

How does drama affect the way we think?
Steve Williams visits Big Brum Theatre in
 Education Company to find out

The Under Room

Big Brum Theatre in Education Company tours schools projects that stimulate children and young people to imagine, question and think. Their latest production for secondary schools and FE colleges is *The Under Room*, a new play by Edward Bond – one of Britain’s most respected playwrights. Bond values the opportunity to write for young people and has said that Theatre in Education is: ‘the most valuable cultural institution the country has’. (Bond, 2000). I went to see *The Under Room* at the Mac theatre in Birmingham. Later, I interviewed the director, Chris Cooper, and then attended a performance and workshop given by Big Brum actor-teachers in a local school.

The play

The Under Room is set in the year 2077. An illegal immigrant has broken into a woman’s house. Both characters are drawn into a web of dependence, fear and corruption. A third character who works the corrupt system provides hope for papers and a new life. But can he be trusted? He behaves like a loan shark – always pressuring the others for more money. All the characters must make moral decisions and face the truth about what they have become. But do they have the inner resources to act rightly and is it even possible to do so? The play’s title suggests to me both the setting – the cellar in the woman’s house – and a human



being's inner capacities. Bond himself says he writes his plays to ask the question: 'what does it mean to be human?' *The Under Room* explores this question and many more that lie behind it in very powerful ways.

The play never provides answers but rather stirs up our imaginations with a series of dilemmas and stories that are difficult to ignore. Bond uses objects to anchor these dilemmas and stories in our minds. When I think of a knife, a small tin box or a faceless, stuffed dummy, the questions and meanings aroused by the play come flooding back into my mind.

In the play, the immigrant is represented by a dummy. An actor (the dummy actor) speaks his words. Early on, the dummy tells Joan, the woman, that he is a shoplifter. Joan corrects him: 'It isn't called shoplifting any more. That's what our parents called it. It's called *shoplooting*.'

The dummy is trying to get to 'the North'. He says: 'In the North life is more easy. They do not shoot you for shoplifting. They could not shoot you for shoplifting *here*. It was not nice. They change the name. They shoot you for *shoplooting*. That is nice. People like it. Not only shopkeepers.'

The dummy, who has become literally a nobody, tells a story of horrific violence and inhumanity in the country he has fled. He says he was forced by soldiers to choose between killing his father or his mother. He must stab one of them so the other might be allowed to live. He recalls the experience in a powerful speech.

Dummy: I see something on the ground. It is as if letters are printed on the ground. As if the ground is a big book. To the horizon. I am standing on the page. At one part the words read: 'my mother say "me" because she choose not to live in a world where her son is killer.' Another part I read it says: 'the father say "me" so he does not have to see son stand by his dead mother.' ... There is no time to read the many other things. The soldier checks his watch. The world ticks like a time bomb in my head ... I wish to turn page to see if on the other side is written. I cannot turn the world ...'

These two short extracts provoked many questions in my mind when I thought about the play later. How easy would it be to persuade people to accept an authoritarian state? As easy as changing a name from shoplifters to shoplooters? How do people try to cope when faced with impossible situations? What do the words on the ground make me think of? Do they suggest conscience, moral imagination, responsibility without power? Is there a link with all kinds of bullying, including bullying at school – the feeling in the victim of being unable to 'turn the world' but trying to act for the best and get through the situation? Does the bullying of the playground and the bullying



of ethnic cleansing have more similarities than I have previously thought? I try to navigate or understand events in the play using my own map of concepts such as fairness, justice, rightness, humanity, belonging, criminality, evil, madness and responsibility. Will they emerge unchanged? With Edward Bond's plays they rarely do.

The director

As a theatre-in-education event, *The Under Room* is certainly capable of stimulating imaginative responses from young people. This was the starting point of my interview with Chris Cooper, the play's director and the Artistic Director of Big Brum Theatre Company.

Steve: Is it the aim of theatre in education to get children to think and to stimulate their imaginations.

Chris: Yes, but there is a long history. Theatre in education was unique to Britain. I would say that it arose from the ashes of the Second World War, the defeat of fascism and the creation of the welfare state. The 1944 Education Act created a level of entitlement and out of that grew the most progressive drama and theatre practice. All the first and most prominent TIE companies were attached to repertory theatres and they began to provide a service in schools. So when I first joined theatre in education in 1988, I was in the company attached to The Dukes Playhouse in Lancaster. We were a free service to all schools. We would tour the schools and the County Council would provide the funding. They were happy days. And then the council cut the money to the Dukes in 1995. So I would say that the role of TIE has been very much, initially, breaking that barrier between communities and theatres and seeing theatre as a tool for educating. I think in its early days it was very message-based because a lot of it came from the traditions of agitprop.

Then it developed through various phases to the point where, as you say, theatre in education seeks to get children to think and use their own imaginations. It has come through a long period of evolution to understanding something that Edward Bond said last night. He said that theatre can't teach. Big Brum doesn't think about teaching children. We concentrate on creating the conditions for young people to explore meanings for themselves – to think about themselves, the drama and the world. We are inspired by people like Vygotsky and Jerome Bruner and then, within the drama field, certainly by people like Dorothy Heathcote and Gavin Bolton. But I think in this company we place a very strong emphasis in *theatre*, which takes in the Greeks and Shakespeare and Brecht and works by more contemporary writers like Geoff Gilham and, recently, Edward Bond. Working with Edward Bond is changing our understanding of what we can do with young people.

Making meanings

Steve: So you aim for children to make meanings for themselves out of what you present to them.

Chris: Dorothy Heathcote uses a phrase that describes part of what we are trying to do, both in the play and in the work we do with young people before and after the performance. She talks about 'the crucible paradigm' or 'stirring things up together as co-learners'.

Steve: The play certainly stirred up my thoughts. It depicts people living through extreme situations. Do young people connect with situations like that?

Chris: There are several layers to that. First of all, we have found that many young people who have seen the play can remember with terrific accuracy the central story of the immigrant having to choose between killing his

mother or his father and they always seem to want to talk about the letters he sees on the ground. They are very intrigued by that. We don't tell them what that means, nor is there any answer in the play. They try to work it out for themselves. It is obviously a carefully crafted speech but it doesn't last long in the play; it is a powerful imaginative detail that is part of the whole. But it is through these details that young people get to the huge questions of life. So the details, the words and the objects, are working on them imaginatively at a profound level. So I think it is in the details of extreme situations like these that people begin to understand things like where they stand in relation to what makes us human. And I think they do test their own values against the extreme situations that are presented to them. Edward once said to me: 'once you watch Hamlet you will never stir a cup of tea in the same way again'.

Steve: So a potential outcome is for young people to reassess their values and concepts.

Chris: I don't think it is potential; I think it happens all the time.

Steve: So from then on they are looking at the world through slightly different sets of goggles.

Chris: Absolutely. No doubt about it. I have every confidence that they would look at an immigrant in a different way having seen that play.

Steve: People's concepts about injustice and violence might change from having watched the play but unless some opportunity presents itself for them to act, they could go on living in exactly the same way, doing the same things.

Chris: They could, but I think what I am saying is 'actual minds ... possible worlds'. I remember an experience of drama that changed my life.



Steve: I'm intrigued.

Chris: It's a very small thing. It was a production of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* at Leeds Playhouse. I might not even like it if I saw it now, but it was to do with the character of Chief and it was seeing his action in the world that changed me. And everyone in my class said that it changed the way they thought. But the interesting thing is that the change created by that little opportunity may have lasted with my classmates for two hours or it may have lasted thirty years.

Steve: What makes the difference?

Chris: After watching a drama performance, other mediating factors to do with culture intervene. With me, it continued to change my life because I went home to my mum and dad and said: 'I've just seen this play and it was fantastic'. Actually what was going through my head was more profound but I didn't have the words for it. But my mum and dad would say 'he's different' – in a positive way – and they asked me if I'd like to go to the youth theatre and that was a mediating influence. But a lot of kids don't have that. My parents eventually started taking me to a lot of theatre and then I learned to be more articulate about what I'd seen and that started to change me even more. The problem in schools is that there aren't many teachers who are able, or have the time to take on the full implications of what the work offers. But if we were properly valued, which we are not, we would be properly resourced and we would be able to work with kids over a series of months rather than for just one day. Then I think we would begin to see real change. I think we could transform the culture of a school over a number of years. And that is not just with performances but with ongoing projects using the medium of drama.

You couldn't be doing anything more important than having young people ask the fundamental questions about what makes us human and having children engage with things that matter to them.

Chris: We are often told that the National Curriculum has no space for proper performance and follow-up. Particularly in secondary schools, teachers get into arguments with each other about children missing lessons to attend a drama performance or do a workshop. So you have all those mediating factors in the culture which can close down possibilities. But I'm saying you can never wipe away the initial experience. It is still in there. You couldn't be doing anything more important than having young people ask the fundamental questions about what makes us human and having children engage with things that matter to them.

Steve: So when young people are watching the



performance, they are looking at other people on stage and empathising with them. And, somehow, they are using their imaginations to connect what is happening on stage with their own lives and values. They are thinking about where they stand. So for you, a successful drama piece stirs that up. It's an emotional, imaginative and intellectual challenge for young people to make their own connections.

Chris: It's all those things. Edward has a very interesting concept of the 'palimpsest self'. This refers to the different layers of a person's self. They are formed at different ages and in different situations and they can re-emerge. When they do people seem to act 'out of character' (*A palimpsest is a manuscript in which old writing has been rubbed out to make room for new. Ed.*) What the play does is to open up a gap. It invites the audience to ask themselves how Joan could do what she did to the immigrant but recognising themselves her situation. We also open a space for thinking about possibilities – imagining how it could be different.

Steve: So we might recognise her loneliness and ask: 'How would I feel if I was as lonely and as anxious as her – because of the stress and fear'.

Chris: Or even more actively: 'I know that feeling'. Human beings are born into the world and they experience pleasure and pain. That is what Edward Bond identifies as tragedy and comedy. And that is why theatre is at the heart, dramatic activity is at the heart, of our being human. Everyone seeks to feel at home in the world and that is based on a profound sense of justice, which comes from those extreme experiences of pleasure and pain. That we need to be treated decently, that we need to be decent to others and that is at the core of our humanity. But in the course of our lives we observe, live with and sometimes suffer many injustices.

Steve: So our experiences of pain and pleasure lead us to seek concepts like justice, loneliness, cruelty and greed to explain the world to ourselves.



performance, we create a gap where the kids create their own meanings through theatre and drama by exercising their own social imaginations. And that is a very different process to the more rational, critical thinking, skills-based approach to education which is dominant now.

Imagination is the key. Reason and emotion work hand in hand through the imagination to create values.

Steve: Aren't both reason and imagination important.

Chris: Yes, I agree with that. We want young people to think well and creatively. But values are important. I think it is only through imagination that you find your values because the imagination invests anything with subjectivity – with yourself. So you are not engaged in a cold non-empathetic experience. On the other hand, as Edward Bond said, someone had to use their imagination to design the gas chambers. And what he was talking about was how the imagination becomes corrupted – by ideology and by destructive life experiences. So the self is denied and there is no empathetic relationship to other people. It gets back again to that fundamental question: 'what makes us human'. Imagination is the key. Reason and emotion work hand in hand through the imagination to create values.

Steve: Do you use plays as the starting point for all the age groups you work with?

Chris: Often but not always. Other projects, like the one we are doing for infant schools in spring 2006, will be highly participatory and so the children won't necessarily sit and watch a whole play; they might be in it dramatically, in role, from the very beginning. There might be theatre moments but it will be much more organic. But the same philosophy survives. Imagination is the starting point; reason and values get drawn out of the process.

Chris: Yes. The young people link imaginatively to something experienced directly by themselves or sometimes to an imaginative scenario which re-conjures relationships or situations they have lived through. But added to that, when you are in a TIE programme, the kids are up and in it in a very particular way. We explore the play with them very directly. So that process becomes much more structured for them and allows them to be much more open in responding to the play.

Steve: But some people's pain is more intense than others.

Chris: If you are born in Africa and become a child soldier then your experience is extreme. I would say that some of the children we work with are materially wealthy but spiritually impoverished because they are ignored by their parents. We all feel pleasure and pain to varying degrees of intensity. Then we have to make sense of it. How do we do that? We dramatise it. Children can dramatise it through play. They do it externally through objects because they haven't developed the mental capacity to internalise that experience. Children develop language and eventually they can dramatise through storytelling. We all invent ourselves and reinvent ourselves through stories. As we get into adolescence we internalise our storytelling and retreat behind the bedroom door.

In drama, we are still manipulating objects, externalising our social psyche. A play like *The Under Room* is an act of social imagination. What Edward is trying to do is to create a gap for us to fill that is devoid of being told what the answers are or even what the problems are. And when we work with children after a



Big Brum project with young children

The school and the students

I attended a performance of *The Under Room* at The Arthur Terry School in Sutton Coldfield. The students belonged to an 'A' level drama group. The actor-teachers of Big Brum Theatre worked with them before and after the performance, so the event lasted the whole day.

Pre-performance activities took only half an hour and, I think, framed the coming experience of watching the play for the audience. Actors asked students what they associated with keywords like 'foreign' and 'immigrant'. Adam Bethlenfalvy, a Hungarian who plays the part of the immigrant, talks to them in his own language. He asks them what they think he is saying. The students' responses were remarkably lively.

It was difficult to tell whether what they said reflected their own thoughts and feelings or whether they echoed things they had heard at home, on the streets or in the media. 'Immigrant' was linked with Twin Towers, cheap labour, people sneaking into the country in lorries and the French who 'let foreigners into our country and won't let them back into theirs'. They also talked about stereotypes, including stereotypes of young people. The actors were keen to focus the students' minds on language and objects and to introduce a complex idea that, just as people use words and things, words and things can use people. Does a chair, for example, 'make us' sit? Members of the class took turns in using a chair for different purposes. Finally the actors told students that they might also think of the play they were about to see as a tool – 'demanding to be used by us'. Then they watched the play up until lunchtime.

The workshop

After lunch, the actors began their workshop, starting with the interesting idea of inviting volunteers, one at a time, to take up positions of their own choosing in the performance area. They are to describe what they see and share insights they have about any of the characters. Some students choose to comment as distanced observers, others are more empathetic. As the volunteers speculate about what has happened, the actors replay parts of relevant speeches. When the students hear the words again, they get new ideas. The whole group is now discussing the play with a lot of interest.

One student says the room 'looks like a mess – it's brutal'. Another is reminded of prison bars by the bars of the only chair in the under room. She says the room is: 'a prison for the characters and for the audience.' One student sees the immigrant's situation differently: 'He has been travelling all his life and he's finally come to rest. He has found his home.' So the under room is a prison and also a home. One boy, speaking about the immigrant, thinks that: 'Killing a parent would send anyone mad. He is mad. Not evil – just messed up.'

One girl talks powerfully from her position on the set about: 'sharp edges, all the layers of imperfection outside

and inside, Joan and the shadows around her'. The actors build on the girl's description by asking the rest of the class: 'what are Joan's shadows?'. They ask groups to devise tableaux to represent ideas. Students in one group represent Joan's concern about money, others present a mime of what they believe to be her deadening routine (one member of this group argues that 'all her days merge into one and become one day').

When the students present their tableaux, there is more debate. One girl gets very agitated about the 'money' tableau: 'Joan doesn't do it for the money', she says, 'she is missing his company.' The students start to talk metaphorically about Joan and her situation. They all seem to agree with one boy who says: 'Joan wears a shell and when the immigrant comes into her life, the shell shatters – her self cracks open.'

Success and frustration

Throughout the afternoon, the workshop continues to move in this way between exploration, through drama, of the characters and their situations, and discussion inspired by those explorations.

By the end of the day, the actors have achieved what they set out to do: stir up thoughts, questions, concepts and possibilities in the minds of the students who had clearly been stimulated by the play and the workshop. Yet I felt that there was a lot more potential for working on this play with this group of students and, for that matter, with other students in the school. It could have stimulated intense philosophical discussion, poetry, art, historical research and psychological investigation. It really could have supported a term's work; it was that good. Why aren't schools able to study a contemporary play like this for GCSE English?

I was beginning to understand the frustration of Chris Cooper and many other Theatre in Education workers throughout Britain. They have so much to offer and yet they have to operate within such a limited space in the current educational environment. There is a lot of scope for realising the value of drama in schools. Can teachers and educationalists rise to the challenge?

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Big Brum Theatre Company are on tour with the *Under Room* at the moment but they are still taking bookings. They are currently developing a new project for infant schools to start in 2006. Web: www.bigbrum.org.uk • Telephone: 0121 4644604/6 • Email claire@bigbrum.freeserve.co.uk