# *O Fair Jerusalem :*
# David Edgar's Political Theatre and His Idea of a New Jerusalem

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David Edgar's early works are straight agit-prop plays. As expected of a writer of political theatre, 'new Jerusalem' has always been referred to as the ideal city in his work. His one-time career as journalist has helped him to observe facts keenly and objectively so that he quickly caught the social and economic changes that the world was experiencing during the 1970's. Because his sympathy was with the people rather than with political movements, he felt that he must be flexible enough to meet the times and present to his audience what was best for them. The world could no longer be divided into two camps—the capitalists and the workers, or the conservatives and the Labour Party, or the middle-class and the working class. The economic situation was changing into a 'mixed economy'. Nothing was as 'fixed' as before, so the battle front of the agit-prop could not hold. Edgar was the first of the political theatre playwrights to express the change in his plays. *O Fair Jerusalem* is one of the plays written during this transition period. As the title of this play indicates, his pursuit of the city is ever more an important theme, so that thematically, the through-line is clear; but that the structure and style are extremely complex creates an impression that the issue and theme are not to be taken so simply as they might appear. The myth of a 'new Jerusalem' is adapted to a dramatic account of the plague which invaded England in 1348. This part, however, turns out to be only a rehearsal for a performance to be done by a group of actors of today to commemorate the 600th anniversary of the Black Death. The 'plague' exists for both medieval and modern men and remedies are invented but those remedies in turn bring forth another and more often a more dangerous 'plague'. The 'city' is there and is not there.

> ...I saw in heaven... seven angels, the bearers of seven plagues... by which the vengeance of God is finally achieved. (*The Apocalypse*, 15:1)

David Edgar's *O Fair Jerusalem* is a play committed to political socialism whose structural framework is based on the action of the thematic movement of "The Apocalypse of the Blessed Apostle John" of the New Testament. The Bible tells that John dreams of angels cleansing the world with thunder and lightening so that God may rebuild a New Jerusalem on earth. This myth of a "new Jerusalem" is adapted to a dramatic account of the plague which invaded England in 1348. However, this happens to be a rehearsal for a performance to be held in a war-damaged church before the congregation by a group of twentieth century actors for the 600th anniversary of the Black Death.

The source for most of Edgar's works is issue-related. In the case of *O Fair Jerusalem*, immediate issues may have been the new National Health Act and the 30th anniversary of Hiroshima, but the call for a new Jerusalem lies at the basis of all temporary issues. It can be said that it constitutes the main issue of all his plays as expected of a writer of political theatre, but in *O Fair Jerusalem* it becomes the key theme about which the whole play revolves. Thematically, therefore, the through-line is clear. It appeals to us directly and strongly. However, that the structure and style are extremely complex creates an impression that the issue and theme are not to be taken so simply as they might appear.

We never learn until far into the heart of the play that the scenes we have been watching were not 'real'. They were scenes from the medieval period rehearsed by a group of actors of the twentieth century. Sudden return to the present in such a way

occurs four times (last scene, Act I; first scene, Act II; first scene, Act III; last scene of the whole play). There is one distinct narrative-line in the scenes of the present about the acting group and its director, Wolfe. In the rehearsed play, or play-within-the-play, there are as many narrative-lines as much as there are characters. This rehearsed play is developed according to the ecclesiastical calendar. The awakening of the boy William from serfdom to liberation is traced along with this calendar as background. There is also the awakening of the Lady from Wedlock. The Knight is tied to a meaningless idealism of chivalric romance. Diccon, the longbowman, who refuses to stay in servitude to the Knight, is the clever 'Arlecchino'. In contrast to this secular group, are the ecclesiastics, bishops and priests who are formidable, binding the people and themselves to unnecessary rules and the friar John whose mendicant undertakings parallel "the angels of the plague." Then there is the narrative-line of the strolling players, especially that of Ham the leader. Their performance of a parable, of a mock Feast of Fools, and of a one-man show makes an interesting play within the play-within-the-play. These different story-lines are cut into fragments and are arranged piece by piece in what seems a complicated web. Music and song elaborate and explain the context. This play is a 'metatheatre', a complicated display on several different levels. What hangs gloomily over the heads of these personages of both the medieval and the present age and uniting the whole play is the "plague", the "plague" in every sense of the word.

The style in which such an agit-prop artist of the theatre has made an unexpected turn toward complexity had not been seen before. In "Public Theatre in a Private Age" written for the BTI / DATEC (Aut 1984), Edgar talks of reasons for the change in his style. We learn that his change in style was caused by his sensing the changes in the social battle front in the 70's. *O Fair Jerusalem* which was written in 1975, then, is a significant

play written during the period of his transition. This paper will approach this play to see how this period of transition affected his theme of 'new Jerusalem'. Although Edgar comments on this play as "not satisfactory" (Trussler 168), it is nonetheless a provocative play.

Born in 1948 of parents who were both engaged in the mass media, David Edgar kept to an environment where politics were like bread and butter. Born and educated in Birmingham, he established himself first as a journalist and then as a writer for leftist theatre groups in Birmingham, Manchester, Leeds and Bradford, "Northern centre for the counter-culture" (BTI). He is now a prominent figure in political theatre in Britain. Edgar's generation of writers began when there was "a consensus shared between play-makers and their audiences that British society was rotten at the root, and that it was the proper business of the theatre to anatomise its rottenness and point the way to radical change" (BTI). Most of Edgar's "early plays were 'occasional' pieces commissioned by individual groups, written quickly in response to a rapidly changing political situation... all written from a committedly left socialist position" (Bull 152). His relations with Chris Parr, then active in the theatre at Bradford University, and later with the General Will, were significant contacts that enhanced his work in many ways.

The spirit with which Edgar has pursued his 'new Jerusalem' has been constant and thus he is known in England as a specially dedicated leftist socialist committed to reaching the public through the theatre. His early work is a direct socialist refutation to anything that is 'fixed', calling for immediate action for revolution because, he says, today the barrier between human beings and 'the just city' is not a diaphanous veil waiting to be rent by Shaw's Fabian analysis, but "something more akin to an electrified barbed-wire fence or the Berlin Wall" (BTI) which has to be torn down immediately. The reason for his choosing the theatre as a medium

is that "books are flat, controlled ... two-dimensional ... I [Albie Sachs] wanted something more immediate, more active, more alive. So it has to be a play. And working on the play is fighting back" (*The Jail Diary of Albie Sachs* 43).

Today his idea of the straight agit-prop plays has changed. He thinks that the agit-prop play as drama has its limitations, for its caricature feature "allows no radical change in the process which is the life of the drama", and "the author has settled all major questions of the story before the play begins" (BTI). He also has the "willingness to enlarge the thematic scope of political drama in a quite unprecedented way" (Bull 152) to meet the times and "to face up to the problem of finding ways of telling them [audience] things they almost certainly didn't want to hear" (BTI 2). Edgar was talking mainly of the "privatized" audience of "the great institutional theatres" but he found this audience worthwhile "risking" an occasional socio-political drama.

One of Edgar's new methods that were "quite unprecedented" was the "collaborative production process" which was followed faithfully for *Nicholas Nickleby* (1980), an adaptation from Charles Dickens' novel of that name, and a play which made Edgar known throughout the world. He was commissioned by Trevor Nunn who was to direct it for the RSC. He collaborated with Nunn in guiding the actors, some fifty in number, to create the play themselves through their creativity and through their own research. Lots of time was spent on 'talking it out', and as he himself says, he had only to jot down the dialogue already created by community work. Edgar believes that collaborative production is "an egalitarian collectivism which is morally superior", and "the ethical common-sense of the age." Such an idea was with him from the early days of his career it seems, for he has a character in *Bloody Rosa*, written in 1970, say: "the university drama group have very kindly offered their services to present, in dramatic form, incidents from our subject's [Rosa Luxemburg]

life, some of them put together out of their own study by way of improvisation, some of them written by myself. I trust this technique will enable us to, well, gain a fuller understanding of our subject" (p. 1.). Recently Edgar scripted *Entertaining Strangers* (1985) in a collaborative production process but under a very different circumstance from *Nicholas Nickleby*. He collaborated with Ann Jellicoe who has had experiences in directing plays with similar procedures which she called 'community plays'. The actors were amateurs, about a hundred of the people of Dorchester. They wanted to chronicle an important part of the history of their town into a performance.

At the basis of this production process was his idea of social realism which became an important feature of his later works. Again, this was a method to cope with the immediate circumstances. He says "social-realism is the only current form of political theatre that appears to be able to survive a period in which political ideas in the theatre are so deeply resented" (BTI). He sought a form which could demonstrate the social and political character of human behavior, and formulated his idea on the art of the playwright and social-realism by basing it on Croce's distinction of the historian and the chronicler.

> The historian attempts to penetrate the core of events by entering into history and reliving in his own mind the experiences of the past; the chronicler treats his materials as inert and empty of determinate content. In the world of letters, clearly, the chronicler is a naturalist and the historian a social-realist, one who, again in Terry Eagleton's words, "penetrates through the accidental phenomena of social life to disclose the essences or essentials of a condition, selecting and combining them into a total form and fleshing them out in concrete experience". Both parts of that equation are important: the essences must be disclosed, but the form of their disclosure must be

> concrete and recognisable. Social realism is obviously a synthesis . . . of the surface perception of naturalism and the social analysis that underlies agit-prop plays. To explain, it is first necessary to be recognisable, and only then, having won the audience's trust, to place those recognisable phenomena within the context of a perceived political truth. It is indeed in this combination of recognition with perception that the political power of theatre lies. (BTI)

Edgar also utilized the features of agit-prop which was to keep the characters as impersonal as possible and to project historical fact. But as Jeremy says in *Maydays*, "it's the little things that matters" (66), Edgar went into "sound factual research" and, for that matter, meticulously. The use of a fictional set of characters to demonstrate the workings of meticulously researched material, he called 'faction'.

Between *Nicholas Nickleby* and *Entertaining Strangers*, Edgar wrote *Maydays* (1983) for the RSC. It was not made according to a collaborated production process, but the technique Edgar acquired through his experiences with community theatre was manifest in this play and his ideas on social-realism were faithfully followed. As a result, a panoramic epic type of drama was created. It has about fifty characters and the scenes take place in England, Hungary, the United States and the Soviet Union between the years 1956 and the early part of the 1980s. It gives an epic view of political life through the interconnecting stories of three men of different nationalities and of different social status. The scenes are many and fragmented structured in a complex web, but unexpectedly the theme and issue are sharply projected and the play offers a clear picture of very recent political history. It is to be noted, particularly at this point, that *Maydays* and *O Fair Jerusalem* have affinities, although there could be nothing so different in subject matter; in addition there is even a ten-year

interval between them. The latter appears to be an early attempt at the panoramic epic style of the former. When Edgar said in a conference, "...what happened in the seventies was a progression from agit-prop to a more complex and, I thought, more mature social-realism among political playwrights and companies" (BTI), it was clear he was talking of himself along with others. *O Fair Jerusalem* may be short of everything in content and technique compared to *Maydays*, but I do not think it is wrong to say that it marks a significant period of transition in Edgar's career as playwright. Indeed Catherine Itzin says,

> 1973 was a key year for Edgar, the beginning of several years of experimenting with different forms. He tried working with a documentary form in *The Case of the Worker's Plane*,... [and] *Events Following the Closure of a Motocycle Factory*.... There was the first draft of *Destiny*, and an experiment with a medieval epic about the Black Death called *O Fair Jerusalem*. From the successes and failures of his many experiments in this period (and he is one of the most prolific writers of his generation), Edgar started to analyse seriously the form and function of political theatre.... (144)

*O Fair Jerusalem* was an experiment in applying the myth of the apocalypse for a 'new Jerusalem". "...The metaphor that we are all members of one body has organized most political theory from Plato to our own day" (*Anatomy of Criticism* 142), says Northrop Frye. The phrase 'new Jerusalem' is now so popularly used to mean 'an ideal city' that it has outgrown being a metaphor. That it has been a phrase much used in non-Christian circles, especially by socialist political theatre, seems ironical and yet very much to the point. From his early works, Edgar has directly referred to 'new Jerusalem' quite frequently, for example, in such plays as *Bloody Rosa*, *Operation ISKRA*, *Wreckers*, *Mary Barnes*, *Maydays* and *Entertaining Strangers*. In many cases, 'new

Jerusalem' is put into a slogan or in music-hall type of songs inserted into scenes in Brechtian style. To show the rigor of Edgar's early agit-prop call for a 'new Jerusalem', here are Rosa Luxemburg's words from a scene in *Bloody Rosa.*

> Great historical movements have been the determining causes of today's deliberations. The time has arrived when the entire socialist programme of the proletariat has to be established upon a new foundation.... The progress of large-scale capitalism development during seventy years has brought us to the point of the destruction of capitalism, and our solution offers the only means of saving human society from destruction.... We must build from below upwards, until the workers' and soldiers' councils gather so much strength that the overthrow of the government will be merely the final act in the drama. (54)

Deeds must come first to build a 'new Jerusalem'. But even in this early play, Edgar sees the difficulty of building an ideal city. That is pointed out at the beginning of the same play when a song about a new Jerusalem is sung, each stanza sung by a different character of a different background, thus emphasizing the difficulty of a unified front. Bernstein, so like an Englishman, sings "We'll build the new Jerusalem/Through ballot boxes day by day", whereas a Polish sings about gaining freedom from Marxism and Russia (3). The call for 'new Jerusalem' in his later plays is more patient, embracing mankind in general. In his latest play *Entertaining Strangers*, he ends the play by having the characters chant a socialist dialectic for a 'new Jerusalem' in a different key thus:

> It's not your Jerusalem
> It's not my Jerusalem
> It is our Jerusalem
> It is our Jerusalem (64)

There was a change in Edgar's idea of bringing about a new

Jerusalem as there was a change in his methods of playmaking and, as was mentioned above, since *O Fair Jerusalem* is a play written during his transition period, his idea of new Jerusalem in this play reflects the period of change.

Frye points out that the apocalyptic pattern has been consistently used as a framework in literature from the middle ages and he explains that its obvious feature

> is the division of being into four levels. The highest level is heaven, the place of the presence of God. Next come the two levels of the order of nature, the human level and the physical level. The order of human nature, or man's proper home, is represented by the story of the Garden of Eden in the Bible and the myth of the Golden Age in Boethius and elsewhere. Man is no longer in it, but the end of all his religious, moral, and social cultivation is to raise him into something resembling it. Physical nature, the world of animals and plants, is the world man is now in, but unlike the animals and plants he is not adjusted to it. He is confronted from birth with a moral dialectic, and must either rise above it to his proper human home or sink below it into the fourth level of sin, death, and hell. This last level is not part of the order of nature, but its existence is what at present corrupts nature. (*The Stubborn Structure* 202)

This structure constitutes the very movement of *The Apocalypse* of the New Testament where God brings thunder and lightening repeatedly to cleanse the world to build and rebuild a "New Jerusalem". Thus Edgar adopts this as a spatial pattern or framework to tell his tale of the aspirations of a new Jerusalem for William and his lot (medieval) and for Wolfe and his lot (contemporary). The parallels of clearance function of thunder and lightening are, the vengeance of the angels of plague in the Bible, Black Death in the internal play in *O Fair Jerusalem*, and

society's self-inflicted pollution in the twentieth century in *O Fair Jerusalem*. 'New Jerusalem' is the desired-for-city in all the parallels.

The internal play, or the play-within-the-play, is molded according to the order of the ecclesiastical calendar beginning at Easter. A hymn-like song addressed to the congregation-audience at the beginning and end punctuates the whole play. The song is meant for Easter morning calling upon all the people to teach their children that Christ died for those He loved. The song ends thus:

O fair O fair Jerusalem
When shall I come to thee?
When all my grief is at an end,
Thy joy then we may see.

The various events, and the deeds of each character are all molded to play a part in the pattern of movement sung in the stanza quoted above.

The characters in the play-within-the-play are, a boy, William, and his mother; Diccon, a longbowman in servitude to the Knight; a Lady who loves the Knight though she is married to a rich merchant; the Knight who loves the Lady; the Clerk who is the nephew to the rich merchant and in servitude to him, and his wife. They are the seculars. The ecclesiastics are John, the friar, a priest and a Bishop. There are the mummers, or travelling players, whose leader is Ham. This internal part is keyed more or less to the fate of William who starts on a journey to find Jerusalem. Edgar however, does not give him a Dick-Whittington-like main role. All the characters have equal weight in their roles and they are only related to each other by chance meetings so they remain independent of each other. Moreover their sketches are strictly surface sketches stressing their relationship with their environment.

The play (or play-within-the-play) begins with the hymn like

song mentioned above and is followed by the "Quem Quearitis" sung by the monks. It is dawn on Easter Sunday. Among the congregation are William and his mother, the latter coaxing her son not to run away because he is bound to the land and will be caught anyway. But he is determined. He wants to free himself from his Steward, his mother, and from a "soil [that] is dead from tilling". His answer to his mother is that because it is Easter, it is "the best day to go" and this scene ends significantly with the last stanza of the theme song: "O fair O fair Jerusalem / When shall I come to thee...."

On the feast of Pentecost, William, while approaching a town, happens to meet Diccon who warns him that a freeman is "a poor man, either road" and gives him advice to register for construction work for building a new cathedral nearby. Diccon admits that he knows the world too well to subjugate himself to the Knight whom he is supposed to be serving, or to help build the cathedral because the priests sit "bibing and gorging theyselves on their tithes and taxes". Diccon does not mind talking spitefully of them because he knows he will not be sent to hell because there is "no space for me [Diccon]. It's all crammed up with popes and cardinals". Then he tells William how he started off to go to Jerusalem because he was told that there would be no famine there. But the roads were thronged with people with the same thought and it was difficult travelling so he gave up and went to France instead as a mercenary.

The Lady, the Knight and the Clerk introduce themselves by turns in a style frequently seen in mummers plays of old England. The Lady, wedded to a "mercantile senility" sits moaning her "passion unrequitted, [so she] seeks redress" and thus she "knows" the Knight. The Knight promises the priest that "by God's good franchise" he will open "the gates of Sion...wide to Christian men", but his pilgrimage could "not extend beyond the Holy See". The Knight's errand is made to be still more confusing and blunted because his chivalry requires loyalty to his lady also. The Clerk

is a man of great learning and puts more importance on it than spiritual practices.

At another part of the town square, the priest is threatening the Clerk for blaspheming, but the Clerk is trying really to warn the priest to take note of the "new wind" that "blows in the world" and not "turn up his coat" against it; and the Clerk underlines his view by saying that it is right to do so since the Holy Ghost gave tongue to the founders of the Church who spoke then of the gift of Knowledge. The Clerk is aware of the "new wind", for his Lord is occupied in trade bringing back not only wealth but new knowledge, and, ironically, the plague.

In these first two scenes, we are introduced to a period of transition from a stable feudal system to a modern world. This was a period when decadence was in the air. It was pandemic.

It is the feast day of Corpus Christi. The Lady, her Lord away on trade business, has been with the Knight for two weeks. She knows she must part with the Knight because of her loyalty to her husband, but she also knows that she must let the Knight go on his pilgrimage for he is restless. The Knight goes away breathing words of everlasting love to her. Then her Lord sends her a message in advance that he is coming home but is immediately taking her away because soon the city will be blown by a strange wind from Sicily, Italy, France, Germany and Flanders. The singer concludes the scene by singing that in the old days the wind might not have spread but now "every road is straight, and full of dead".

At another part of the town square, Ham and his mummers are performing a "moral, *muddled* parable" to demonstrate how "the world [is] a wicked walking-place". On a highway a rich merchant is attacked by Debt and Wedlock who steal his money. Their moral is "this man is richly got / We've not a lot / Why should this be?" A tax-collector and a priest refuse to help the merchant who is injured but a Jew takes pity. Then when the

merchant is revived, he turns thief, kills the Jew and runs away with his purse. The merchant's moral is "that being robbed, to rob you [the Jew] back in turn". Ham's comment on this morality play is, "from fair Jerusalem" "on the road to Jericho", "the reaper grim waits for every man" and "he you help may grant you his diseases"—"our time's a pain and grievance terrible." The style of the language echoes that of the old morality plays, but the characters are not simple allegorical characters. They show two opposites. Thus Ham's "muddled" parable. After the performance, the citizens kill all the mummers for carrying the disease, but Ham escapes.

The spread of pestilence is declared publicly for the first time by the Bishop saying that this is a just punishment from God whose "patience has run out" and "none can be spread by Old Nick" who is "waiting with his furnace stoked". His view of the disease is just as bad as all the superstitious rumours about the disease that he refutes.

On Lammas Day, John, a grey friar, kneels in prayer for the return of a world before Adam's sin. He then simulates the Passion of Christ the Lord while a Reader reads the passage about the opening of the seven seals from *The Apocalypse* of the New Testament. At the same time an elaborate tableau is shown by monks and skeletons to supplement the reading. There is a climax in the reading at the passage of the opening of the sixth seal when there is mentioned the levelling of the world by thunder, lightening and earthquake when all men great and small hid in the rocks. With the opening of the seventh seal, a lamb stood on Mount Sion with those redeemed, and John saw the new city, New Jerusalem, and God sat on the throne and said "Behold I make all things new". At this moment John, the friar, is seen holding the skeleton of a babe, and calling on God with Christ's last words "Into Thy hands I commend my spirit." Here friar John is duplicated with John the Baptist prophesying in the wilderness and with John,

the writer of *The Apocalypse*. This scene brings out the meaning of the plague in all its Christian context, but Edgar's intention is to cut off the religious context and to retain the shape of the myth of apocalypse to talk of a new Jerusalem in the latter half of the twentieth century. This will become apparent toward the end of the second act. At the moment though, this scene is an impressive one which takes us deeply into a medieval religious and, at the same time, a sinister atmosphere—all the more effective because in the next and last scene of Act I there is a sudden change to a scene in 1948, an everyday, mundane routine scene with characters arranging chairs.

And that is what exactly Hilda is doing in a church damaged by the bombing of World War II. Hilda is a member of Wolfe's theatre group and she is getting ready for the performance of the play which we have just been watching. It is therefore, only at this moment that the audience is informed that what they have been watching was only a rehearsal by these actors. We are still in 1948 in the first scene of the second act which function as a commentary on the 1348 plague, as much as it is an indirect comment on the pollution of our age. To understand something of what they are doing, the actors have invited a Dr. Henderson to talk about the nature of the pest. The pandemic nature of the plague at that time was caused from ignorance and superstition, and the developments in trade and means of travelling. Out of pity and kindness, people attended the afflicted but that became the cause for spreading the disease, so the people kept away. Dr. Henderson strongly opposes Malthus theory of pandemic diseases, and he says that no matter how men have made an effort to develop civilization to overcome hunger, war, plague, they "have not eliminated but made more deadly those forces of destruction". This is true of medical practice also. It so happens that the New National Health Act of 1948 will be coming into effect on the day the play is to be performed and the group argue about whether it

will be effective or not. Among the group is John Hammond, the vicar of the church, and who is sponsoring the play to be enacted in the nave of his church. He talks of Leningrad as an example of a city rebuilt and renewed from rubble. He reflects the other Johns previously mentioned.

The actors begin their rehearsals again. It is Christmas tide but there is a heavy sinister air. There are two different lines of development in this scene, each cut into fragments and alternating with each other. The Lady is witnessing the death of her Lord. She decides to go to the Knight whose child she is to give birth to and is ready to bequeath all wealth to the Clerk, her husband's nephew. Ham is acting as mock Abbot saying his mass in the style of the Feast of Fools. The Abbot's face is a skull, signifying death. He gives advice to the Nobleman and his wife to live in total abandon because no matter what they do hell is the only alternative that is awaiting them. Eventually all around Ham die of the plague and he is left alone to continue mumming. He mums a St. George play impersonating a number of characters all by himself. This St. George kills the Turk, is injured, and is cured by a doctor, but forgets to pay him when he is given a kingdom and a princess—a lovely tale to be told at Christmastide.

It is also at Christmastide that Diccon and William help to clear away the bodies of the dead, but only those whose pocket contains a purse. Diccon will not respond to the pleadings of the Knight, who wants him to accompany him for his excursions to France, because the Knight cannot pay more than what he steals from the pockets of the dead. The Lady comes seeking for the Knight but he has completely forgotten about her. William suddenly decides to help the Lady through her difficulties. No motivation is given but his willingness to help her is the first sign of revival from decadence. But Ham's words are a contradiction to William's behavior: "All virtue's deadly now, but charity is deadliest, o yes, charity's a killer, kindness kills and friendliness

is fatal, yes—". No, revival is not yet. The plague has entered Ham's head and he goes mad. Diccon is most afraid of being contaminated by this ailment and he runs away. Ham is rescued by the Lady's kindness and wisdom and is freed from an illusion that he himself is the devil and the Lady, a bawd of Babylon. Ham's madness points to Edgar's concern with politics of human psychology in which case the conflicting pressures of society are "such that schizophrenia could be seen as a perfectly sane response" (Bull 187). The play comes to a point where evil has been exhausted and where gradual amelioration can set it.

At Advent, John the friar, in a red robe, comes into the church to clear the way for the Lord, mirroring the image of John the Baptist in the wilderness. He declares that he has come on behalf of the poor for alms and he consumes the Host and drinks of the Wine, ignoring the priests who are aghast at his abrupt behavior. He accuses the rich merchants and especially the priest of Rome as being Antichrist who "wears the robes of innocence to hide his putrid nudity." So saying, John the friar continues his preaching concluding that hordes of people are destroyed not by God but by men. The just are now ready to chain the Antichrist; they are the poor who have been wrongly treated and exploited by the rich whose purse contains the plague. So the poor will rise and shall be comforted in Jerusalem, and Jerusalem can exist here and now "when all is held in common, like the sky and sea, as in old Adam's time, and each man has enough". Then John performs a strange miracle with gun-powder (which he calls a 'trick'), and gathers a throng of people to follow him for he "will make all things new".

As the Bishop assaults John, it is William who comes boldly forward and knocks the Bishop down to defend John. William has been true to his heart since the day he had left his mother.

It is to be noted here that although John the friar is depicted with tremendous effect this scene is weakened on occasions when

clear and sharp paralleling of Edgar's socialism and Christian theology is blurred. Obscurity is caused by an idea or deed which cannot be identified. If John the friar stands for John the Baptist or John of The Apostle, he would not be identifying God with 'us', nor would he occupy himself with occult-like practices of placing the Lady in the center of the circle of fire made by gunpowder. Theatrical as these scenes may seem they weaken the effect because they are unconvincing.

There is a commentary from the twentieth century after the striking appearance of John as at the end of the first act. The audience by this time will need specific knowledge of why 'a clearance' is necessary, 'a clearance' of bodies off the streets, of decadence in the church, and of mounting pollution in our time. Edgar sets up a tense situation in which Wolfe must explain convincingly, urgently and earnestly why he had to perform this play. One of the members of the acting group, Harry, accuses Wolfe of escaping to the United States during World War II and says that he does not wish to work any longer with a deserter. Wolfe cannot afford to lose Harry at this moment, so he tells Harry that he had to flee in order to avoid fighting, for he saw that the English were not fighting fascism but the people of Germany, and that is only butchering and exploiting to expand imperialism. Such a war was wasteful, damaging and dangerously 'pandemic'. He goes on to say that he could only hope that the world will learn, but again today war and disease continue—"what man has cured he makes . . ." so that Jerusalem is not coming. If we can't see this situation now, we shall never see it—"that's what my play is about." As he says this, Wolfe is suddenly taken very ill and is carried off to a hospital. When John Hammond tells the group that Wolfe has a chronic case of tubercular meningitis, which he caught while he was helping the refugee children in the slums of Hamburg in 1945, Harry and the group are more than convinced. The rehearsals are resumed without him

but with more earnestness.

It is mid-December and nearing Christmas. The Flagellants are becoming more and more popular and John's followers are turning to them. They preach that people must go through unceasing suffering in compensation for the sacrifice of Jesus Christ our Savior. In a time like this when the world is suffering from the plague, their ways and their preaching convince. Meanwhile the singer sings a merry tune of the coming of Yuletide.

The Knight returns from France and when he is told that the Lady is waiting for him he rushes out to find her; on his way he ignores a child who asks him for alms. The Bishop is not afraid of the Flagellants but afraid of John and his influence. The people are fickle, for when they learn that John cannot work miracles, they desert him for the Flagellants. John, therefore, is alone now and sick of the plague. On Candlemass day John is captured by the orders of the Bishop, and the one who actually lays hands on John is Diccon, who says he will work for anyone who opens his purse generously. Diccon does not fail to see that John too has a purse in his pocket. But the purse contains only a handful of powder. Diccon does not know what the stuff is for but keeps it and the purse.

It is Passion Sunday. The Lady is in labor and Ham is acting as her "Joseph". She tells him that the baby is a bastard but begotten in real love. At another corner of the stage, the Clerk and his wife decide to contribute money for the building of the cathedral. They will contribute labor through paying for labor, which is a way never known before in feudal society. They are the new middle-class, practical and pragmatic. The spot of light returns to the Lady. She calls for a priest for Extreme Unction but since none could be had, Ham anoints her while telling a tale of a monk who went mad waiting for God's answer to his question: "If you're tired at looking at the sins of man, why not give and pass the reigns to us for a while?" The Lady

dies and Ham goes away with the baby. William departs too. The Knight comes too late, but he kneels and this time earnestly prays to the Virgin Mary to help him get to Jerusalem on the Crusade. Instead of the Virgin Mary, Death appears and foretells his death, not a gallant one but a trivial one. So romance and chivalry give way to mercantile profiteering and the middle-class. In the next tableau, the Clerk and his wife see skeletons of the Bishop, the Knight, and the Lord (the rich merchant and the dead husband of the Lady) descend; and from the Lord, the Clerk's wife takes off the cloak and gives it to her husband, not the Bishop's nor the Knight's.

The plague has begun to subside after a year, but the world had undergone a major change during that time. We now see William working for the Clerk a freeman, earning his wages accordingly to his ability and working hours—shortage of labor after so many deaths has helped him to win his rights. Diccon, however, is different. He capitalizes on anything he can lay his hands on. He is not working like William but preparing for and waiting for the next war, for, he says confidentially to William, he has learned to produce explosives with the powder that he got from John the friar, and he plans to earn gold for it. His philosophy has not changed—"no virtue, being free and poor".

It is Easter Saturday and the plague is over. There is rest in the atmosphere. William diligently works for the Clerk and he is worried about Ham who is now really mad. Ham is holding a bundle of rags thinking that the babe is still alive. "Mebbe, it's waiting", Ham says, but "waiting" for what?

Suddenly, Ham steps out of the play-within-the-play and yet still remaining Ham, gives a long angry speech on the biggest plague ever since the beginning of civilization. He says when plagues could be cured, a more destructive 'plague' assaulted the human world and that was the atomic bomb. Ham-actor is extremely disturbed about Britain allowing U. S. the use of bases

for bombers carrying H-bombs. "They are man-made" and are "more dreadful even than the plague". Perhaps the actor who was impersonating Ham was reminded of the atomic bomb by having had to carry a bundle of rags for a baby because the world is haunted today by 'unborn babies', metaphorically speaking. Edgar was writing this play about the time when Hiroshima and Nagasaki were commemorating their thirtieth anniversary since the dropping of the deadly weapon.

Thus the play-within-the-play ends without a proper ending and the last scene takes us back to 1948 where we see Wolfe miraculously cured by a new 'weapon', streptomycin. This new invention was fortunate for Wolfe, but every new invention is a threat to the human race because of the possibility of misuse. Diccon's strategy for money making could destroy the whole human race. Wolfe is supposed to be still recuperating but he "has a play *to do*" and so he comes to rehearse and if the play be effective, the human race may enjoy a "fair Jerusalem".

At the end, the singer merges the medieval and the modern elements together and concludes the whole by singing the theme song:

> O fair O fair Jerusalem
> When shall I come to thee?
> When all my grief is at an end,
> Thy joy then we may see.

Edgar's dramatic aim has always been "to explore on as many fronts as possible, the struggles of a socialist philosophy at large in a confusing world of late capitalism" (Bull, p. 152.).

> I saw ... an angel come down from heaven, with the key of the abyss in his hand, and a great chain. He made prisoner of the dragon, serpent of the primal age, whom we call the devil, Satan.... (Ap. 20: 1–2)

The "dragon" in *O Fair Jerusalem* was demonstrated in a variety of features appearing again and again as in history. As

man accumulated knowledge of the environment he lives in he could have used that knowledge for the good of his race, but consequences show very often that man was turning it against himself instead. Destruction today, says Edgar, is therefore not God made but man-made and it is all the more so very embarrassing for us all. The pattern of apocalypse—the cleansing, the building, the destruction, and then again cleansing—repeats itself in history, and so in the play, the cyclic use of this pattern has been adapted not only to the whole play but in many individual scenes. Especially significant is the adaptation of the pattern to the scene of the reading of *The Apocalypse* accompanied by John's simulation of Christ's sacrifice and the sinister tableau of death.

New Jerusalem is then not yet a reality in this play. It is there but it is not, thus, the effect of complexity.

This is the result of the author's unchanging political commitment, and intensive research on his subject. "Edgar has moved political theatre into the role that best suits it—as the testing-ground of change", is how Bull concluded his view of Edgar (194), emphasizing that he was the only playwright to sense the changing conditions in the early seventies. Even a decade ago, to argue for socialism, one could do it within the frame of social economy in a capitalistic system and stand up for trade unionism at the same time for the working-class, but not so today. Agit-prop theatre was possible when the battle line between a monolithic corporate capital and a newly vigorous labour movement was clearly demarcated, but now the politics that agit-prop plays "could get across were very crude, whereas the world about us was getting more complicated" (TQ, IX, no. 33). Rising unemployment and successive waves of inflation changed the social and political fronts in the early part of the 70s, and it was more difficult to continue the traditional way of action on the industrial front, and so the militant-left turned its action toward internal struggles of the Labour Party. Not all the working class supported the Labour

Party nor the middle-class the Conservative, nor the labourers the trade unions. Consumer life of the average English became affluent and the result was the working-class' rejection of the socialist ethic of class warfare. "It is not a socialist society which has given the working-class the life they enjoy; it is a capitalist society...." (Alderman 259), or as Tedderella says "you must accept we're living in a mixed economy" (*Tedderella* 8). Alderman points out that "mixed economy now seemed to be here to stay" (263) and "Revisionists believed that the wider, ethical aims of socialism could be achieved without a great deal of public ownership" (264). Today's socialism is more and more nearing humanism and its outlines are becoming blurred. It is natural that the more one studies the present social and political conditions the more one is led away from a definite answer, and it is difficult to foretell the future—especially at a time of transition. Thus in *O Fair Jerusalem*, the Clerk's business-like pragmatism and William's common sense carry them quite a long way, but theirs are not the final answers. Troubles lurk and remedies are thought out to get nearer to a Jerusalem but those remedies often beget "dragons". Edgar's careful research on his subject matter and his experiments with methods to explicate his dialectic in the most convincing way for an immediate audience has made him go through such a stage. The result is a play with a complex vision of a 'new Jerusalem' and thus a complex structure.

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* Plays of David Edgar in script form, either kindly given by the author, or borrowed from his agency, Michael Imison Playwrights Ltd.