

Interview with Sir Arnold Wesker

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Do you ever read your own plays for pleasure, I ask Arnold Wesker. We are perched together in the press office of Greenwich Theatre, an hour or so before the first preview of his new play *Longitude*, an adaptation of the book by Dava Sobel. Wesker looks at me for a moment, somewhat askance. 'Why would I?' he asks. I am stumped. Er... well, like any achievement in life you might want to occasionally return to it, I suggest. He pauses and then says, emphatically, 'No'.

The writer of such vital and defining twentieth century plays as *Chips With Everything*, *Roots*, *Kitchen* and *Shylock* is now in his seventies, and his youthful political urgency has evolved into something calmer and perhaps wiser. Warm, perceptive and funny, Wesker is modest about his status but is not averse to a momentary tease. 'I related strongly to Harrison,' he says of the hero of *Longitude*; 'an uneducated genius against the establishment.' In fact the parallels are all too clear – both men have produced work of importance that has not always gained a commensurate amount of recognition. Wesker has cheerfully worked against the grain of many of his contemporaries and has suffered the indignity of seeing many of his peers lionised in life and canonised in death while he has often had to look abroad for acknowledgment and popularity. When asked what attracted him to the *Longitude* project he unashamedly declares 'the commission!' and refuses to see injustice in a man of his stature having to work in this reactive manner.

I ask him if unfavourable reviews can still leave their mark on him, given that almost everyone passing judgement on him nowadays is a relative newcomer. 'I feel like George Dillon' he says, referring to Osborne's eponymous hero; "'I attract hostility.'" And in some strange way I do. Not deliberately. But I seem to. And my new novel has got a panning. So I'm anxious.' When I probe him further he admits to not reading reviews. 'The only review I've read is the good one', he says of his novel, *Honey*. 'I couldn't face the language of vilification.' I am surprised that reviews hold so much power for him. Why does he care? He considers for a moment. 'I care because I spend a lot of time writing and I care about writing good prose. It does affect one. And it affects one's livelihood.'

I ask him how he feels at this moment with the opening of a new play just hours away. With over forty plays to his credit does he still feel anxious and excited? 'There's nothing like the early years' he replies. 'The excitement of the early years is incredible. Then comes not a jadedness but... you've been through it all before.' He is nevertheless infectiously enthusiastic about this production and he sings the praises of director Fiona Laird. Plus, he eventually concedes, somewhat shyly; 'there's some not bad writing in it.'

Knowing he has recently sold his archive to the University of Texas I ask him about this. 'I've just sold three tons!' beams Wesker. 'Boxes and boxes and boxes.' He is now in the company of Stoppard, Osborne, Graham Greene and

Norman Mailer but it was an earlier notable who attracted his attention on his visit. 'I was thrilled when they showed me a Ruskin notebook with his drawings – beautiful.' And he beams. Has he always kept everything? 'I'm a hoarder', he confesses. 'I've always kept everything; not because I thought it would be valuable but I write by hand and go through seven or eight drafts, so I produce a lot of material that might be of interest. If I were researching me I'd be daunted.'

We discuss how the world of theatre has changed over the decades.

'Technologically theatre has improved, so one is able to do more on the stage', he observes. 'But in terms of form everything has been done before – theatre has been done in the round centuries ago, it's been done outdoors centuries ago, it's been done on every platform'. I quiz him about the new elements that he has brought to the history of the stage. Famously Kenneth Tynan said that in *Kitchen* Wesker had been the first person to put work on the stage. He is modest about this now. 'When I started writing that play I didn't think "I'm going to put work on the stage for the very first time" – I was simply working in a kitchen at the time and thought it would be dramatic.' Returning to the idea of his literary legacy he softens somewhat his earlier stance. 'I occasionally dip into the plays to check a quote' he admits of his own sizeable canon. 'But I don't think I've ever read any of the plays from beginning to end.' We talk about the mystery of the creative process and the writer's sometimes ambiguous place within it. 'I do look at the books on the shelves' he muses, 'and think – when did I write those? How did I write them? We forget how we did anything and writing a new play is like starting all over again – you're learning again.'

I wonder what it is that compels Wesker to keep writing after all this time. He claims to be still looking for something new. 'It's a response to the material that life throws up; that's what drives me. It may not do that to someone like Tom Stoppard, since he's on record as saying that he starts with ideas, not characters. I don't start with ideas, I start with characters who are animated by ideas.' With both *Longitude* and another new play, *Groupie*, about to open, Wesker confesses to feeling tired. 'At this moment nothing is driving me as I have nothing I want to write. I've written a lot in the past few years. But the juices will be revived and something will happen and I'll think yes, that's challenging me, and I'll start writing about it.'

Kieron Barry