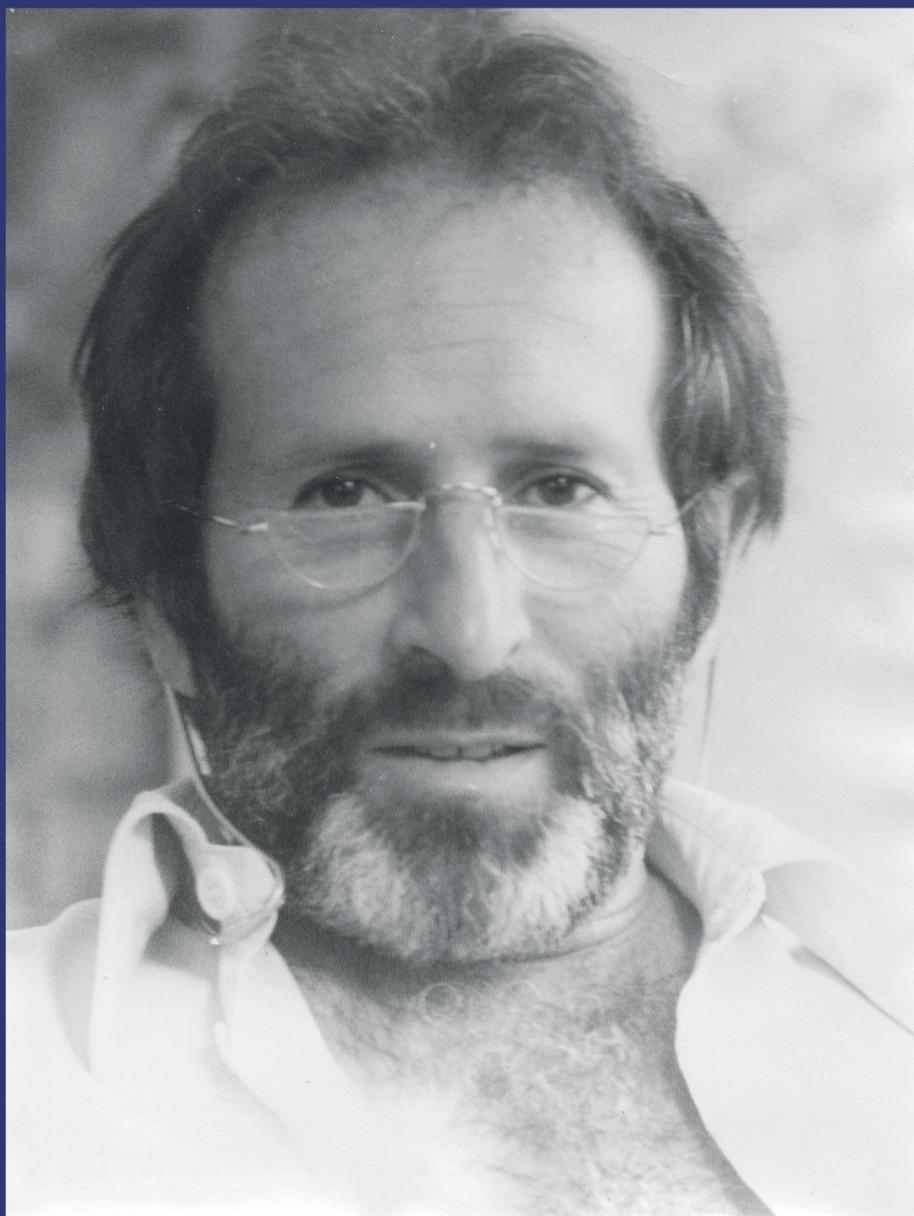


Arnold Wesker

Fragments and Visions



Edited by
Anne Etienne and Graham Saunders

Introduction

Anne Etienne and Graham Saunders

As we write this introduction, Jack Thorne's new play *The End of History* makes its premiere on the main stage of the Royal Court Theatre (RCT). *The End of History* is Thorne's first original play for the Royal Court (having previously adapted in 2013 the film/novel *Let the Right One In*) and has garnered mainly positive reviews. Amongst them, the veteran critic Michael Billington draws attention to its structure – in which over the course of the play we witness the fortunes of a single family in 1997, 2007 and 2017 – and similarities to Arnold Wesker's Royal Court debut, *Chicken Soup with Barley* (1958). However, the analogies with Wesker go far deeper than this insofar as the family in Thorne's play are classic Weskerian idealists, naming their three children Polly, Carl and Tom, after the political radicals Polly Hill, Karl Marx and Tom Paine. In this respect, they are highly reminiscent of characters such as Sarah and Ronnie Kahn in the aforementioned *Chicken Soup*, Beatie Bryant in *Roots* (1959) and Dave and Ada Simmonds in *I'm Talking about Jerusalem* (1960).¹ The relationship between the parents to their children also carries with it similarities to *Chicken Soup*, where Ronnie increasingly rejects his mother's staunch faith in communism, or vice versa in *Roots* where Beatie battles to try to get her parents to embrace the social and political ideals she has learnt in London. Yet, like many of Wesker's characters who seek to make real their utopian visions – characters such as Andrew Cobham in *Their Very Own and Golden City* (1965) and Shylock in the eponymous play (1976), *The End of History* concludes in an atmosphere of defeat. David's wife Sal has died of cancer and their three children who have gathered for the funeral have not followed the ideals that inspired their parents as young people growing up in the 1960s. However, the play ends on a note of hope when David announces that, rather than spend his final years in retirement, he will be selling the family home and moving to Eritrea for five years to work as an engineer on a sewer project (Thorne 2019: 91). A similar resilience is shown by other characters in Wesker's work – though increasingly more in his female roles – from the rebellious spirit of *Chips with Everything* (1962) to the uplifting meeting of two characters who had given up in *Grouper* (2001). Just over sixty years since the Royal Court staged his

first play, something of Wesker's spirit lives on in the work and concerns of a significant contemporary British dramatist.

When he died in 2016, Arnold Wesker had written more than 40 plays – with the recent Oberon thematic editions still in print – as well as two novels (one erotic), short stories, poetry and essays. Part of a generation 'who helped change the face of British theatre' his importance in theatre historiography, and in British culture through Centre 42 (C42), cannot be denied (Billington 2016). Yet, he suffered from estrangement for most of his career, and references abound that define his position as marginal, from Ronald Bryden's assessment of him as 'the unique outsider in the British theatre' in his 1966 review of *Their Very Own and Golden City* to Billington's view of Wesker as a 'congenital outsider' in his review of *Denial* (2000: n.pag.). Certainly, a process has taken place whereby a young Jewish working-class pastry chef and aspiring film director at one point found himself in the spotlight between 1958 and 1970 and then gradually relegated to the margins of British theatre. One may therefore ask 'whatever happened to Arnold Wesker', as does Wesker to his female alter ego Lady Betty Lemon, 'née Rivkind from Dalston Junction' (Wesker 2001: 91) in *Whatever Happened to Betty Lemon?* (1986). The question implies either that once 'in the public eye [he] has now slipped from view' or that 'longer processes of time and environmental influences' have transformed the once hopeful, socially committed young writer into an allegedly curmudgeonly, angry old man (Wilcher 1991: 140).

In the case of Wesker, the situation is rather more complex. Undoubtedly, his sudden fame and central involvement in both British artistic and political life through C42 shifted perceptions; additionally, he seemed to attract publicity through his frequent expostulations and even news about his personal life regularly made the headlines. Wesker had become unavoidable in the 1960s. But 'when a society invites one of its rebels inside, a society without whose support serious stage plays and favourable newspaper reviews are virtually impossible, the rebel either accepts or invites contumely or neglect' (Levitt 1998: 103). In questioning established directors such as Peter Hall, flying to Havana to direct the world premiere of *The Four Seasons* in 1968, turning down Prime Minister Harold Wilson's offer of a CBE (Commander of the Order of the British Empire), condemning critics for their lilliputian minds and suing the Royal Shakespeare Company in 1973 over their failure to produce his play *The Journalists*, Wesker showed he was a free spirit. Cumulatively, Wesker almost seemed to invite a backlash and he most certainly received one. Though his plays continued to be produced abroad, Wesker retreated both geographically and spiritually, ensconced within his cottage situated in the Welsh Black Mountains, yet still yearning for the early successes he had experienced on various London stages. When the 'wilderness' years finally receded, it was still through the revival of early work (such as productions

of *The Kitchen* at the RCT in 1994 and the National Theatre in 2011, *Chips with Everything* at the National Theatre in 1997, *Chicken Soup with Barley* at the RCT in 2011 and *Roots* at the Donmar in 2013) rather than later work (Wesker 2011b). In a thoughtful obituary, fellow playwright David Edgar commented on this situation in that although ‘his great early plays really were great [...] British theatre wasted his later work’, a state of affairs that Wesker often bitterly lamented (Edgar 2016: n.pag.).

Wesker’s ambivalent place within contemporary British drama can be further illustrated by the lack of updated scholarship since Reade Dornan’s edited collection of essays in 1998 together with the aforementioned narrow range of revival productions. Likewise, only a fraction of Wesker’s dramatic output tends to be studied (*Roots* was for many years a set A-level text), and he is still persistently remembered and discussed as the author of *The Trilogy*, three plays, staged between 1958 and 1960. This situation fails to accurately reflect both the range of genres Wesker’s plays encompass and his willingness to experiment with a number of different styles – moving far beyond the frozen and incorrect image of being a naturalist playwright. Making extensive use of Wesker’s deposited archive at the Harry Ransom Center (HRC) in Austin, Texas, this collection of essays aims to consider his long career as a playwright and to establish new insights to both his major as well as lesser known work.

To do so, the volume focuses on two central tropes that have guided Wesker’s creative process since the early years: fragments and visions. Visions echo his initial battle cry to the Secretary of the British Trades Union, ‘Vision! Vision! Mr Woodcock’, in a bid to obtain support for the arts through the extraordinary initiative that became C42 in Britain (Wesker 1960a: n.pag.). Such visions are equally present in his plays where characters are moved to action by the utopian yearnings expressed by characters such as Ronnie in *Jerusalem* and Andrew Cobham in *Golden City* to John Carpenter in *Longitude* (2005).

Fragments also figure for Wesker as an equally positive force. For example, fear of fragmentation motivated Wesker not only to make sense of chaos by communicating to audiences and other artists throughout the C42 project, but also led him to experiment from the mid-1960s onwards with new theatre languages. Wesker claims that ‘[t]he arrangement of fragments is the artist’s purpose in life’ (Wesker 1970: 106), yet as Robert Gross points out in his study of *The Old Ones*, Wesker’s explanation of this creative process ‘remains shadowy’ (Gross 1998: 234) in its relation to truth (Wesker 1970: 111). However, Wesker acknowledges how the search for clues shaped his first plays, ‘digging back as far as possible to beginnings, in order to explain the present’ (Wesker 1970: 113). This approach sheds light on his controversial use of flash-forward in *Golden City* and informs his last plays in various ways. For instance, he revisits impressions of personal neglect in

*Groupie*² where the curmudgeonly, once famous painter Mark Gorman is shaken out of his raucous inertia and self-pity by Mattie Beancourt, a 60-year-old version of the ebullient Beatie Bryant. They break down each other's barriers in passages that echo early tropes, from the sharing of food in an indoors picnic to the sharing of art and questioning of the place of the artist in a gallery.

In his last play, *Joy and Tyranny* (published in 2011), his arrangement of fragments has created a patchwork which bears testament, possibly, to the vision he held throughout his playwriting career. The text itself blends previous plays, including the prominent character and original excerpts from *Betty Lemon*, Connie's lines in *When God Wanted a Son* (1997) revised for the Comedienne's interventions as well as other characters and situations variously inspired by *The Journalists* or *Men Die Women Survive* (1992); it also borrows the episodic structure of *Chips with Everything*; it emphasizes Wesker's concern with musicality by subtitled the play, *à la Strindberg*, 'Arias and variations on the theme of violence'; it opens with a film that serves not only to establish the topic of violence – itself a theme running through his plays – but also to recall his partial training in film as the stage directions dictate the visual movement of the punch by a cinematographic reference: 'just as the bone thrown in jubilation into the air by the victorious ape in Kubrick's "2001" [*sic*] morphs into a space ship' (Wesker 2011a: 15). The play closes with an explosion, but the final words spoken are reminiscent of the lasting influence of Leah Wesker on her son and of an attitude that he carried throughout his career: 'I had a mother, a strong and tiny thing she was who gave me one piece of advice I never forgot. "Talk" she said. "Always say something. Something is remembered"' (57). That this idea is expressed by Betty Lemon, a character that Wesker created as a metaphor '[f]or last days, last thoughts, last fights' (AW 1986), confirms the impression that in *Joy and Tyranny* he has weaved together pieces of his work which he wanted remembered (AW 1986: n.pag.).

Ultimately, what Wesker feared, and for which he condemned the Labour party in 1968, was 'fragmentation of vision' (Wesker 1970: 107), a fate which he publicly challenged in a letter titled 'Prole playwrights', a few months after the success of his first produced play, *Chicken Soup with Barley*:

I didn't write *Chicken Soup* simply because I wanted to amuse you with 'working-class types' but because I saw my characters within the compass of a personal vision. I have a personal vision, you know, and I will not be tolerated as a passing phase.

(Wesker 1959: n.pag.)

This book attempts to navigate between these two driving forces whereby fragments can become the best ways to understand Wesker's overall vision.

This is reflected in two parts, which address different periods of his career with alternate critical focuses. The first part, 'Early Visions', outlines portraits of Wesker's early career. As such it opens with two chapters, on C42 and on his relationship with playwright Harold Pinter, that frame the following case studies on three of his early plays: *Roots*, *Chips with Everything* and *Their Very Own and Golden City*. The second part, 'Unifying Fragments', examines alternative but connected facets of his life and later work, from his reputation as a 'difficult' playwright to the lasting importance of community in his plays. Building on previous studies by major Wesker scholars Glenda Leeming, Ronald Hayman, Robert Wilcher and Reade Dornan, the authors have proposed new insights and potential for future investigation.

Edward Bond's prologue to the critical chapters is both a personal account of his early recollections of Wesker and a vivid picture of the seminal impact that the RCT made on their own writing careers.

Another feature that contributes to the originality of the volume has been its recourse to extensive archival material. In 2018, the Harry Ransom Center (HRC) completed work on gathering the entirety of Arnold Wesker's archive. This consisted of 408 boxes acquired through four accessions.³ Wesker himself in a mordant essay entitled 'What are we writers worth?' weighed his collected life's work at three and a half tonnes (Wesker 2010: 151). Wesker's archive, in much the same way as the collections of Samuel Beckett's papers at the University of Reading and Harold Pinter's collection at the British Library, has opened up exciting vistas offering researchers entirely new perspectives on the work of these writers. While the first two accessions of the Wesker collection were catalogued by 2004, the last two, dispatched in 2016 and 2018, still remain uncatalogued at the time of publication of this volume. However, Dr Eric Colleary, Curator of Theatre & Performing Arts at the HRC, granted unprecedented access to editor Anne Etienne. This has included access to previously restricted material. Many of the contributors have taken advantage of the materials deposited in the collection, and this volume represents the first stage in an 'archival turn' that offers both a major reassessment and the hope that it will promote further interest in the work of Arnold Wesker.

For his involvement in C42, Wesker was often called the English Planchon. While he must have been flattered, Wesker's early portrait of Roger Planchon betrays not only the extraordinary qualities he lends the Frenchman but also the impossibility to find a matching counterpart among his heroes, let alone himself:

Consider one person with, say, the administrative capabilities of George Devine, the splendid vulgarity of Behan, the friendly belligerency of Lindsay Anderson, the gentle intelligence of Karel Reisz and the vision of Joan

Littlewood – all in one! Planchon seems to have just that, and he’s a fine actor into the bargain!

(Wesker 1960b: n.pag.)

In his chapter, Lawrence Black charts the impossible task of leading C42 and argues that the contradictions that befell C42, in its push for a radical cultural agenda against personal, political, economic and radical counter-cultural forces, made its failure inevitable. In 1974, Jean-Louis Barrault’s production of *Rabelais* at the Roundhouse (C42’s London home) opened to the infamous protest of naked actors condemning the theft of the Roundhouse by bourgeois interests, claiming that ‘The Roundhouse was meant to be used by workers [...] It has been turned over to the commercial theatre’ (AW 1974: n.pag.). Though Wesker, present with Barrault in the auditorium, was embarrassed by the event, one may infer that his abandonment of the C42 social and artistic project to coffee shop entrepreneur and former civil servant George Hoskins’s commercial interests in 1970 hinged on the same realization: ‘It is an over-simplification, but it is near enough to the truth to be said’ (AW 1974: n.pag.). Yet, Black points to C42’s legacy represented by the Roundhouse, as an emblematic and ‘chic’ venue that has endured to this day by reinventing itself beyond the initial C42 vision.

Graham Saunders’s chapter traces the relationship, both personal and theatrical, between Harold Pinter and Wesker. Both were near contemporaries who grew up in the same Hackney neighbourhood in London’s East End, and both came to prominence as representatives of the ‘new drama’ in Britain during the late 1950s. The chapter draws on correspondence from Harold Pinter’s archive, which is held at the British Library. The correspondence is wide ranging and touches upon the dramatists’ shared Jewish identity and their views on theatre. What emerges is an affectionate, if distant, relationship, but in this reappraisal, the use to which the pair are often used by critics as bookends to differentiate between the differing stylistic, thematic and political paths that British theatre took after 1955 is misplaced.

James Macdonald, who directed *Roots* at the Donmar Warehouse in 2013, recalls his trip to Norfolk, looking for the roots of the play with the assistance of Dusty (Beatie Bryant) Bicker’s family. In his research on this school syllabus play that started as a commercial flop, Macdonald suggests that the legacy of Wesker is to have created a new form of drama: ‘politics as it is lived by people’. At the same time, Macdonald also points out that the lasting beauty of the play resides in its lyricism. This ability of Wesker to have politics living on stage and to write theatrical poems is raised by French directors in a later chapter.

Echoes of C42 are evident in *Roots*, in the opposition between Beatie’s and her family’s cultural expectations; they are also to be found in *Chips with Everything*, as pointed out by John Bull in his case study of the context and development of

the play between 1960 and 1997. In *Chips with Everything*, Wesker's most commercially successful play in the United Kingdom, Bull argues that much hinges on the enigmatic character of Pip, Wesker's first upper-class figure who voices both his fascination and despair at the working classes' obsession for 'chips with everything'. Bull's chapter makes use of archival documents at the HRC to trace how Wesker shaped and changed this play about a group of RAF conscripts before the appearance of Pip very late into the writing process, possibly influenced by Brecht's *Galileo* in more ways than the play's structure.

Chris Megson's chapter resonates with evocations of C42 in that it looks at the theatrical illustration of Wesker's cultural endeavours with C42, *Their Very Own and Golden City* (1965), a play that Dexter deemed to be too close to Wesker's experiences and therefore refused to direct (Hayman 1973–74: 92). Disregarded by Dexter, it was similarly overlooked by the critics, repeating the fate of his previous play, its companion piece, *The Four Seasons* (1965). This period marked the beginning of Wesker's commercial and critical descent. However, Megson's meticulous study unpacks the play's merits against its controversial contexts and suggests its inclusion as a significant early example of being a state-of-the-nation play.

Wesker's career has undoubtedly suffered from his reputation for being disputatious and confrontational. While contemporaries such as John Osborne, John Arden and Edward Bond have also been portrayed as fellow members of the 'awkward squad', this reputation did not manifest itself until much later in their careers. By contrast, Wesker, with C42, made enemies from as early on as the 1960s in his battles with the trade unions and Harold Wilson's government. His close friend the novelist Margaret Drabble explains his tendency to fight as emerging from two impulses:

unlike most people who feel hurt, he doesn't care who knows it: most of us are restrained by a kind of pride from answering back to our attackers, but not Wesker. He conducts long battles in newspapers: he is even prepared (and considers he ought) to take more serious offenders to court. [...] He doesn't merely brood, he takes action, which is what he was brought up to do.

(Drabble 1975: 25)

Harry Derbyshire argues that the public attacks Wesker waged upon his critics was initially launched out of a sense of personal hurt before they became a point of principle. In the long run, the theatre Establishment prevailed because 'he [Wesker] refused to flatter the theatre elite' (Pascal 2016: n.pag.). For Derbyshire, the undiplomatic interventions serve to highlight the unspoken rules of British cultural discourse that Wesker had rashly transgressed to his great cost. As evoked by Saunders, Pinter and Wesker found themselves on opposing sides of the Iraq War

debate, and Derbyshire's chapter examines Wesker's political views on a cluster of issues, including Israel, the Salman Rushdie *fatwā* and 9/11, which relate in complex ways to his cultural identity as a Jew.

Wesker had never been religiously observant – speaking as late as 1970, he had only just recently, it seemed, begun to gain a sense of identity as Jewish and with it a shared sense of suffering and persecution (Hayman 1970: 4–5). Yet, Jews and Judaism have always been an intermittent concern that runs through his work from *Chicken Soup with Barley* (1958) to *Blood Libel* (1996, written in 1991). In a memorial speech in 2016, Mike Leigh drew attention to Wesker's Jewishness, raising an overlooked alternative perspective to the angry young men of British theatre in the late 1950s:

If you were a nice Jewish boy born in the 1940s and you were not called something Old Testament like Michael, David or Jonathan, you would be Anthony, Leslie, or Jeffrey. Half a generation earlier the fashion had been the likes of Harold, Bernard or Arnold. [...] So imagine how exciting it was for the tiny handful of us who were concerned with [...] culture to discover that not just one but three young East End Jewish dramatists had burst onto the scene: a Harold, a Bernard and an Arnold!

(Leigh 2016: n.pag.)

Sue Vice's chapter on the representation of Jewishness within Wesker's plays chooses to look at three examples from the latter part of his career in what she describes as 'case-studies of antisemitism in different national and historical contexts'. All three – *Shylock*, *Blood Libel* and *Badenheim 1939* (2010) – are set at specific periods (medieval England, renaissance Italy and Nazi-occupied Austria, respectively), a strategy that Vice sees as a deliberate shift from plays such as *The Old Ones* (1970) in which Jewish characters feature, but the issue of Judaism or antisemitism is not at the forefront.

The professional controversies explored in Derbyshire's study most often stemmed from his work being disregarded by directors or critics in the United Kingdom. However, this reputation did not follow Wesker abroad, where his work met with more lasting success. While the international scope of his career deserves a volume in itself, Anne Etienne's chapter focuses on the case of France, a country where Wesker and his then girlfriend Dusty spent a year in 1956, at her request, in Paris. The chapter makes extensive use of archival material and interviews carried out with the directors of some of his plays to explore how the French audience knew and received his work. While it reveals occasional differences in opinions and of approach between Wesker and his French directors, it also reveals stark

discrepancies in appreciations of the plays compared to the United Kingdom and a keen understanding of Wesker's creative process.

In an interview with a French journalist in 1968, Wesker expresses his writing process in visual terms: 'In organising facts, I modify them. For instance, I will darken the story to make more vivid the sudden explosions of light that set it aglow at specific points' (Schifres 1968: 98). This tendency to contrast can of course be found in his shift between monologues and snappy dialogues, the one enlightening or emphasizing the other, but also giving it the rhythm that will complement the play's colours. Wesker also had recourse to visual references when describing his plays' aesthetics. For instance, in comparing his historical plays, he suggested that with *Blood Libel* he 'wanted to build a drama out of large primary blocks rather than minute detail' to be found in the more naturalistic *Shylock* and *Caritas* (1981), concluding it to be 'the difference between naturalistic and abstract painting, between, say, Constable and Ben Nicholson' (AW 1991: n.pag.). His designer for *Annie Wobbler*, Pamela Howard, not only relates how their collaboration began but also brings to light and analyses the visual talent displayed in his little-known drawings. Much like he described his plays in visual terms, Howard points to the presence of the stage in the way he approached a space.

When Arnold Wesker came on a visit to University College Cork in 2004, he wanted to talk about his mother because of the pivotal influence she had had on him. Leah Wesker was the first woman in his life to find a theatrical representation as Sarah Kahn, and she was followed by Dusty as Beatie Bryant. Both Margaret Rose and Glenda Leeming have devoted groundbreaking studies to the woman plays, respectively, on the tradition of the monodrama and on his portrayal of women's experiences, analysing how his writing questions their sense of identity against dominant discourses (see Dornan 1998: 129–36; 194–08). Based on extensive archival and empirical research, Michael Fry's chapter tracks the figure of the dramatist in the one-woman plays, in various forms and habits. Indeed, Wesker acknowledged that *Betty Lemon* was a self-portrait, as discussed in Anne Etienne's chapter on French productions, and *Four Portraits – of Mothers* was further inspired by familiar stories rather than 'social objectives': 'One is my aunt. The unmarried one and failed one are based on people I know. The fourth mother is inspired by my wife' (AW 1983: n.pag.). Beyond these personal experiences, Wesker explained that he found 'women more interesting than men. They seem to me more courageous, more perceptive, more vivacious than men' (cited in Attallah 1997: 50). Though John Dexter had indeed suggested, 'it seems to me as though all that you've written belongs to a female and not a male', Fry's careful exploration of Wesker as a woman raises counterarguments (cited in Hayman 1973– 74: 95).

In her insightful article, Margaret Drabble noted that community was a dominant image in his plays: 'a family, a group of friends, even a group of National

Servicemen. They make community, often against the odds' (Drabble 1975: 28). In the final chapter, Robert Wilcher qualifies the recurrent theme of the community and the individual as 'Wesker's [contradictory] commitment to socialism and humanism' through a discussion that includes a wide range of work before ending in a detailed look at *Beorhtel's Hill* (1988), a community play involving the local residents of the new Essex town of Basildon. For Wilcher, in *Beorhtel's Hill*, the living community of townspeople as performers claim the play for themselves as an embodiment of its history – a culmination and distillation of the ideas that Wesker first developed in the *Trilogy*.

Ten years ago, Wesker e-mailed Anne Etienne his latest news: 'Chichester Festival Theatre have finally bought my new(ish) play GROUPIE for their next season; and the Royal Court are reviving CHICKEN SOUP WITH BARLEY for late 2010. Who knows, I may be discovered!' (Wesker 2009: n.pag.). This final exclamation encompasses Wesker's sense of tragic irony, which he defined as tongue-in-cheek humour, but also the acute awareness of his career at this point. He was in effect discovered all over again in those final years through successful productions on London's main stages of his early work. This collection of essays is an attempt at discovering Wesker in a theatre career lasting over fifty years by synthesizing unifying fragments to the portrait of a 'gentle man who fought for his ideals', a challenging writer whose plays were shot through with social and artistic visions (Nathan 2016: n.pag.).

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NOTES

1. The dates throughout the book refer to the plays' first production, be it national or international.
2. Originally commissioned by Radio 4, it was first given a reading at the Chichester Festival Theatre in July before being broadcast in November 2001, with Barbara Windsor and

Timothy West directed by Ned Chaillet. Foreign productions followed, but every British attempt has foundered so far.

3. Throughout the book, references to the Wesker Papers at the HRC have reflected these four accessions. Therefore, AW refers to the first accession and AW2 to the second one, followed by the box and file code. The third and fourth accessions (AW3 and AW4) only have box numbers because they were uncatalogued at the time of writing.

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