ARNOLD WESKER’S ROOTS

behind the scenes

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Introduction

Welcome to this Behind the Scenes guide to the Donmar’s major revival of Arnold Wesker’s modern classic, ROOTS. In the following pages you will find a wealth of information designed to give you a closer look at the process of bringing this production from page to stage.

This guide aims to set the play and production in context through conversations with members of the cast and creative team. It includes interviews with the actor Jessica Raine who plays Beatie Bryant, the production’s Designer Hildegard Bechtler, as well as offering an insight into the work of Video Designer Dick Straker. There are also extracts from the Rehearsal Diary of Oonagh Murphy, the Donmar’s Resident Assistant Director, and practical exercises designed to further unlock the world of the play.

We hope that you find this guide interesting and informative. To view the Behind the Scenes guides for other productions, please visit www.donmarwarehouse.com/discover/resources.

Sophie Watkiss
Sam Maynard

The cast of ROOTS
Section 1: Background to ROOTS
Rooting ROOTS: the new wave of playwriting in 1950s Britain

1950s post-war Britain saw an explosion of work by new dramatists whose naturalistic plays became collectively categorised as ‘kitchen-sink drama’, so called because they replaced the conventional middle-class fare of the London theatre with the gritty realism of the working class; forsaking the drawing room for the kitchen.

This dramatic sea-change in British post-war drama is anchored in theatre history by the work of actor and director George Devine (1910 – 66), founder of the English Stage Company at the Royal Court Theatre in 1956. The Royal Court was essentially a playwright’s theatre, described by theatre historian J. L. Styan as ‘defiantly working-class in orientation, attacking the comfortable craftsmanship and dull thinking of the established theatre.’

The contents of the plays were refreshingly new, often depicting the life of the urban or rural working-class. With the naturalistic representation of the rural working-class came a new style of dialogue, rooted in a plethora of refreshingly varied regional accents.

Arnold Wesker (born 1932) is a dramatist whose early plays have become intrinsically linked with the new wave of British playwriting of the 1950s; he was a major exponent of post-war social drama. Born in the East End of London of Eastern European Jewish parentage, his plays are largely autobiographical. His first play The Kitchen (1957) is based on his experience as a confectionary apprentice in a London hotel; Chips with Everything (1962) is derived from his service as a conscript in the Royal Air Force.

Roots (1959) is the most popular and influential part of a trilogy of plays written by Wesker, following on from Chicken Soup with Barley (1958) and preceding I’m Talking About Jerusalem (1960). Roots typifies the genre of the rural kitchen sink drama, with the energy and muscular drive of the Norfolk dialect of the play’s setting, and its focus on the meticulous depiction of the rhythms and activities of everyday life; Acts One and Two are located in kitchens, and the first scene opens with one of the characters actually washing up. From the initial stages of his planning process for the play, Wesker was adamant that what he was ‘excitedly eager to capture as much as anything was the slow pace of pause and silence in Norfolk rural life.’

1 See J. L. Styan, Modern Drama in Theory and Practice 1: Realism and Naturalism, p. 151.
Like many of his other dramatic works, the trilogy is unquestionably autobiographical, with Wesker drawing on both his family and life to create the essence of the plays. Both *Chicken Soup with Barley* and *I’m Talking About Jerusalem* are about his Jewish communist family, with the politics and ideologies of the central figure, Ronnie, aligned to those of Wesker himself. The middle play, *Roots*, is about the family of Ronnie’s girlfriend, Beatie Bryant, the character of Beatie being based on Wesker’s own wife, Dusty. Wesker and Dusty Bicker met and fell in love when she was a waitress in Norwich, and Dusty subsequently followed Arnold when he returned home to London. *Roots* is about a fortnight during which the waitress (renamed Beatie Bryant) returns home to her native Norfolk for a few week’s holiday to stay with her sister, mother and father; Ronnie is to join her on the final Saturday of the visit, and be introduced to her family for the first time in the couple’s three year relationship. To please Ronnie, Beatie has imitated his political and cultural progressiveness, something which her family become all too aware of, as she constantly quotes his ideas and philosophies at them for the duration of the play. In the first Act, we see how Beatie has attempted to rehearse Ronnie’s views on the importance of words:

“Well, language is words’ he’d say, as though he were telling me a secret. ‘It’s bridges, so that you can get safely from one place to another. And the more bridges you know about the more places you can see!’”

Beatie quoting Ronnie to her sister Jenny, Act One

Lisa Ellis and Michael Jibson
By Act Two, this attempt at educating her family to the ideas and politics of her boyfriend extends to putting on a record of the last movement of Bizet’s L’Arlésienne Suite in her endeavour to teach her mother about its parallels with socialism:

“Now listen. This is a simple piece of music, it’s not highbrow but it’s full of living. You want to dance to it. And that’s what he say socialism is. ‘Christ’ he say ‘socialism isn’t talking all the time, it’s living, it’s singing, it’s dancing, it’s being interested in what go on around you, it’s being concerned about people and the world.’”

Beatie quoting Ronnie to her Mother, Act II

Ronnie is the trilogy’s central character, but a key element of Roots is his absence. At the end of the play, instead of arriving in person, Ronnie sends a letter to Beatie, calling off their engagement. Initially shocked and distraught, the news then appears to motivate Beatie into finding her own voice, which she then speaks in eloquently and at length. Her epiphany is the precursor of other such speeches from female characters in post-war British drama, from Willy Russell’s *Educating Rita* (1983) to Jim Cartwright’s *Road* (1986).

The real Ronnie, Arnold Wesker, married the real Beatie, Dusty Bicker, a year before *Roots* was premiered, suggesting that neither had entirely escaped the influence of the other. ‘I *did* write a letter to Dusty saying our relationship should end’ admits Wesker, ‘but she ignored it and replied asking me to pack and post a parcel of selected Jewish deli foods. I think that response of cheerful insouciance as much as any other aspect of her character suggested to me we could be lifelong partners.’

By choosing to end Roots with the dissolving of Beatie and Ronnie’s relationship, Wesker gives the strongest and most persuasive voice in the trilogy to a woman, discovering what she means and who she is, as she speaks.

Apart from this final denouement and Beatie’s epiphany, the key focus of Roots is not action, but the detailed rituals of the everyday activities of the lives of Beatie’s family. The major issue for this in performance is that of pace. John Dexter, the director of the original production of Roots at Coventry Belgrade, gave his cast firm and clear instructions regarding this on the play’s opening night: ‘Don’t be rushed. You’ll hear shuffling, coughing – ignore it. Dictate the pace, they will accept it.’

Arnold Wesker recalls in his own words the first night of the play at the Coventry Belgrade:

*The opening was breathtakingly slow. Patsy Byrne [Jenny] – solid, experienced, intelligent, trusting utterly in the play and John’s direction – called to her child offstage, waited, went into her, moved slowly back into the room, returned to her frying pan and cooked. Charlie Kay [Jimmy] took his time coming in from work, placing his bike in the front room, arching his back with pain. Patsy looked at him a long time, watching, before asking: ‘Waas matter wi’ you then?’ Slowly, they build up the exchange that was to become the running joke of the play, about Mother Bryant saying the pain in his back was due to indigestion.*

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Twenty years on from this inaugural production of *Roots*, Wesker reiterated how key it was that the debate in these plays, ‘the cut and thrust of domestic polemic’ should take place in the midst of physical action: in his note to actors and directors embarking on producing plays form the trilogy, he cautions, ‘If the physical business of living does not continue then the dialogue will emerge pompous and fall with dull thuds from characters who will appear no more than cardboard cut-outs.’ This focus on the daily rituals of the lives is key to Wesker’s rationale for the play; to portray the comparatively primitive life of the economically starved rural society of the time.

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4 John Dexter cited ibid, p. xxiii
It is ironic that none of the three plays from Wesker’s trilogy were initially staged at the Royal Court, the spiritual home of the new wave post-war dramatists. Although *Roots* was commissioned by Devine, he positively disliked the play, which was why it was first produced at the Belgrade Theatre, Coventry, and only then because Peggy Ashcroft saw the play as a perfect vehicle for the young actress Joan Plowright, who played the role of Beatie in the inaugural production. It subsequently transferred to the Royal Court, its critical acclaim sealed with a further transfer to the Duke of York’s Theatre in London’s West End. When Wesker completed the trilogy, the success of *Roots* led to the three plays being performed together at the Royal Court in 1960. Overall, the trilogy played to 83% capacity, with *Roots* proving the most popular of the plays, selling out for the duration of the run.
Section 2:

The Donmar’s Production
Cast and Creative Team

Cast (in order of speaking)

Jenny Beales  
Lisa Ellis

Mrs Bryant  
Linda Bassett

Mr Healey  
Nic Jackman

Jimmy Beales  
Michael Jibson

Stan Mann  
David Burke

Frankie Bryant  
Carl Prekopp

Beatie Bryant  
Jessica Raine

Mr Bryant  
Ian Gelder

Pearl Bryant  
Emma Stansfield

Production

Director  
James Macdonald

Designer  
Hildegard Bechtler

Lighting Designer  
Guy Hoare

Sound Designer  
Ian Dickinson for Autograph

Video Designer  
Dick Straker
Oonagh Murphy’s
Rehearsal Diary

Resident Assistant Director Oonagh Murphy’s Rehearsal Diary

WEEK ONE

Roots is a play about ideas. It is a play of words; how people let words shape and define how they live. It is about the ability to express and about the failure to articulate. Our first week of work is full of words. We make note of words we don’t understand to look up their meaning. We debate the intention of characters, by their choice of words. We seek to understand what the playwright means in the way he assembles words. And it has also been a week interspersed by silence. The silence that denotes action in the play, yet to be enacted, as we still read it sitting at a table. Silence that settles on the group as we think about a certain line, how it still resonates fifty years on. The silence that falls at the end of a day of discussion working through the play unit by unit.

James guides the company through the disorientation of week one, encouraging questions and assertions to do with the play’s world. What is fact? What is speculation? What relates, with startling veracity, to the actual relationship between Arnold and his wife, Dusty? Research is fed into conversations. We answer questions about the characters’ lives based on our reading. Wesker’s autobiography ‘As Much As I Dare’ sits in the centre of the table, alongside books about England in the 1950s, a post-war cookbook, and a series of short documentaries made about working class Britain first shown in 1956 called Free Cinema. And of course, Arnold’s other plays, specifically the trilogy to which Roots belongs.

By the end of the week, we return to the beginning of the play to begin moving it. In the first session, James leads the actors in figuring out the world these characters inhabit. Hildegard’s set leaves great space for discovery. The simplicity of the design, with its attention to the textures and scale of the individual settings, facilitates the actor’s exploration of Arnold’s stage directions. They trace the routes of daily existence. They track the very real tasks that need to be done - dinner to be cooked, cleaning undertaken. “What has to happen by this point?” is a question that structures the work. And it is in the work that James’ assertion that this is a play that is all about ‘the doing’ begins to make sense.

The world that is not overly dramatic; the action unfolds with little event. In the very first five minutes of Act One, the rhythm of this life is established immediately.

This is a story that relies on routine. The incremental changes some of the characters experience is apparent only as it is relayed via the relentless routines of working life.

In our final session of the week, the amount of business seems as some points overwhelming, at others exciting. The real work here will be to master the tasks at hand. Activity allows these characters to articulate in a way that they are unable to do when they are standing or sitting talking to one another.

It is this tension between where we direct our energies and how we occupy our minds, and whether the ability to stop and think about our existence is a luxury and not a choice, that still feels very current. We leave for the weekend with our heads full of ideas, and the actors exhausted after a day of working repetitive tasks on their feet, but the sense of forward motion; the pervading feeling is that something very special is being discovered.
The journey from London to her home in Norfolk might have taken Beatie up to five or six hours. At the beginning of Roots, her arrival is anticipated by her mother watching the hourly buses which pass the family home. In the final act, the tension is underscored by the same hourly buses coming and going, but not delivering Ronnie. There is something of this same quality of waiting, in the stance of Keith, nephew of Dusty Bicker (who the character of Beatie in the play is based on), as we pull into his drive. Our journey hasn’t taken as long as Beatie’s but the experience of driving out of Ipswich into the landscape of rolling meadows dotted with farms, feels a little like stepping back in time.

Keith and his family welcome us into their home and show us photographs of the people on whom Wesker based his characters. Keith shares anecdotes and memories, answering the actors’ questions about their characters. We learn that Stan Mann was originally a successful businessman in the 1930s, and turned to alcohol after his wife left him. We hear about how Poppy Bryant poached meat because the post-war rationing left food so scarce, and how Mrs Bryant enjoyed car boot sales and was excellent at cards. The real Pearl, Sissie, actually was a Freeman’s catalogue agent who kept an immaculate house. And Mr. Healey, the farm manager, was actually Austrian, and had been rescued and brought to the estate by the owners, the Trefon family, just before the beginning of World War Two. Keith’s memories offered us insight into the minutiae of the lives that we are trying to depict.

What’s striking is how hard these lives were. Yet, each story was regaled with the family’s dry wit, which Wesker captures succinctly in his dialogue.

In search of a glimpse of the real tied cottage in which the Bryant (Bicker) family lived, we drive out to Starston. After a word with Keith, the owners invite us in. They are intrigued to hear how a young playwright called Arnold Wesker wrote a play set in the house that they have just bought. We walk through the rooms imagining where the play’s events take place. Next door a retired pig-man, who worked on the estate his whole life, sells us honey and nods at Dusty’s name; he went to school with her.

A final stop brings us to the old house where Jenny and Jimmy Beales live. David Burke stands at the little driveway where Stan Mann’s home – a disused railway carriage – once stood. The geography of the play, the distances between places, and the remoteness of these homes, feels very immediate.

Back in London, we proceed through the play, working on sketching out how the scenes work. We use Arnold’s instructions in the script as a general template.

The actors mark through activities – tidying, cooking, preparing a bath – trying out various versions. Action in this play is relentless; there is constant repetitive work to be done. The actors are encouraged to work things out by doing. However, if we hit an obstacle, James is at hand to offer insight. He has made notes of when a specific task needs to be finished, or where on the set a certain moment might play. He does not impose them on the cast definitively. Rather they are there to be explored if what the actors offer is not working. His notes draw the work back to the story we are telling, an occasional reminder of what we need to experience within each unit of the story.

The emotional life of these characters begins to evolve via the blocking and ‘figuring out business’ work. The actors have conversations with one another about their character’s relationships and back-stories. Yet, this work runs alongside the rehearsals, rather than governing them. A lot of the work going forward will be this fine combination of discovering emotion, and, when necessary, masking it with activity.

The week ends with the company working on the final act of the play. It is quite strange, given our research trip to the living room where it all happened, to see the actors explore their roles in greater detail. When silence settles over the room, it feels loaded and familial. We begin to see taciturn relationships in moments that emerge. The characters are coming to life, slowly but in a way that is naturalistic and deeply rooted.
We begin the week in Act Three which is the point when the everyday habits of the lives that we have been watching are interrupted by the anticipation of Ronnie’s arrival and Beatie’s breakdown when he does not come. James guides the company to break down the act into sizeable and shorter beats or moments. During sequences which are heavy on monologue or duologue, with other characters sitting listening, the work is two-fold. The actors speaking are encouraged to break-down their arguments, and to decide what exactly they are saying, to whom and why. New information is identified and discussed to clarify logic or attitude. For those not speaking, James encourages a similar specificity – to use their understanding of their character to actively respond to what is occurring. He asks questions – ‘Is that new information?’ ‘Is that adding to the tension or diffusing it?’ and ‘How much has your character been affected by Beatie’s argument, immediately, but also, later?’ In watching the scene play from different angles, you experience different emotions and attitudes as the large ensemble fills the stage.

Brett, our fight director, and Kate, our movement director work with the actors this week. Brett choreographs the slap Mrs. Bryant gives Beatie in the third act. He works concisely, breaking the movement down for Linda and Jess. He positions them so that when Linda’s hand travels back across Jess’ cheek it cuts through the point of focus for each of the three angles of the stage which the audience will see it from. Ideally, from nowhere in the house will it be possible to see a gap between Linda’s hand and Jess’ cheek as we hear the sound of a slap. Brett shows Jess that after she makes the nap (the sound of the slap created by her hand) she should follow through swiftly putting her hand to her face, as if responding to pain. The audience, Brett explains, will only register that she has created the noise, by clapping, if they see the evidence of it. By paying attention to both the lead-up to and the aftermath, he creates a short sharp burst of an attack that tells the story realistically.

Kate, the movement director, is also working on another key story-telling moment in the relationship between Beatie and her mother. The dance at the end of Act Two is a moment of joy and abandon for Beatie, with Mrs. Bryant also enjoying her daughter’s free-spirited, youthful energy.
Kate works with Jess towards a dance that feels spontaneous and unchoreographed. Arnold’s suggestion of the dance being a mixture of the Cossack and the hornpipe is investigated for steps that might be incorporated. They discuss the feeling of music making you want to dance, and what that feeling is immediately before you do anything, which Kate says is referred to as pulsation in choreography. She identifies how the fashionable dances of the time, to skiffle and rock and roll, would influence Beatie, potentially in her moving from the lower back and hips, but also how abandon and elation, also feel like they come from the chest, in an open gesture. The dance has a specific relationship to the text. It builds as it is interjected with dialogue. We identify this structure, so that Jess can go away and work on some ideas alone, before bringing it to the scene.

By the end of the week, we have worked through the play for the second time fully on its feet. We run long sections with a few notes, which allows momentum to build, enables the actors to run their lines and action together as much as possible and to keep a clear idea of their individual tracks. The sketch begins to be filled in with greater detail, with the story elucidated through images, of people and objects. James responds ‘let’s check that out’ to any offer or suggestion. This allows for the actors to have an instinctual map of their action, as it feels that it comes from them; as Linda suggests, that is why it’s called ‘learned by heart’ and not ‘by head’. However, ideas are edited, and action streamlined. Often we learn that it can be stiller, or slower. Sometimes, it’s about making sure that it isn’t convoluted or telling the wrong story about relationship or biography. The moments in between text are as important as the dialogue. The line from I’m talking about Jerusalem springs to mind: ‘“Words are bridges” he wrote, “to get from one place to another”. Wait till he gets older and he learns about silences – they span worlds.’

Beyond text, the visual poetry of the play is sometimes startling. In our final session for the week, we work the sequence where Mother Bryant mops the floor after her daughter’s bath, as Beatie sits examining her reflection in a handheld mirror. It is a moment of subtle but brilliant insight into parent/child relationships, coloured by the empathy with which Arnold draws these easily-caricatured people. It’s a unit that leads to a great argument, between the mother and daughter, about access to culture in working class and rural areas, and it’s underscored by Mendelsohn and Bizet. It makes for very exciting kitchen-sink drama.
Rehearsals have arrived to a point where we are working through acts, putting together units in order that the actors can map the psychological trajectory they are playing with more depth. At points, it is necessary to take away the tasks in order to clarify the thoughts and ideas in the interactions. For example, an argument in Act Two, between Beatie and her mother, and Mr. Bryant, requires that we discuss the individual beats in the text, and give the emotional journey of the characters space to develop.

James sculpts the actors’ work, focussing moments of narrative, defining how long silences last, how stillness works, and the rhythm of the piece as it unfolds. He choreographs beats, and plays with what in the story is foregrounded. In the ultimate act, the actors discover more and more layers of subtext, as we watch this family collectively move through the act’s units – family reunion, anticipation of the stranger’s arrival, bad news, awkward waiting, games, arrival of the letter, and the ensuing fall-out. Throughout this action, the claustrophobia of the room, the circumstances of time of day/year, hunger, and situational discomfort, and of course, of pre-existing relationships are played. Greetings, entrances, exits, side-glances, tea-serving, responses, and ignorances, and finally sitting down to eat, are all mined for how we tell the story actively and thoroughly.

Such work is happening on many levels. The imagery of the piece, and what the audience should be giving attention to any moment, is being created in tandem with the creative team who prepare for technical rehearsals. The designers watch some rehearsals and share ideas with James, bringing the larger production concept to life. More of the actual furniture and props are brought into the room. In production meetings, conversations happen about delineating the rooms of the house and the spaces that the set illustrates. Plans are drafted for how the scene changes will take place, and the crew are fitted for costume to do them. The soundtrack of the era makes it way into our daily work. Penny the dialect coach observes scene work and steers the actors in their continued discovery of their characters’ voice through the adoption of this heavy Norfolk accent. The textures of the play’s world become more immediate. With only one week before we bring it to the theatre, this is a wonderful place to be.

The designers watch some rehearsals and share ideas with James, bringing the larger production concept to life.
Jessica Raine trained at RADA, graduating in 2008. Since then, her extensive stage work has included *Earthquakes in London*, *Harper Regan* and *Rocket to the Moon* at the National Theatre, *Punk Rock* at the Lyric Hammersmith and Manchester Royal Exchange, and *The Changeling* at the Young Vic. Jessica is perhaps best known for playing Jenny Lee in the BBC drama Call the Midwife. ROOTS is Jessica’s first production at the Donmar Warehouse.

What is it about Arnold Wesker’s ROOTS that captured your imagination enough to take on playing the role of Beatie in the Donmar’s production of the play?

I grew up in the countryside and I recognised something instantly in Beatie when I read the play; something about a girl who has the countryside in her, but has moved away to an urban place – and completely fallen in love with someone and followed him there. There is something about the ruralness of Beatie and her intellectual awaking – there were definitely some parallels to my life. It’s very rare that you read a play and recognise something, and I think that’s what it was.
You are entering the third week of rehearsals. Can you talk about the rehearsal process so far and what discoveries you have made about the play?

The first week we did the dreaded read through on the first day, which is great to get out of the way. Then we sat round a table and tore the meat off the play, really discussed it – everyone sharing their thoughts. Then, at the end of that first week, we read the play again, and it was amazing the difference it made having really talked about it – which lines pinged out all of a sudden. On the Monday of the second week we got on our feet and threw ourselves in, which is always terrifying, but I really appreciate that way of directing - where you just get up and do it. I think you find out through doing, particularly with this play, because it is so prop heavy, especially for the lovely Jenny Beales and Ma Bryant who are the matriarchs in control of the domesticity – the cooking and the cleaning – and there’s a lot of it! So, we’ve been sorting all that out. The second week we got through the whole of the play like that, so we’ve got a nice rough sketch. Now we’re going back and looking at things in much more detail.

From your experience of the play in rehearsal so far, what is it about the piece that makes it relevant to an audience today?

I think there is a certain amount of apathy that Beatie, or certainly Ronnie, is railing against, that I can also see in the culture around me – and I’m not exempt from that, I think I have that apathy too. There is a certain amount of frustration – you just want to say, “Do something, for goodness sake just do something”. I think that in politics now there is no clear left, no clear right, and that’s quite frustrating, especially if you are a young person. Not that many people even vote anymore. So I think the piece is really relevant. The end product of the play is Beatie trying to get her family to think. It’s not that they’re stupid, or that the world is stupid, it’s just this apathy and what she sees as a laziness, and this habit of not asking questions. Beatie is actually as guilty of that as everyone else, it’s just the fact that she’s gone to London and has met someone who isn’t and she’s heard him and is parroting him for most of the play; but she doesn’t really understand – which is hard to play, as an actor.

When we first meet Beatie in the opening scene of the play, she has just returned to the rural Norfolk of her youth after a period of living and working in London. As she views her former life through new urban eyes, what ‘backstory’ have you created for her?

A massive backstory. I remember during the first meeting I had with James, I probably spoke more about her life in London, than what we see of her life in the play, because we think that backstory is so important. She’s followed Ronnie to London. We’ve worked out that she is a ‘Nippy’, a Lyons Teahouse Corner Shop Waitress. I see her life as very busy, not much money; I think she lives with Ronnie in a flat in Notting Hill, which is unusual because they are not married, and for the late 1950s that’s quite a thing. But you learn from that that she is such a free spirit and just doesn’t care what people think. She’s just so in love with Ronnie, and she’s discovered sex and she’s discovered life in London. I imagine this girl who hangs out with Ronnie in the pub and at political meetings. Initially I thought she might be quite quiet, because in the play she says, “his friends turn on me and ask me questions that I’m not ready for”. But I think that’s wrong, actually: she’s got such spirit and life in her. I think she really stands her ground, but doesn’t understand what’s going on. So, yes, I’ve got this huge ‘well’ in my head of their life in London together. We’ve got Arnold Wesker’s biography, and I’ve just read Dusty Wesker’s cook-book, which is one of the most useful things you could possibly have for a character, because she was so full of life and joy and generosity. I’ve got a huge, vivid image of their life in London, and I think that’s very important.
As a cast, to what extent have you negotiated the shift in dynamics between Beatie’s relationship with her family prior to her life in London, and her return home?

We worked out that Beatie left home at sixteen, so she’s now twenty-two; she went to work in Norwich for three years and met Ronnie, and she’s followed him to London, where she’s been with him for another two years. I don’t think she’s come home from London that often, because she’s so caught up in her new life. So there’s a certain amount of distance. There are clearly two very strong women in the Bryant household (although we’ve discovered that they are all strong women in the Bryant household!). We think Ma Bryant and Beatie Bryant are both quite argumentative, and Beatie wanted to strike out and have her own life - sixteen is quite a young age to move away. We’ve just been rehearsing the first scene, and I think Beatie loves coming back, and then that thing happens that you slightly regress as soon as you step back into your parents’ house. Which is quite interesting to play, because I think Beatie is a young women, but in the context of the play and the way I’m playing her, she can come across as quite childlike, because she’s in her own home, and picking up comic books; she comments on it herself, “I’m just the same as I always was.” I think it’s a lovely thing. She gets cooked for, and it’s the old home cooking that she really loves. So it’s a great thing to come home, but she’s obviously got this bee buzzing around her head, which is “Ronnie is coming to visit”,

Jessica Raine
and I think she needs to prepare her family for him. I think she knows it's a massive thing that he's visiting her home, and doesn't quite know how she'll react to him when he arrives, or vice versa. So there's this strange, "I don't want you [the family] to embarrass me", thing going on. She's sent for her "pick-up" – her record player – to come to the house, so it's like she's preparing the house, "there will be music and intelligent conversation, and Ronnie won't think I've come from, [in her eyes], an ignorant family". She's nervous of that day coming.

Are there any pivotal ‘break though’ moments for her in the play?

There are several breakthrough moments, but the funny thing about this play is, the less drama there is, the better, because I think Wesker wanted to portray a slice of life – and that's also what attracted me to it: so much of it is in real time. We jump forward two weeks, or a day or two, but when you see it – that's how it is, that's their life. It's not a life of talking about subjects or debating, it's a life of hard work and getting on with things and not talking about your emotions; they have their own ways of dealing with things. Because there is no 'drama', everything has to have an everyday feel about it, so when those breakthrough moments do happen, they are for Beatie, and the family are taking it on board or not. There's a moment where she gives her mother what she thinks is a gift, by saying, look I'll talk you through what I've found through listening to music, so she puts a record on for her mother to try and make her see what she, Beatie, sees in her love of classical music.

The end of the play is the most obvious breakthrough moment because she finally talks with her own brain behind her words, rather than parroting Ronnie. She's had to go the hard way about it, but she finally understands what he's been talking about, and what socialism is, and how important it is. It's amazing the way she'll always try, she's such an optimistic girl; very rarely does she give up – she gets frustrated with her family, but she keeps on going because she loves them so much. I think that is a really important aspect, otherwise it’s a play about a girl who's angry at her family and is berating them – and I’ve learnt through the rehearsal process that this just doesn’t work, because you don’t want to listen to a girl whose berating her family for two and half hours, it would be unbearable! And also it's not fair -they are the way they are. Just putting that love, and that optimism and that joy for food and for life in there really helps all of that. And the last act, when you get the letter from Ronnie - that's a huge breakthrough for Beatie, which the audience watch her go through.

What are the technical challenges of the role?

It’s one of the most technical things I think I’ve ever done. In terms of the dialect certainly, but also in the amount of words that Beatie speaks – it’s such a wordy play. Technically that’s really difficult, but I think what saves it is you never stand there and just say the words – you’re always doing something; you’re making a cake, tidying up, washing up, making a meal. I think that's going to be a massive challenge.

In what ways do you think the production will inspire and engage an audience?

I think it goes back to what attracted me to the play in the first place, of how it relates to a contemporary audience; the characters are so loveable, and the way they are written makes them so real. I can’t really think of plays where they have portrayed rural life so eloquently. And I hope Beatie, finding her voice, will be really interesting to watch, because she’s such a funny girl – she is so up and down in her spirits, as her Mum says. I think it's just such a fascinating journey that she goes on; and the question of apathy that she’s trying to raise with her family. It's up to each individual character - and we haven’t got there yet – as to whether or not they take on board what she’s saying. I hope the production will provoke people to walk away and ask questions.
A conversation with designer Hildegard Bechtler

Hildegard Bechtler is an award-winning costume and set designer. Born and raised in Stuttgart, she moved to London in the 1970s and has been working there ever since. She has created designs for numerous plays on the London stage. In 2011 she won the Olivier Award for Best Costume Design for her work on the National Theatre revival of After the Dance.

Hildegard has worked for all the major opera houses around the world, most recently The Makropulos Case at the 2012 Edinburgh International Festival/Opera North and The Damnation of Faust at English National Opera, De Vlaamse and Palermo. She also won the 2009 Australian Green Room Award for Best Opera Design for Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk at Sydney Opera House.
As a designer, what was it about the play, ROOTS that inspired you to work on the production?

A lot of the reasons why you want to work on a production have to do with the relationship you have with the director, because in a way, you don’t choose the play, the director and the play come to you. I might not have wanted to do ROOTS with another director, but I certainly wanted to do it with James! The challenge was doing it here, in the Donmar, because it is really a proscenium stage play; you’ve got two kitchens, and you should be able to see through a window, into a garden, but because of the nature of the play, the scenic elements weren’t that interesting to us anyway, which is why James was keen to do it here. It was the intimacy of the audience sitting very close to the daily grind that punctuates the rhythm of the play that was key for us. The words are rhythmically linked to the action, much more so than in other plays. That’s how I read it - I thought the action was driving the play. We stayed away from artifice in terms of ‘sets’; not to use a set was the starting point, to put a floor onto earth and lino on top, and then to layer this with carpet to indicate the change of interior locations. For us, it was about the floor, because the audience look down on the floor at the Donmar – that’s what you’ve got, you haven’t got any flying, any wing space or even a storage area. You also have a back wall and a wonderful space with the audience intimately close to the action.

Wesker is very specific about the play’s setting in his stage directions. To what extent is this both a creative opportunity and a creative challenge for you as a designer?

In the end, putting a few items into an empty space is just as difficult as creating an elaborate set. The simplest designs can be the most difficult. But the Donmar is a very naked space; the actors can’t hide, and, as the designer, I can’t hide either. One of the challenges is the scene changes, because the demands of the play require you to change the setting completely,
twice. In between Acts One and Two, you have to change a range for a cooker, because there is electricity in the second kitchen; there also has to be a source of water coming from the outside into the second kitchen, because Beatie has a bath in Act Two and the water has to come from the right place to fill it, and you have to have a drain as well, to get rid of the bath water. The fact that all of this is so precisely asked for in the play is challenging you to make sure that you move from a cottage that has no amenities, to one that has electricity and cold water. You realise when you watch the play and observe the Mother, the brilliant Linda Bassett, that all she does is washing up, cooking, cleaning, even bringing the water in from outside to heat for the bath. It’s shocking to see how tiring the physical work is, and there’s no time left for anything else.

As we speak, the production has just had its first preview. Is there anything that you want to adjust or work on before the opening night?

One of the things that I’m very happy about is that ROOTS is the complete opposite to the other show that I’ve designed at the Donmar, TRELAWNY OF THE WELLS. That had a very theatrical treatment of the space; building a proscenium within what is essentially a studio theatre. I’m enjoying that contrast. There is a small staircase that is built into the corner of the Donmar Space, which I’m very happy about because it takes me back to my own memories of staying in country cottages. There is something about the low beam across the whole space which says that these are low rooms, and then this tiny staircase tucked in the corner is really the only bit of set, but it’s so comfortable there and is used beautifully by James and the actors. If I had another chance to go back to the drawing board, I would have linked that corner to the action, and made it more of an interior with a larder, putting wallpaper directly onto the Donmar wall. In scenic terms, I could have made a little ‘reality’ corner, but it’s too late to do that now!

How would you describe the job of a designer?

I have been a designer for many years, but it has never seemed like a job, not once. To be able to have an on-going dialogue about text or music – I design quite a lot of Opera – is wonderful. Then, to slowly start tackling an empty black space with form and colour, and to add to the storytelling is fascinating. I welcome being given the chance to do a great variety of design. At the beginning of my career, for some reason I was very committed to only doing very ‘highbrow’ work; I’ve gradually ventured out into some lighter pieces, which are just as demanding. You treat every piece of work you do with the same discipline really, and every piece has its own challenges. When I designed the musical Top Hat, I had to take the production into thirty-six different locations while meeting the music to the second; in Opera the conductor can be very forgiving if there is a delay. You have to think differently for each job. There are so many different avenues you can go down in terms of research too, and I love any excuse to buy mountains of books as reference for my research! My next project is designing an American play. I’ve just come back from Los Angeles, and I felt inspired to photograph everything on my morning walk to the theatre - my research material was suddenly all there in front of me. When a design project has taken hold, you look around you with that in mind, and you learn to really see things. This playtime and dreamtime is wonderful. The job is also about the combination of having a knowledge of architecture and a feeling for colour – because colour is a signal for a lot of things emotionally. The most wonderful part of the job though is the collaboration with a group of creative people. When this collaboration works, there is nothing better. This has certainly happened here, with ROOTS, and of course it is fantastically well cast. You feel a great responsibility that you have given the actors what they need. That’s the most important thing, because they are the ones in the space doing the play. It is their environment, and if it comes back from them, that you’ve given them what they have needed, and have enhanced their performances, then you have done your job.
What are the skills a young person would need to develop in order to become a designer?

You have to be very organised, and be able to keep to deadlines. But I think people skills are the most important thing, because you never know how much of it is down to luck, to why you meet a certain person at a certain time; a benchmark for my work is still one of the first ever theatre jobs that I did all because of a chance meeting. I studied Stage Design at Central Saint Martins, having left Camberwell School of Art where I was going to study painting after a foundation year. I was an older student, a working foreigner in this country in the 1970s, when there were very few French, German or Russian voices – I was much more ‘foreign’ in those days! At Camberwell, I was encouraged to be a painter, but I’d never thought of doing this. It was at this time that I started going to the theatre, and suddenly I thought, ‘I want to do that!’ I didn’t know much about it as a job, other than looking at what another designer had done on the stage – it was that aspect that I was drawn to, making spaces, rather than acting or directing. During my final year at Central Saint Martins, I started collaborating with young directors from the National Film School. Overall, I think what is important is your own excitement for a project, and who you attract to work with you. I don’t know how much of that is just chance, or timing, but it’s the meetings with people that form the direction that you go in.
Section 3: Resources
Spotlight on: Dick Straker, Video Designer

Video design and projection has become an increasingly prevalent element of theatre design over recent years. With the fast moving developments in digital technology, the Video Designer is set to become a growing presence within the production process.

Video Designer Dick Straker has produced projection designs for many seminal theatre productions, as well as for fashion shows, and commercial and architectural projection events. This has included working for the National Theatre, London (where he was Video Consultant from 1999 to 2006), the Royal Opera House, and Gainsbury & Whiting (including four Alexander McQueen shows).
Can you talk about the diversity of the role of the video designer in the production process, using examples from your previous theatre work?

I’ve been a video designer working in theatre for about fourteen years. That includes working at the National Theatre, and in the West End, working on musicals and transfers to New York. So, I’ve worked on large commercial shows, as well as doing more low key, smaller shows, which are actually, by and large, what I prefer. I’ve been fortunate that my career to date has spanned the era of transformation from pre-digital projection design – before video projectors were really viable – to now an almost exclusively digital environment, where everything is projection.

What would you say are the benefits of the digital environment in relation to video design for the theatre?

It’s completely transformed how the artwork – the media – that we project is played, the type of people who can make it, and the speed at which it can be made. When it was shot on film it had to be processed in a lab, as there were no laptops to edit it on. It was much better in some respects, because it meant you had to make a lot of decisions before you did it; there was no going back. Now you can shoot as much as you want, giving as little or as much thought as may or may not be required, and make a lot of changes afterwards. So, it’s a completely different process. I wouldn’t want to put a value judgement on it, and say that one is better or worse than the other, because they’re quite different, but it has made it a lot more flexible. It has also meant that a lot of people who produce media in other ways – such as illustrators, filmmakers, editors, and various types of animators – are also able to get involved; they are essentially working digitally, and digital media can be transferred into the required format for video projection. That has dangers as well, because it also means that media content can be produced without a huge understanding of what actually happens when it comes into a theatre and onto a stage.
What was the career path that led you to become a Video Designer for theatre?

I studied Fine Art, so essentially I’ve always been involved in visual media. I was most interested in mixed media installations while I was doing my Fine Art degree; as well as doing print making and sculpture, I was doing photography and mixed media installations, and became familiar with working in a 3D space. When I left college I was commissioned to do an exhibition where I was approached by somebody who worked in lighting, but mainly in music and nightclubs, and they wanted someone to work with them on projection. Quite by chance I began working with them, and that progressed at a time when film and projection became very popular in clubs, and there were a lot of fashion designers, filmmakers and television producers who were being influenced by club culture in the late 1980s and early 1990s. I got asked to transfer what I was doing in clubs into a lot of other different environments, including TV and outdoor building projection, catwalks, and title sequences for people like MTV; there was a whole range of other things that this led to, including being approached by some theatre producers to do one or two shows, but I didn’t get involved very much in theatre at that time.

What actually happened was I did an outdoor projection with photographers and artists on the exterior of the National Theatre on the South Bank, which subsequently led to working inside the National Theatre on their stages, and starting an early version of their video department. I then had the opportunity to do more work for them, some of which then transferred into the West End, and onto Broadway. I also set up the Video Archive at the National Theatre, and that has only just recently been taken over by NT Live, which has obviously become a lot bigger part of what they do within the organisation.
That must have been really exciting, to have been at the National at the initial stages of the use of video in theatre productions.

Yes, it was the start of theatres having a video department, and increasingly investing in video as part of productions; it wasn’t the beginning of the use of projection in productions, but it was the beginning of a specifically more commonplace use of digital video projection.

What is it about Arnold Wesker’s ROOTS that captured your imagination enough to take on the role of video designer in the Donmar’s production of the play?

It was the simplicity of what James, the director, and Hildegard, the designer, were talking about regarding the video design. A lot of what I’m often asked to do, is to make something that is seductive, or high tech – which video projection can often be associated with – like the special effects in a film; they didn’t want anything like that at all, they just wanted something to fill a period of time when there were going to be some scene changes in the play that are quite slow and time consuming (because of the nature of the play and the story). What it means is producing images that are very specific to the play, and integral to what has happened in the previous scene, and what is about to happen in subsequent scenes. I’m expecting it to be slow moving images of some landscapes that are important places for the characters who inhabit them, and for it to be quite a subtle, photographic and filmic effect. I’m almost trying to create things that I would have done nearly twenty years, when I wasn’t using digital media and fancy editing and playback devices; it’s almost a return to something I would ideally have wanted to do with film and slides – but you no longer have the technology available to do that, so I suppose I’m transposing an older style to a newer medium, and that’s the aspect that interests me. It’s still work in progress and development, so I’m not entirely sure what the outcome will be!
Can you talk about the process so far of how you are collaborating with the creative team to incorporate video design into the production?

It’s early days so far, because I’ve only just met to discuss the project with the lighting designer, Guy Hoare, and the sound designer, Ian Dickinson, both of whom who I’ve worked with before. So there is some degree of familiarity within the team. But initially it’s been discussions with James, the director, who’s very keen for the video projection to give a sense of atmosphere and place in the production. He and the set designer, Hildegard Bechtler, have looked at some images and I’ve discussed those with them. I’ve met Hildegard, and we’ve explored one or two things that I thought were interesting, and one or two ideas that’s she already had in mind; but it all comes down to this strong sense of place and atmosphere that needs to be evoked in the scene changes where projection happens. Last week the whole company and myself visited the actual place where the play is set and spoke to relatives of the playwright, Arnold Wesker – because he is writing about his wife’s family. We went to meet them and they showed us round the locations where the play is set. So, again, that links very strongly with understanding the atmosphere and location of the play. I now have to go back and film the footage in that location, which is on the Norfolk/Suffolk borders. It’s an interesting place, and we will have an authenticity which I think is important in this play.

What are the creative opportunities and challenges of designing video for the Donmar’s stage?

The initial impression I get from the Donmar - who haven’t done a huge amount of video projection before – is that there’s a strong feeling that it wants to support the work of the actors and the writer, and video can often be seen as interrupting that, because video projectors unfortunately introduce a bit of noise into the space, which can be a problem. One of my main concerns is how to get a sufficiently sound proofed projection system, and I’ll be using hired projectors. With the configuration of the set design, all of the action happens in a fairly low ceiled room; there is a lot of height in the Donmar, and Hildegard has put a scrim (a gauze) across the upper level, so that leaves a large, blank space, which is partly what I’m filling. James also wants that to be continuous and flow onto the floor. So, I’m filling the whole back wall and the floor. Because there is a gauze and a ceiling in the way, it has to be broken down into using a number of projectors. So, it’s become a little bit of a patchwork, and that creates challenges, because projectors in themselves aren’t that noisy, but an accumulated effect can be a problem, so we are working to minimise that.

What will be your role be as you move into the technical runs of the production in the theatre itself?

I will be trying my best to put everything together off site, before we arrive at the theatre, and make sure that I and the person installing the equipment have tested everything we need to before then, so we become sufficiently familiar with everything before the short window of the technical runs. One aspect of the Video Designer’s job is to understand the issues of working in a performance space; my preference is always to be involved as far back in the process as I possibly can be – including modifications to the equipment and working with the installers and programmers - so that when you do actually get the short opportunity of trying it out in the space, it’s something that hopefully goes as smoothly as possible.

If young people, or anyone involved in producing theatre, want to incorporate video design into their productions, what basic equipment and skills would they need to get them started?

To begin with, they need to think about the ‘acquisition format’ – which is basically how you acquire the image; that can even be hand drawn and photographed; it could be shot on your mobile phone, as long as you’ve got the means to upload the images. Conventionally you’d use
a video or film camera, often that would be a digital SLR camera, which are very common now, and they shoot film and video to quite a high quality. Most people carry cameras with them in one format or another. I’d encourage people to use something that they are familiar with – that they are already using – but also experiment with other means of acquisition. Don’t be afraid to experiment – people will often have a camera attached to their laptop as well, so they can record things directly onto that. If you are particularly interested in filmmaking and photography, then try and get hold of a quality camera if you can. You then need something to edit it on, again you can do this on a laptop with iPhoto or iMovie. You then need a means of displaying it which can be a screen or a monitor. It doesn’t have to be a projector. You can get relatively cheap small desktop projectors – although the problem is they are not always bright enough – they don’t always have the range of lenses. All of this technology is increasingly surrounding us and available, and relatively cheap. You have to understand the limitations though; if you are working with your camera phone, and iMovie and you’ve got a small desktop projector – because that’s the only equipment you can get hold of - you will need to experiment with all those elements as you are producing things, in order to understand what will and won’t work before you get too far down the line. One problem with projection is that it doesn’t work very well when you have a lot of light, so you have to liaise quite closely with the lighting and set designer to make sure that your screen area is in a relatively dark space, so that you can see it. To summarise, I would encourage people to experiment, and try things out to discover what works – and play to those strengths, because often you can get quite a reasonable result if you understand the things that are working well, then develop and explore those aspects of what you have done.
Practical exercises for use in the classroom

A note on reading the text out loud.

The cast of ROOTS worked with voice coach Penny Dyer over several weeks to learn how to replicate the tones and sounds of the Norfolk dialect. The accent has an energy and muscular drive that is both physical and verbal; think of the visual stimuli of the flat Norfolk landscape, the far horizons, big skies and biting winds. When you initially approach reading the text out loud, remember that it has a robust and determined rhythm that reflects these elements; be bold with it, to capture the essence of this.

Arnold Wesker also offers the following advice about pronunciation in his preface to the published version of the play:

1

When the word ‘won’t’ is used, the ‘w’ is left out. It sounds the same but the ‘w’ is lost.

Double ‘ee’ is pronounced ‘i’ as in ‘it’ – so that ‘been’ becomes ‘bin’, ‘seen’ becomes ‘sin’, etc.

‘Have’ and ‘had’ become ‘hev’ and ‘hed’ as in ‘head’.

‘Ing’ loses the ‘g’ so that it becomes ‘in’.

‘Bor’ is short for neighbour.

Instead of the word ‘of’ they say ‘on’, e.g. ‘I’ve had enough on it’ or ‘What do you think on it?’

Their ‘yes’ is used all the time and sounds like ‘year’ with a ‘p’ – ‘yearp’.

‘Blast’ is also common usage and is pronounced ‘blust’, a short sharp sound as in ‘gust’.

The cockney ‘ain’t’ becomes ‘ent’ – also short and sharp.

The ‘t’ in ‘that’ and ‘what’ is left out giving ‘thaas’ and ‘waas’, e.g. ‘Whass matter then?’

Other idiosyncrasies are indicated in the text of the play itself.

Exercise 1: an introduction to key phrases and ideas in the play

As a class, read through the following phrases taken from the play and discuss their meaning:

‘Well, language is words’ he’d say, as though he were telling me a secret. ‘It’s bridges, so that you can get safely from one place to another. And the more bridges you know about the more places you can see!’

Beatie quoting Ronnie, Act I

‘Christ’ he say ‘socialism isn’t talking all the time, it’s living, it’s singing, it’s dancing, it’s being interested in what go on around you, it’s being concerned about people and the world.’

Beatie quoting Ronnie, Act II
I’m tellin’ you that the world’s bin growing for two thousand years and we heven’t noticed it. I’m telling you that we don’t know what we are or where we come from. I’m telling you something’s cut us off from the beginning. I’m telling you we’ve got no roots.

Beatie, Act III

The apple don’t fall far from the tree – that it don’t.

Mrs Bryant, Act III

Q1 In pairs, choose one of the phrases, and prepare a short improvisation that reflects its meaning. Include your chosen phrase within the improvisation.

Q2 Present your improvisation back to the class and discuss how the ideas at their heart, taken from a play written in the 1950s, can have relevance today.
Exercise 2: working with text

As a class, read through the two extracts from ROOTS printed below. Discuss the following:

Q1 What key ideas and themes emerge from the two extracts?

Q2 What is Beatie’s role in each of the scenes? How does her family respond to her in each extract?

In groups, choose one of the extracts to experiment with practically. Consider the following as you explore the text:

Q3 What are the objectives for each character in the scene you are working on? (For example, what is it they want to achieve by the end of the scene?)

Q4 How do they go about trying to achieve their objective? How successful are they in achieving this by the close of the scene? Note: your character can have a physical objective, as well as an emotional one.

Present your work back to the whole class and consider the following:

Q5 What were the differences and/or similarities in the objectives that were chosen for the characters in each version of extracts 1 and 2?

Q6 What discoveries did you make about the character you played and their relationship to the other characters on stage?
Extract 1, taken from Act One.

Beatie has arrived at her sister Jenny’s house on the start of a two week holiday with her family. She has just shared supper with Jenny and her husband, Jimmy.

Beatie helps collect dishes from table and proceeds to help wash up. This is a silence that needs organizing. Throughout the play there is no sign of intense living from any of the characters – Beatie’s bursts are the exception. They continue in a routine rural manner. The day comes, one sleeps at night, there is always the winter, the spring, the autumn and the summer – little amazes them. They talk in fits and starts mainly as a sort of gossip and they talk quickly, too, enacting as though for an audience what they say. Their sense of humour is keen and dry. They show no affection for each other – though this does not mean they would not be upset were one of them to die. The silences are important – as important as the way they speak if we are to know them. Jimmy starts to sharpen a reap hook.

Jenny What about that strike in London? Whaas London like wi’out the buses?
Beatie Lovely! No noise – and the streets, you should see the streets, flowing with people – the city looks human.
Jimmy They wanna call us territorials out – we’d soon break the strike.
Beatie That’s a soft thing for a worker to say for his mates.
JIMMY Soft be buggered, soft you say? What they earnin’ those busmen, what they earnin’? And what’s the farm workers’ wage? Do you know it, gal? ¹

BEATIE Well, let the farm workers go on strike too then! It don’t help a farm labourer if a busman don’t go on strike, do it now?

JENNY You know they’ve got a rise though. Father Bryant’s go up by six and six a week as a pigman and Frank goes up seven’n six a week for driving a tractor.

JIMMY But you watch the Hall sack some on’em.

JENNY Thaas true, Beatie. They’re such cods, honest to God they are. Every time there’s a rise someone get sacked. Without fail. You watch it – you ask Father Bryant when you get home, ask him who’s bin sacked since the rise.

BEATIE One person they ‘ont sack is him though. They ‘ont find many men’d tend to pigs seven days a week and stay up the hours he do.

JENNY Bloody fool! (pause) Did Jimmy tell you he’ve bin chosen for the Territorials’ Jubilee in London this year?

BEATIE What’s this then? What’ll you do there?

JIMMY Demonstrate and parade wi’ arms and such like.

BEATIE Won’t do you any good.

JIMMY Don’t you reckon? Gotta show we can defend the country, you know. Demonstrate arms and you prevent war.

BEATIE (she has finished wiping up) Won’t demonstrate anything, bor. (goes to undo her case) Present for the house! Have a hydrogen bomb fall on you and you’ll find them things silly in your hands. (searches for other parcels)

JIMMY So you say, gal? So you say? That’ll frighten them other bastards though.

BEATIE Frighten yourself y’mean. (finds parcels) Presents for the kid.

JIMMY And what do you know about this all of a sudden?

BEATIE (revealing a table cloth) Thank you very much, Beatie. Just what I need.

JIMMY You’re not interested in defending your country, Jimmy, you just enjoy playing soldiers.

BEATIE What did I do in the last war then – sing in the trenches?

JIMMY No.

BEATIE Do you know the M.P. for this constituency?

JIMMY What are you drivin’ at, gal – don’t give me no riddles.

BEATIE Do you know how the British Trade Union Movement started? And do you believe in strike action?

JIMMY No to both those.

BEATIE What you goin’ to war to defend then?

JIMMY (he is annoyed now) Beatie – you bin away from us a long time now – you got a boy who’s educated an that and he’s taught you a lot maybe. But don’t you come pushin’ ideas across at us – we’re all right as we are. You can come when you like an’ welcome but don’t bring no discussion of politics in the house wi’ you ‘cos that’ll only cause trouble. I’m telling you. (he goes off)

¹ As part of their research, the cast of ROOTS discovered that the average wage of a bus driver in 1958 was £13 per week, compared with £7 per week for a farm worker.
Extract 2, taken from Act Three

It is Saturday, the day Ronnie is to arrive. The family is assembled in the front room of the Bryant’s cottage, where the table is laden with a spread of food in honour of the anticipated arrival of the guest. The characters in the scene are:

Beatie
Mrs Bryant, Beatie’s Mother
Mr Bryant, Beatie’s Father
Jenny, Beatie’s sister
Jimmy, Jenny’s husband
Frank, Beatie’s brother
Pearl, Frank’s wife

BEATIE (jumping on a chair she thrusts her fists into the air like Ronnie and glories in what is the beginning of a hysterical outburst of his quotes) ‘No one do that bad that you can’t forgive them.’

PEARL He’s sure of himself then?

BEATIE ‘We can’t be sure of everything but certain basic things we must be sure about or we’ll die.’

FRANK He think everyone is gonna listen then?

BEATIE ‘People must listen. It’s no good talking to the converted. Everyone must argue and think or they will stagnate and rot and the rot will spread.’

JENNY Hark at that then.

BEATIE (her strange excitement grows. She has a quote for everything) ‘If wanting the best things in life means being a snob then, glory hallelujah, I’m a snob. But I’m not a snob, Beatie, I just believe in human dignity and tolerance and co-operation and equality and –

JIMMY (jumping up in terror) He’s a communist!

BEATIE ‘I’m a socialist!’

MRS BRYANT Seems to me as though he ent very happy.

BEATIE ‘When I’m with people and I’m singing then I’m happy – when I run away and forget them I’m depressed.’

MR BRYANT (also using a quoting voice) And when his arse itch he’s in agony!
Bibliography and suggestions for further reading

Other plays by Arnold Wesker include:
Arnold Wesker Plays 2: Annie Wobbler; Yardsale; Four Portraits of Mothers; Betty Lemon?; The Mistress; Letter to a Daughter, Methuen Modern Drama (2001)
Wesker’s Social Plays: Denial; When God Wanted a Son; Rocking Horse; The Kitchen, Oberon Books, (2009)
Arnold Wesker, Volume 3: Chips with Everything; The Friends; The Old Ones; Love Letters on Blue Paper, Oberon Books (1980)

Resources that were used for research by the company include:
As Much As I Dare, Arnold Wesker, Century (1994)
Wesker’s Political Plays: Chips with Everything; Their Very Own and Golden City; The Journalists; Badenheim 1939; Phoenix Phoenix Burning Bright, Oberon Modern Playwrights (2010)
A 1950s Childhood: From Tin Baths to Bread and Dripping, Paul Finney, History Press (2009)
Recipes by Kendal Milne, Kendal, Milne & Co. (1950)
Lateral Thinking: A textbook of Creativity, Edward de Bono, Penguin (2009)
The Angry Years: The Rise and Fall of the Angry Young Men, Colin Wilson, Robson Books Ltd (2007)

Bibliography

Edgar, David ‘Out of the kitchen: The roots of Roots’, programme note for the Donmar’s production of ROOTS (October 2013)
Pattie, David Modern British Playwriting: the 1950s, Methuen Drama (2012)
Rebellato, Dan 1956 And All That, Routledge (1999)
Wesker, Arnold Plays 1 The Wesker Trilogy: Chicken Soup With Barley; Roots; I’m talking About Jerusalem, Methuen (2001)
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