criticism on stage", his critics have not accepted it. It has not been accepted because of one fundamental error on the parts of these critics--looking for the author's 'social standpoint'. In doing so, they missed the simplest message contained within the familiar story. The reason for this, Arden says, is because "other habits of play-going have led them (critics and audiences) to expect that they are going to have to begin by forming judgements by selecting what they think is the author's 'social standpoint' and then following it to its conclusion". Arden argues that "this does not happen in ballads at their best. There we are given the fable, and we draw our own conclusions. If the poet intends us to make a judgement on his characters, this will be implied by the whole turn of the story, not by intellectualized comments as it proceeds. The tale stands and it exists in its own right."<sup>46</sup>

As stated earlier, Arden has employed techniques drawn from the British tradition, as against 'American pop culture' which had its influence upon a major part of the world in the sixties and seventies. Arden writes in "Telling a True Tale" that the "English public has regrettably lost touch with its own poetic traditions... there is a large deploring of the flood of American Pop that has clearly caught the imagination of youth to the exclusion of anything native".<sup>47</sup> Arden was himself a

a young man, in 1960, when he wrote this essay, but he seems to have escaped that particular 'flood' of imported culture. His first successful play, Serjeant Musgrave's Dance, presented in 1959, draws largely from the ballad and the bardic tradition. In this tradition, familiar songs would be used, traditional motifs employed and stock situations used, to help carry across the tale. In Serjeant Musgrave's Dance Arden has used the elements of this tradition, complete with songs, verse and traditional motifs. Verse is used liberally in all of Arden's plays and his characters burst into song quite easily. In spite of repeated criticism, Arden continues to employ songs and verse in his plays. John Russell Taylor, while discussing The Waters of Babylon (1964), says, "several of the characters have a disconcerting habit of bursting into song at odd moments."<sup>48</sup> Michael Anderson finds fault with another area in Arden's use of language in terms of his prose. "Alas", he says, "Arden's dramatic prose is of variable quality".<sup>49</sup> He goes on to describe two scums conversing in what he calls, "polished artificiality"--that is the people on stage speak 'out of character'.

The point is that Arden has consciously employed both these methods--the songs and the 'polished artificiality' of speech, heightened sometimes by the use of verse. Beginning with Serjeant Musgrave's Dance (1960) on to Pearl (1979), Arden has used verse consciously. He says that if verse is to be used it should clearly be verse, compared to the surrounding prose.

He says, "I think the use of formal verse and straightforward vernacular prose in juxtaposition is quite a good solution even in a modern play."<sup>50</sup> So, all of Arden's characters, at one time or another, speak in verse sometimes in rhyme--at other times in free verse. Of course, the characters of the poets in Arden's plays often speak the finest poetry, but even ordinary men like Butterthwaite use rhyme when it comes to telling his own story, his low origins as a workhouse donkey. Simple straightforward rhyme is used for him, without running the risk of being accused of using language above his station in life.

In the workhouse I was born  
 On one Christmas day  
 Two long ears and four short feet  
 All I ate was hay...

If the use of verse is a solution there must be a motive for Arden's employment of it. The motive is to achieve a heightened theatricality. A conscious effort is made by Arden to achieve this, first of all to ensure that the audience is alert to the fact that they are watching a play. Arden is not competing with the "dream merchants"--with films or with the television--nor does he want to employ the Stanislavski method of the theatre of illusion. "People must", he feels, "want to come to the 'theatre because of the artificiality, not in spite of it".<sup>51</sup>

'Conscious artificiality' or heightened theatricality is also a result of the visual elements of theatre. Among other things colours play a very important role in Arden's plays. Even in this matter, Arden is indebted to the ballad tradition. "In the ballads", he writes, "the colours are primary. Black is for death, and for the coal-mines. Red is for murder, and for the soldier's coat the collier puts on to escape from his black. Blue is for the sky and for the sea that parts true love. Green fields are speckled with bright flowers. The seasons are clearly defined. White winter, green spring, golden summer, red autumn."<sup>52</sup> One is reminded of Arden's Serjeant Musgrave's Dance in this context. The soldier's red coats, in a black and white snowed under coal-field. Arden is consciously creating a 'visual excitement' in this play.<sup>53</sup> The play opens with the deserting soldiers playing cards; the black, white and the red of the playing cards have set the tone--Black Jack Musgrave leads his men in 'red coats' into the northern 'black and white' town, into the 'black' coal miners, to spread the message of peace (white), against war and violence (red). The final scene at the market place is like a pageant with Musgrave trying to perform the duties of producer, director and main actor. The image of the skeleton, white, dressed in a soldier's tunic and trousers, is meant to provoke terror of war, but the image becomes much more terrifying and in a different way altogether, when Annie, deranged, takes the head on her lap and nurses it. It is

grotesque, rather than terrifying Attercliffe's song at the end again uses the colour symbol--"Your blood - red - rose is withered and gone" (Act III, scene ii).

The pageants which Arden's characters put on usually continue to carry on the colours Musgrave used. The visual is used in Johnny Armstrong's hanging scene where Armstrong is seen in all his finery, baubles and all. Charlie Butterthwaite, in the final scene of The Workhouse Donkey, wears a table cloth for a mayor's robe, and a paper chain in place of the original mayor's costume, and sits on the table in front of an audience delivering his final speech, in verse, about the downfall of the workhouse donkey, that is, himself. Krank, in The Waters of Babylon goes into a London underground convenience and emerges, visually, a different man; from the sordid life of pimping and prostitution to the busy architect. And Pearl (in Pearl), who lives by "changing her shape", is finally reduced to a shapeless beggar with a split nose and cuts in her ears and cheeks. Just as Pearl, a radio play, draws on the visual imagery, so does The Bagman where the playwright, John Arden, we are told, wears oversized spectacles. The 'little people', who perform before the audience, wear clothes which set them out to be closely allied to Arden's own creations--"a soldier in a red coat, and a policeman, and a doctor, and a pretty little blonde Popsy... and a hideous old woman" (The Bagman, p.57).

From the use of colours, we come to the use of masks in Arden's plays. The first play to use masks was The Happy Haven (first performed in 1960) written with Margaretta D'Arcy. The masks in this play are really exaggerated caricatures of old people, worn by young actors, who would be performing vigorously, complete with chases and ridiculous games. Since this play, Arden has used various kinds of masks. Both The Island of the Mighty (1973) and The Non-Stop Connolly Show (1978) employ masks denoting different figures. In The Island of the Mighty, the Queen and the Princess of the Picts wear cat-masks and when Balan takes over kingship of the Picts he too is required to wear a mask. In The Non-Stop Connolly Show the most striking mask is worn by a character called Grabitall (whose name says what he denotes), but the mask which is essentially a demon mask, derives various connotations as the play proceeds so that finally it becomes the ultimate symbol of oppression.

Masks help in heightening theatricality, distancing the audience, and is another solution for Arden who is trying to achieve the alienation effect. Drawing attention to theatrical property as being nothing more than just theatrical property achieves the same result. In The Royal Pardon, Arden has effectively pointed out properties to be just that and has succeeded in distancing the audience--while giving them something to think about. The Kings and the Queens in The Royal Pardon wear cardboard crowns, just as the travelling group of actors do. There is no illusion; everyone is wearing cheap

imitations, normal theatrical properties. The purpose of all these experiments with form is almost always the same. To use theatre as a vehicle to reach the common man--not sentimentally, not by wringing their emotions--but by evoking consciousness about the problems raised and yoking in support and participation from them.

Arden has always been a conscious artist. He has himself, like his creations, been a poet involved in the affairs of men. He has aligned himself with left-wing Irish politics, at the cost of his having to give up professional theatre in Britain. He has written extensively about this particular aspect which he himself has faced, and is facing--the state's involvement in the affairs of the stage. But he has not arrived at the solution, as yet, about how to use stagecraft effectively enough to combat statecraft when necessary. One waits eagerly to see a form of theatre emerge--a new effective theatre--Arden's theatre.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> John Arden, The Bagman, p.37.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Anderson, Anger and Detachment, p.51.

<sup>3</sup> As mentioned earlier, in 1972 a controversy arose around the production of The Island of the Mighty between the writers, Arden and D'Arcy, and the management of the Royal Shakespeare Company. Arden has written about this controversy in an essay titled "Playwrights on Picket", included in To Present the Pretence, pp.159-72.

<sup>4</sup> Albert Hunt, Arden: A Study of his Plays, p.157.

<sup>5</sup> ibid., p.72.

<sup>6</sup> Arden, in a Peace News interview (rpt. in Encore, Sept-Oct. 1965). Quoted in Albert Hunt, Arden, p.72.

<sup>7</sup> Arden acknowledges the influence of his wife, Margaretta D'Arcy, on his playwriting career. It was largely owing to her that Arden, as he says, turned towards the alternate theatre. See Catherine Itzin, Stages in the Revolution, p.26, and To Present the Pretence, pp.47-8. About the influence that the Indian visit had on him Arden has given an account in the Preface to Two Autobiographical Plays. And also in an essay titled "The Chhau Dancers of Purulia", included in To Present the Pretence, pp.139-52.

<sup>8</sup> Michael Anderson, Anger and Detachment, p.50.

<sup>9</sup> Harold Hobson, Sunday Times, Nov. 8, 1959. Quoted in Michael Anderson, Anger and Detachment, p.50.

<sup>10</sup> John Russell Taylor, Preface to Three Plays, (London: Penguin, 1964).

<sup>11</sup> Albert Hunt, Arden: A Study of his Plays, p.29.

<sup>12</sup> John Russell Taylor, Anger and After, p.84.

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*, p.84.

<sup>14</sup> Arden, in an interview in Peace News, Aug. 30, 1963, (rpt. in Encore, Sept-Oct 1965). Quoted in Albert Hunt, Arden, p.25.

<sup>15</sup> John Russell Taylor, Anger and After, p.85.

<sup>16</sup> Arden, Plays: One (London: Eyre Methuen, 1977), p.245.

<sup>17</sup> Albert Hunt, Arden, p.92.

<sup>18</sup> Arden, in Encore, Sept-Oct 1964. Quoted in Albert Hunt, Arden, p.21.

<sup>19</sup> Albert Hunt, Arden, p.21.

<sup>20</sup> *ibid.*, p.20.

<sup>21</sup> *ibid.*, p.21.

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*, p.80.

<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*, p.80.

30. <sup>24</sup>Catherine Itzin, Stages in the Revolution, pp.29-
- <sup>25</sup>ibid., p.31.
- <sup>26</sup>Frances Gray, John Arden, p.87.
- <sup>27</sup>ibid., p.87.
- <sup>28</sup>Catherine Itzin, Stages in the Revolution, p.31.
- <sup>29</sup>Arden, To Present the Pretence, p.157.
- <sup>30</sup>Arden, Plays: One, p.113.
- <sup>31</sup>ibid., p.113.
- <sup>32</sup>Arden, To Present the Pretence, p.47.
- <sup>33</sup>ibid., p.48.
- <sup>34</sup>ibid., pp. 157-8.
- <sup>35</sup>Michael Anderson, Anger and Detachment, p.52.
- <sup>36</sup>Peter Brook, The Empty Space, pp.74-5. Quoted in Frances Gray, John Arden, p.66.
- <sup>37</sup>John Arden, "Telling a True Tale", from The Encore Reader, p.125.

<sup>38</sup> *ibid.*, p.125.

<sup>39</sup> John Arden, Preface to Armstrong's Last Goodnight, Plays: One, p.238.

<sup>40</sup> *ibid.*, p.239.

<sup>41</sup> John Arden, Encore, Sept-Oct 1964. Quoted in Albert Hunt, Arden: A Study of his Plays, p.21.

<sup>42</sup> John Arden, "Telling a True Tale", from The Encore Reader, p.126.

<sup>43</sup> *ibid.*, p.127.

<sup>44</sup> *ibid.*, p.127.

<sup>45</sup> *ibid.*, p.128.

<sup>46</sup> *ibid.*, p.128.

<sup>47</sup> *ibid.*, p.125.

<sup>48</sup> John Russell Taylor, Anger and After, p.87.

<sup>49</sup> Michael Anderson, Anger and Detachment, p.55.

<sup>50</sup> John Russell Taylor, Anger and After, p.90.

<sup>51</sup> John Arden, in an article in New Theatre Magazine Quoted in Frances Gray, John Arden, p.57.

<sup>52</sup> John Arden, "Telling a True Tale", from The Encore Reader, p.127.

<sup>53</sup> See John Arden, Serjeant Musgrave's Dance, Methuen Student Edition (London: Methuen, 1982), p.xxvii.

## CONCLUSION

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The themes which appear frequently in Arden's longer plays are to be found in his shorter works too, as well as in the plays he has written in collaboration with Margaretta D'Arcy. The theme highlighted in this dissertation--the fusion of art and life studied through Arden's presentation of the poet and public man within the boundaries of the stage and the state--is not restricted to a handful of plays only, but occur in a majority of his work.

Paradoxes abound in Arden's works, as he says in The Royal Pardon (Act I): "The truest word is the greatest falsehood,/Yet all is true and all in play--". Truth is examined through the falsehood of theatre. And Arden's theatre makes no bones about being a falsehood--"All is painted, all is cardboard" (The Royal Pardon, Act I).

Arden sees all public activities as performances. Nelson in The Hero Rises Up (1969) is presented in both his public and private capacities. The public figure is the hero of Trafalgar, and the private figure is one who is shown as a ridiculous blundering person unable even to take care of his love life. The play deals with the private feelings and public actions of the man Nelson, whose final performance is the attainment of highest glory--he has become a national

hero and finds his place in the limelight, as it were, on his high pedestal.

The Royal Pardon (1967) is subtitled The Soldier who Became an Actor. It deals with the events centering around a group of travelling actors who are joined by a deserter, called Luke, who follows them about throughout the play. Whenever he is given a chance he talks about the 'duty'<sup>he</sup> has performed as a soldier. He also draws attention to the parallel between playacting and war, claiming that having been a soldier he will naturally make a good actor. "My voice is well trained", he says, "having had experience of half the parade grounds in England, let alone three-quarters of the battle-fields of Europe, and my physique is well adapted to any running, jumping, stamping or strutting that may be in request." He goes on to more violent aspects as he says, "if there's any sword-fighting in the part, you've got the very man" (The Royal Pardon, Act I).

Arden's assertion that art and life are just two sides of the same coin comes up in Ars Longa, Vita Brevis (1965), where a lesson in art just flows into a military training discipline. An art teacher, Mr Miltiades, starts off<sup>by</sup> taking an art class in which the insistence is on using the right hand for pencils and left hand for rulers and going on to a military drill with the repetitive 'left, right, left, right'. The parallel here, as in the case of The

Royal Pardon, draws attention to Arden's preoccupation with the artist--the creator who can play positive as well as negative roles in society. On one hand we have Mr Miltiades, the art teacher, who insists on the drawing of straight lines, or at the very least, squares, triangles, tetrahedrons and conics, anything to stifle free expression, and on the other hand we have Pearl and Backhouse in Pearl (1979), who play a positive social role, using their craft for the benefit of the people.

Arden, at this present time, obviously has no doubts about the potentialities of his craft, that is, literature, or more precisely, theatre. But he is definitely pessimistic about whether it can be put to much use with the pressures that are applied from external sources, spear-headed by the forces of the State. The struggle, between the power of the State forces and the inherent power of theatre goes on.

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