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Edward Bond's 'Irresponsibly Optimistic' Preface to *Saved*

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There's insight and entertainment a-plenty in Scott Munson's two-act *Dearest Frank Lights a Cigar*, the 1998 winner of SWTA's New Script Contest. In this compelling drama, Munson proves that the personal is indeed the political. By way of flashbacks, we learn about the life and brilliant career of Frank Fatzner, a German playwright about to receive a prize from the Soviet Union of the 1950s for his literary achievements. In his wake, he has left a trail of destruction that leads back to him with tragic results. Through a riveting narrative replete with emotional as well as physical violence, Munson delineates the subtle connection between personal tyranny over another and institutional tyranny over a nation.

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SCOTT MUNSON, a native of Hollywood, California, was born into a family of actors, torch-song singers, and scriptwriters. He was educated at UCLA, Harvard Law School, and the W. B. Yeats School of Anglo-Irish Culture. Scott's work has been performed at theatres in Los Angeles, New York, San Francisco, and Chicago. In addition to *Dearest Frank Lights a Cigar*, he has written two other full-length plays: *Owl* and *The Idea of Order at Key West*; as well as an evening of short plays, *Seducing the Audience*.

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EDWARD BOND'S "IRRESPONSIBLY OPTIMISTIC" PREFACE TO SAVED

Robert I. Lublin

Winner of the 1999 Oscar G. Brockett
Prize in Theatre History

Edward Bond seems blithely unaware of Roland Barthes's conclusion that the author is dead. Although Barthes argues that meaning in a text is constructed by the reader (or audience member) wholly apart from the author, Bond stubbornly refuses to remain in his authorial grave and provides copious commentary on the meaning of his works. He offers his own critical introductions to the published editions of his plays, and he has never been shy about having his opinions printed in newspapers, journals, or books. Jenny Spencer counted more than one hundred interviews and discussions with the playwright in print by 1982, and no one has tried to tally the full number since. One might deduce that Bond is worried people will misinterpret his works and consequently wishes to guide his audiences to a "proper" understanding of what they mean. Along these lines, Spencer suggests that "Bond's critical writing may limit the plurality of meanings otherwise to be found in the plays" (3). And yet, this conclusion proves unsatisfying when we realize how poorly Bond's commentaries serve to explain the complexities of his plays. Terry Eagleton has come to a similar conclusion, that "writers are not conventionally expected to theorize about their own work, and when they do so in the unabashedly large generalities of Edward Bond's prefaces to his plays, it is predictable that criticism will find itself a little embarrassed" (127). Indeed, if Bond's critical exposition serves any point at all, it is to further obfuscate his plays by making seeming contradictions and addressing material that appears to be only tangentially related to the work purportedly being examined.

Of course, this is not to suggest that Bond's analyses of his own works are written with the intention of obscuring their meaning or misdirecting an audience's or reader's interpretation. Rather, I propose that in the manner by which Bond explains his own works, he provides for himself a voice where Barthes suggests he has none. After an audience has drawn its conclusions and the critics have responded in their newspapers, journals, and books, Bond reassumes a position of authorial jurisdiction and requires all of these conclusions and responses to be evaluated. He takes the finished text and, armed with knowledge of its general reception, instills it with additional life. In this manner, Bond could be said to enter into a dialogue with his audience; he listens to what they have to say and considers it in his response. As a result, subsequent attempts to fully engage Bond's text must take this new information into consideration when

trying to establish meaning. Furthermore, since Bond places his work as firmly in the political realm as he does in the aesthetic realm (or more so), he uses his self-reflective criticism as a means to reintroduce his plays into more recent arguments about people and society. Thus it might be inaccurate to say that Bond provides explanations for his works and more appropriate to say that he extends them. His commentary is as much creative as it is reflective. To illustrate this aspect of Bond's self-criticism, I will look at Bond's most influential play, *Saved*.

When *Saved* was first performed at the Royal Court on 3 November 1965, it drew immediate, harsh criticism from most of the reviewers who came to see it. J. C. Trewin of the *Illustrated London News* wrote: "It may not be the feeblest thing I have seen on any stage, but it is certainly the nastiest, and contains perhaps the most horrid scene in the contemporary theatre. (Even as I write that hedging 'perhaps' I delete it: nobody can hedge about *Saved*.)" Irving Wardle's response in the *Times* was no more complimentary:

The most charitable interpretation of the play would be as a counterblast to theatrical fashion, stripping off the glamour to show that cruelty is disgusting and that domestic naturalism is boring. But the writing itself, with its self-admiring jokes and gloating approach to moments of brutality and erotic humiliation does not support this view. In so far as the claustrophobically appropriate action has any larger repercussions, it amounts to a systematic degradation of the human animal.

Together, these vitriolic reviews represent the opinions of the majority of the initial audience for *Saved*. Trewin's shuddering response to the scene in which a baby is murdered in its pram helped to make the scene more famous than the play. Even positive responses to the work had to do justice to the extreme violence and almost palpable cruelty of the production. Penelope Gilliatt of the *Observer* wrote:

I spent a lot of the first act shaking with claustrophobia and thinking I was going to be sick. The scene where a baby in a pram is pelted to death by a gang is nauseating. The swagger of the sex jokes is almost worse. But it has to be said that this isn't a brutish play. It is a play about brutishness, which is something quite different.

These reviews, taken together, paint a picture of a play saturated in violence and focused on the depravity of humanity.

Consequently, the critical statement that Bond includes with his play in its 1966 publication is somewhat bewildering. It starts: "*Saved* is almost irresponsibly optimistic" (5). This statement, so far as I have been able to determine, does not reflect the opinion of any audience member who attended one of the early performances of the drama. After all, *Saved* is a play about people living at the bottom of society where poverty, inhumanity, disrespect, and cruelty are daily occurrences. During the play we see people repeatedly hurt and humiliate those who care about them. We see a marriage devoid of love linger on and a daughter who has no respect for her parents. Also, we see a baby ignored as it cries hysterically for attention and then witness this child being tortured before being stoned to death by a bunch of hooligans, including the child's father. How remarkable, then, that Bond would define such a work as "irresponsibly optimistic." Delia Donahue has noted that Bond's prefaces are frequently at odds with his plays: "What Bond says about his plays in his prefaces and elsewhere, that is, his polemical exposition of theme and aim, is often contradicted by the substance and action of the plays themselves, in fact by Bond's linguistic and theatrical practice" (9).

Certainly most will agree that Bond's assessment of his play is at odds with its substance, but that fails to prove that he does not believe his opinion to be accurate. Evidence suggests, however, that he fully realizes the incongruity between his play and his critical commentary about it. On 11 December 1965, Bond submitted an article to the *Guardian* titled "When Violence is Meant to Shock" in which he owned the darkness of the dramatic world in *Saved*: "I meant the violence in *Saved* to shock because I wanted to make the loathsomeness of all violence unequivocal. More important, I wanted to show that all violence has an aftermath of political corruption, and that when the violence is severe, the corruption is permanent" (qtd. in Donahue 9-10). If Bond recognizes the brutality of his production which was created, he says, for the purpose of shocking, why would he begin his essay in the manner that he does? Using Bond's own words, how are we to develop an "irresponsibly optimistic" opinion of a play in which the "corruption is permanent"?

The answer lies in the fact that these two evaluations of *Saved* by its playwright were given at different times in the play's career. The latter, in which Bond sanctions his use of shocking violence, was published earlier, roughly one month after the play opened, when debate concerning its literary merit, and that of its creator, were highly contested. Indeed, at the time, in response to this work, patrons of the Royal Court Theatre were forming organizations in order to combat "pornographic, sadistic, filthy, unfunny, and obscene" drama (Scharine 49). Consequently, Bond's article explaining the importance of shocking violence in *Saved* can be seen as a countermeasure to the forces put in motion to halt its progress and that of

future plays of controversial subject matter or questionable style. Bond felt he had to justify both his play and himself to the dramatic world which was in the process of judging him.

One year later, when *Saved* came out in print, it was Bond's first published work. The validation of print may provide some explanation for Bond's decision to make more of his Author's Note than a straightforward description of the text. What he made, however, was a statement that has required analytical and linguistic gymnastics from all of those who have attempted to incorporate its complex and contradictory messages into their analyses of Bond's play. And yet, it would be irresponsible scholarship to ignore it in a study of *Saved* since it stands there, at the beginning of the published play, demanding to be read by everyone who picks up the work. One could choose to disregard its contents, but that can only be accomplished after engaging its ideas. It is in this manner that Bond belies his authorial death--the creation of meaning has not passed beyond his hands.

As a result, Bond's essay at the beginning of *Saved*, as Michael Mangan writes, "works not so much as a final interpretation, cutting off further debate, but more as a stimulus to further argument" (16). Certainly this is the case with Bond's assertion that his play is "irresponsibly optimistic." In his Author's Note, Bond grounds this conclusion in his estimation of Len:

Len, the chief character, is naturally good, in spite of his upbringing and environment, and he remains good in spite of the pressures of the play. But he is not wholly good or easily good because then his goodness would be meaningless, at least for himself. His faults are partly brought home to him by his ambivalence at the death of the baby and his morbid fascination with it afterwards. (5)

In allowing for these rather extensive faults in one who is "naturally good," Bond takes away some of the most formidable arguments one might make against a positive evaluation of Len. Bond then finds cause to respect Len in the conclusion of the play when he stoically refuses to leave the home of the self-destructive family and undertakes to mend the chair that was broken in a scuffle between Pam's parents. As a result of these affirmative actions amidst difficult circumstances, Bond states that his play is "formally a comedy" (6). Richard Scharine picked up this argument in 1976: "*Saved* is a comedy, not because its protagonist, Len, is victorious, but because he refuses to recognize defeat" (57). Since then, this argument has received additional critical support; Michael Mangan, in his 1998 book on Bond, found optimism in the symbolism of the mending of the chair: "It shifts the play's discourse onto a more symbolic plane than that which it seems at first

to inhabit, representing some continuing attempt to make the human relationships of the play work, despite all the odds against it" (16).

Certainly there are various definitions one could give for *optimism* and *comedy* but I am hard-pressed to find any which adequately describe *Saved*. Indeed, an examination of the play's text, unmediated by the Author's Note, motivates one to deconstruct virtually all of the positivity that has been found therein. Let us begin with the affirmative aspect of Len's character that inspires him to stay with Pam and her parents at the end of the play and rebuild the chair. Scharine finds in this decision evidence of a human spirit that prevails despite adversity. What, however, distinguishes Len's obsession with Pam from her obsession with Fred? Both result from lust gratified in a world utterly devoid of any emotional fulfillment, and both are pathetic when seen onstage. Pam yearns for Fred's company and begs him to stay with her even after he has murdered their child and openly voiced his disgust for her. Len seems no more dignified when he remains with Pam despite the fact that she implores him to go and blames him for all that has gone wrong in her life:

PAM. (*crying*) E's killed me baby. Taken me friends. Broken me 'ome.

[...]

PAM. Take that knife. The baby's dead. They're all gone. It's the only way. I can't go on.

[...]

LEN. I'm tryin' t' 'elp! 'Oo else'll 'elp? If I go will they come back? Will the baby come back? Will 'e come back? I'm the only one that's stayed an' yer wan'a get rid a me!

[...]

PAM. (*crying*) No 'ome. No friends. Baby dead. Gone. Fred gone. (112-13)

Rather than an affirmation of the prevailing human spirit, Len's decision to stay at the end more convincingly shows the monomania of one man's misguided love.

Bond goes some distance towards negating this argument by noting that "most critics would say that for the play to be optimistic Len should have run away. Fifty years ago when, the same critics would probably say, moral standards were higher, they would have praised him for the loyalty and devotion with which he stuck to his post" (5). Rather than further affirming Len's natural goodness, however, this statement merely serves to weaken both sides of the argument. It thus falls to the audience to decide for itself whether the end is optimistic or not. This noted, it should be added that William Gaskill, the original director of *Saved*, responded to Bond's essay

by writing, "Whatever Edward may say I cannot find its ending optimistic" (qtd. in Scharine 58).

With the optimism of the conclusion brought into serious doubt, Len's character loses most of the positive qualities that Bond attributes to it. The only other support that Bond provides lies in the relationship that Len establishes with Pam's father, Harry. Against this, however, Donahue has convincingly argued that their relationship exists "at the expense of the mothers in the play with hideous implications" (34). When Len is packing his bags, intent on leaving after his latest argument with Pam, Harry opens up to Len and encourages him to stay. His reasons, though, are rooted in an appeal for the maintenance of masculine authority:

HARRY. Don't let 'em push yer out.

LEN. Depends 'ow I feel in the mornin'.

HARRY. Choose yer own time. Not when it suits them. (118-19)

Harry urges Len not to bow to the will of the women. Furthermore, he recommends that Len refrain from speaking to the women at all since "It saves a lot of misunderstanding" (120). The fact that the next (final) scene in the play, including Len and Harry along with Pam and Mary, is undertaken entirely in silence suggests that a quiet battle is being waged between the sexes. In this battle, however, the women have never presented a unified front; only the men have grouped together. Bond recognizes that this scene constitutes a "social stalemate" but argues that it is not pessimistic to one who has learned to "clutch at straws" (5). No matter how hard I try to clutch at the smallest shreds of possibility, I cannot shake the feeling that this scene depicts existential hell; the relationship between the men fails to affirm anything because it only serves to perpetuate the vile circumstances in which everyone lives.

What now are we to make of Bond's "irresponsibly optimistic" play? How are we to evaluate this "naturally good character" when all of his ostensibly positive traits dissolve under close analysis? The answer, obviously, is that he is not "naturally good." Quite the contrary, Len is a full member of Bond's vicious world, constituting its cruelty even as he suffers its effects. In his Author's Note, Bond allows for Len's ambivalence at the baby's death but fails to note the fact that he had the power to stop it. While speaking with Fred, Len confesses to having watched the child being stoned to death and done nothing to stop it:

LEN. I was in the trees. I saw the pram.

FRED. Yeh.

LEN. I saw the lot.

FRED. Yeh.

LEN. I didn't know what t'do. Well, I should a stopped yer.

FRED. Too late now.

LEN. I juss saw.

FRED. Yer saw! Yer saw! Wass the good a that? That don't 'elp me. I'll be out in that bloody dock in a minute! (76)

This makes Len complicit in the child's murder and removes him from the broadest definition of "naturally good" I can conceive.

And it seems logical to suggest that Edward Bond agrees.

In writing the Author's Note the way he does, Bond forces his readers to do a double-take, to reevaluate the key issues of his play. Based on the reviews of *Saved* it is absolutely clear that no one who saw the play found it to be optimistic. In suggesting that it is, however, Bond accomplishes two things. First, he encourages his readers to note the depth of the pessimism that permeates the play so that they can refute his ridiculous claim. Second, he inspires them to consider the atrocities of the world the author lives in (and the reader lives in) to understand how, by contrast, the dramatic world of *Saved* could be considered optimistic. Thus, Bond's preface serves primarily as an extension of *Saved* and not as an explanation of it. It takes the work and draws it further into the political realm where Bond wants his plays to have their largest impact.

And, as Bond noted in a 1981 interview, *Saved* needed the extension:

I had this idea that if I described it [the world Bond had grown up in] clearly and accurately, then people would say, "Well, these things are terrible and we must do something about it." [...] They didn't say that at all. They said, "How disgraceful, how dare you put these things on the stage. How dare you show us these things?" (qtd. in Roberts 65)

The scene that drew the most complaints, of course, was the one in which the child is murdered in its pram. Bond's response was to state, in his preface, that "the stoning to death of a baby in a London park is a typical English understatement" (6). He validates this assertion by arguing that "compared to the 'strategic' bombing of German towns it is a negligible atrocity, compared to the cultural and emotional deprivation of most of our children its consequences are insignificant" (6). Such a statement implores the audience and readers of *Saved* to have a similar reaction to the violence in their own society that they had to the violence in Bond's play.

Out of his desire to have a positive social impact, Bond crafted the preface to *Saved* to work along with the play as an appeal for public action.

Towards this objective, Bond devoted the last third of the Author's Note to improving people's behavior by increasing moral understanding. Bond notes that the morality taught to children is ineffective because it is grounded in religion, something which "has nothing to do with their parents' personal lives, or our economic, industrial and political life, and is contrary to the science and rationalism they are taught at other times" (7). Thus absent from the rest of a child's life, religion cannot succeed as a source of morality. Instead, Bond recommends that children be taught moral skepticism and analysis so that they can understand their world and the people with whom they share it. But what role does such a seemingly tangential discussion of morality serve in being attached to this play? I believe the answer lies in Bond's hope that, by focusing the dramatic power of *Saved* through the mechanism of his preface, he can make his previously misunderstood creation serve as a positive influence on society.

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THE RELIGIOUS ISSUES IN LANFORD WILSON'S EARLY PLAYS

Mark Bryan Russell
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A reader of Lanford Wilson's plays should be struck by the spiritual undertones permeating most of his work, especially the early plays. But in plays that are made up of mostly prostitutes, hustlers, drug addicts, adulterers, and hypocrites, it is easy to miss the religious symbolism. The symbols are there, but why? Are they incidental, unconscious on the author's part, or does Wilson intentionally want his audience to ponder these spiritual aspects? After careful reading, it is obvious these allusions are definitely intentional, and by using as evidence the plays *Balm in Gilead*, *The Rimers of Eldritch*, and *Serenading Louie*, I will explore how the playwright's Baptist upbringing influenced his early works, and how Wilson's disillusionment with religion caused these plays to be pessimistic and negative towards the religious beliefs with which he was reared.

Gene Barnett asked Wilson in a 1981 interview if he was a religious person in any conventional sense and if it was reflected in his plays except incidentally. Wilson responded:

I think so, without thinking about it too much. I have a feeling that I am rather, but it never quite gets into the plays. I'm always rather alarmed at how irreligious they are and chose Lebanon [Missouri] because I thought those plays in that series were going to be religious rather than political. It turns out they're political rather than religious, and to my surprise. I have a feeling you see, that, writing about people as I see them—I see them as a little unreligious in their behavior at least—it's very difficult to get a religious point of view from their behavior, except to see how these people are *not* doing what they *say* they're doing or what they *believe* they're doing. (qtd. in *Recreating the Magic* 66)

Wilson's conclusion that his plays read more political than religious may be true, but in his attempt to incorporate religion into his dramas, he gives enough symbols and allusions to make a religious point, even if it is not apparently dominant.

Martin Jacobi, in his essay "The Comic Vision of Lanford Wilson," wrote that Wilson's plays