



SAPIENZA
UNIVERSITÀ DI ROMA

Department of European, American and Intercultural Studies

Dealing with Shakespeare's Heritage: Edward Bond's Anatomy of the Human

The playwright in conversation with
Rosy Colombo, Andrea Peghinelli
and Sapienza University students

with the participation of David Tuillon

Welcome address

Stefano Asperti, Dean of the Faculty
of Arts and Humanities, Sapienza University



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Edward Bond is considered one of Great Britain's most important, challenging and controversial playwrights. His formal and thematic innovations contributed to bring into question the function of contemporary dramatic literature. *The Pope's Wedding*, his first play staged at the Royal Court Theatre in 1962, was defined as an astonishing tour de force. Then, in 1965, followed *Saved* which would become a classic, a landmark for uncompromising playwriting. 'It is one of those rare work of art that can be said to have rearranged the cultural landscape', wrote Michael Billington. It proved that even inarticulate characters were worthy of attention in a new dramaturgy and exposed the absurdity of theatrical censorship. Violence is culturally determined, it is a society product and, as a 'cheap consumer commodity', it is showed to be the outcome of a class-based capitalist society that depends on its existence on a semi-illiterate workforce imbued with images of aggression. Ronald Bryden in his review vividly remarked that with *Saved* Bond wanted to 'rub our noses in the fact the real new poor are the old poor plus television, sinking deeper in a form of poverty we do not yet recognise - poverty of culture', an image that is tragically still up to date. His characters are not screened behind a literary language. Through the impoverishment of their linguistic capacity, Bond exposes their moral and cultural vacuum, in their dialogues they can just convey the most basic needs or feelings.

In the plays that followed - *Narrow Road to the Deep North* (1968), *Lear* (1971), *The Sea* (1973), *Bingo* (1974), *The Fool*, (1976) - he further developed his idea that violence is not just a way of expression of the socially deprived but it is also an agent for social change. His creative engagement with the canon - apart from his appropriation of Shakespeare as a cultural capital he also adapted Jacobean plays - is an investigation around the concept of power and its corruption, and the stance of the artist who is faced with evidence of such corruption. Once again, there is not an original sin to generate violence and cruelty, but they are determined by an unjust society.

In the plays he was commissioned by national institutions such as the National Theatre - *The Woman* (1978), *Summer* (1982) - or the Royal Shakespeare Company - *Bingo* (1974), *The Bundle*, (1977), *The War Plays* (1985), we still find the interconnected political engagement and complex aesthetic issues that are a trademark of Bond's plays and confront the audience with a profoundly disturbing image of its own world in a stripped down but rational way.

None of his plays was ever first produced in a London West End theatre.

The year 2015 has seen a revival of Bond's dramatic art in Italy, featuring a new translation of *Lear* (at Minimum Fax), a stage production at the Teatro India (8-20 December), the very recent publication (by Sillabe) of *Edward Bond. La parola al drammaturgo. Conversazioni con David Tuillon* (which appeared originally in French, 2013, and was translated into English in 2014). The revival, today, breaks a decades-long silence about Bond, after a previous widespread interest in the Seventies, the leaden years of terrorism, when his plays, notably *Lear*, were a sort of icon of ideological resistance against the establishment, perceived as a maze of law and injustice, order and violence. Today, a time of awakening of terror and rebuilding of walls raised against a supposed invasion of immigrants for the sake of security, is also, necessarily, the right time to reconsider Edward Bond's vision of violence and his anatomy of the human, which is in fact an anatomy of society. Since for Bond writing for the theatre is a political act, his way of dealing with Shakespeare's heritage, making Shakespeare a politically engaged playwright, is an act of political re-creation, and *Lear* is a case in point. In *Lear* Shakespeare is reborn as a poet of society rather than of nature (as in the tradition of Samuel Johnson and the Romantics), thereby challenging the cult of Shakespeare's impersonality, non commitment, the quintessence of negative capability. Since his first experience of *Macbeth* at the age of 14 Bond has been obsessed with Shakespeare, particularly *Hamlet*, *King Lear* and of course *Macbeth*, along with Greek drama, sharing with Shakespeare the problem of defining what being human is, in fact his own problem after Auschwitz and Hiroshima: "we all died in Auschwitz". Our seminar thus proposes to focus on anatomy as a metaphor both of *King Lear's* and of *Lear's* poetics, with specific reference to King Lear's imaginary trial of his daughter to diagnose the cause of her evil ("Then let them anatomize Regan, see what breeds about her heart", III, 6) and to the realistic, professional, scientific "little autopsy" of cruel Fontanelle in the presence of her father, waiting to see how she died (II, 6). The different results show the ideological shift in Bond's rhetoric of anatomy: in Shakespeare, evil is a mystery immanent in human nature; in Bond's drama the blood on the anatomic table allows Lear to discover that the origin of Fontanelle's disease is external to the human body, clearly a product of society. There is beauty inside, but it is the beauty of blood. The immersion of Lear's hand in blood functions as an objective correlative to the playwright's practice, his own way of saving Shakespeare's heritage.