



The World

Playwright Mac Wellman: his personal mission impossible is to expose and resist the "onslaught of political lies, right-wing hucksterism and general consumer-society madness" in contemporary American culture.

According to Wellman

A political and linguistic outlaw revels in the theatre of excess

An Interview by David Savran

Mac Wellman has a wicked way with words. In 1990, while enjoying a grant from an embattled and queasy National Endowment for the Arts, he wrote *Sincerity Forever*—a raucous meditation on art, politics, family values and Jesus H. Christ—dedicating the play to Senator Jesse Helms and the Reverend Donald Wildmon, head of the American Family Association, “with my compliments, for the fine job you are doing of destroying civil liberties in These States.”

Later, when Wildmon reprinted a speech from the play in a newsletter, Wellman fired off a letter charging him with violation of copyright, bigotry, willfully misunderstanding the Bible and dressing up “hatred in the language of love.”

Perhaps the most provocative accusation in Wellman’s letter, however, was his insistence upon Wildmon’s “intense hatred of the rich and colorful language of the common people.” All of Wellman’s plays represent veritable orgies of language; stretching grammar to the breaking point, reveling in the sound and texture of words, they turn language, character and dramatic form inside out. Doing for drama what William Burroughs did for the novel, Wellman creates a unique, language-driven *mise-en-scène* that pulverizes the syntax of traditional theatre.

This is not to suggest that his use of language is obscure: It is always an outgrowth—cancerous mutation might be a more accurate metaphor—of “the rich and colorful language of the common people.” And so many of his characters’ speeches represent ingenious appropriations and elaborations of clichés, puns, curses and prayers; lists of often wildly dissimilar names and places; and violent harangues

that morph into a kind of pure poetry. What other playwright could imagine a universe teeming with planets named Plinth, Goethe, Jubilatrix, Bistro, Reddish, Galahad, Wild, Mildred and Dudu? What other playwright would dare populate his plays with space aliens, dancing plates and spoons, vampires, girl huns, mystic furballs and bodacious flapdoodles?

Wellman’s theatre, however, is by no means an arbitrarily designed linguistic curio shop. His 1984 essay, “The Theatre of Good Intentions,” represents a kind of anti-naturalist manifesto in which he attacks the traditional theatre for its manipulation of warm emotions, its impoverished dramatic vocabulary, its fake profundity, its doggedly consistent and well-rounded characters, its fixation on questions of motivation and intention, its habit of explaining evil away and its obsession with victims. It argues that the well-intentioned play succeeds all too well in producing “a perfect and seamless sum-

mation of itself and its own intentions, and nothing else.”

Against this debilitated theatre, Wellman offers a theatre of excess, of deeds rather than motives, of agents rather than victims. Most important, he writes plays that cannot be summarized or translated into another medium. Despite his gleeful rejection of the well-made play, his drama is always a reflection upon theatre itself and is haunted by popular forms—knockabout farce, melodrama, musical theatre and vaudeville—mocking, exploiting, holding them up for examination. Thus *Crowbar* (1990), which takes place in an old Broadway theatre, is a kind of vaudeville show for ghosts—casualties of history—who com-

Olek Krupa and Laura Innes in River Arts Repertory of Woodstock, N.Y.’s 1987 premiere production of Wellman’s *Dracula*, directed by Len Jenkin.



pulsively turn their lives and deaths into grand guignol.

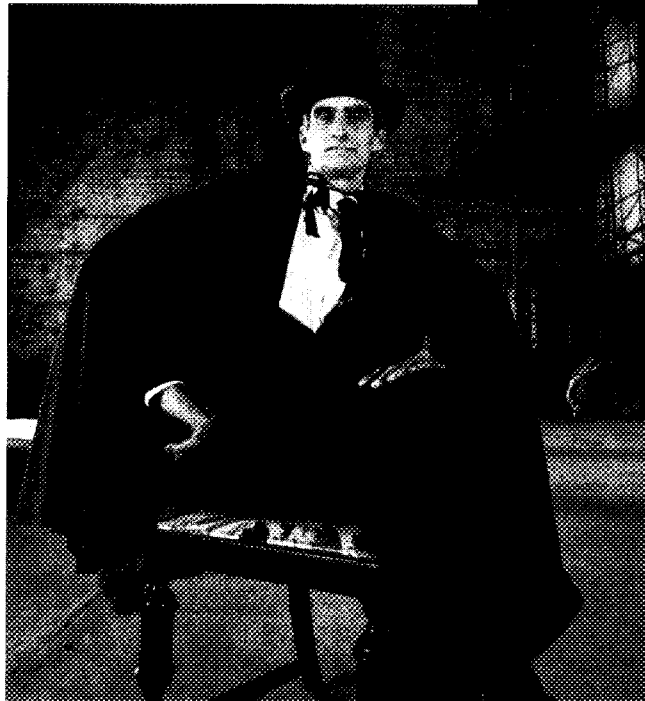
Wellman's agitation for civil liberties and his invention of a new theatre poetry are by no means separate enterprises—his anti-naturalist project represents a deliberate political intervention. Confronting what he calls the “self-destruction of the left,” he attempts to “pursue an edgy, intuitive path to explore the full damage done by the onslaught of political lies, right-wing hucksterism and general consumer-society madness, on the inner person.” His theatre becomes a spur to reimagining American culture, to rethinking the connections between corporate rapine and the politics of deception, between environmental devastation and the loss of community, between art and social critique. Focused on doing rather than being, on acts rather than identities (and implicitly criticizing the ubiquitous identity politics of our time), it never tells an audience what to think or do. Sometimes, as in *Sincerity Forever* (1990) and *7 Blowjob*s (1991), politics is at its very center. More commonly, however, as in *Terminal Hip* (1990) or *FNU LNU* (1997), the political is embedded in a vertiginous reflection on performance, role-playing and the power of language. But in all these plays—and quite literally in *Whirligig* (1988)—Wellman reacts against the asceticism so often associated with leftist art by taking the spectator on an exhilarating ride to the far reaches of outer—and inner—space.

Wellman's most activist play, *Sincerity Forever*, represents both an unmasking of the intolerance and hatred that lie concealed beneath the language of love and a dialogue about the function of art in a time of social crisis. Set in the town of Hillsbottom, it focuses on seven decidedly banal young men and women, dressed in Ku Klux Klan regalia, who pass their time wondering about the meaning of the universe and being deeply sincere. When their bucolic paradise is raided by two enraged Furballs who seem to have been beamed down from the East Village, the good citizens of Hillsbottom find themselves becoming inexplicably possessed—turning homosexual and regurgitating the Furballs' speeches. In the midst of this chaos (clearly an allegory of the right's fears about the corrupting influence of allegedly indecent art), Jesus H. Christ appears, an African-American woman carrying a heavy suitcase. This *dea ex machina* holds a mirror up to an America gone blind and mean: “You swinish, mealy-

mouthed bunch of hypocrites wouldn't know the Lord God of Hosts if he swope down and bit you on the ass.”

DAVID SAVRAN: How did you get interested in theatre?

MAC WELLMAN: It was an accident. I took my junior year abroad—this was 1965—and I was hitchhiking in Europe, outside of the Hague. I got picked up by a woman who yelled at me and said, “You're hitchhiking in the wrong spot, if



Above: Carl Savering, left, and Raphael Parry in Wellman's *Harm's Way* at the Undermain Theatre of Dallas, directed by Katherine Owens.

Left: Kirk Brown in the Cleveland Public Theatre's site-specific production of *Crowbar*, staged in a vacant vaudeville theatre by Damien Gray.

you stay there you'll get arrested.” Her name was Anna-Marie Prins and she ran an experimental theatre company in Amsterdam.

At one point Anna-Marie noticed I had dialogue in the poems I was writing. She said, “Did you ever think of writing plays?” I said, “No, I don't know how to do that.” She said, “There's somebody coming from Dutch radio tomorrow. If you have an idea, we'll try to convince him.” I thought this was an opportunity, so I made a list of things I thought should go in a play. I knew nothing about what I was doing. The guy commissioned me, and that's how my first play got written. So for a few years my work was all radio drama, translated into Dutch—a language I don't speak.

I moved to New York in 1975, but it took me four or five years before I really found my place. I was writing plays that I would characterize as poetical plays—ghostly historical dramas, almost no connection

to contemporary theatre. But I went to see a lot, rather than go to a drama school, which I think was the right thing to do.

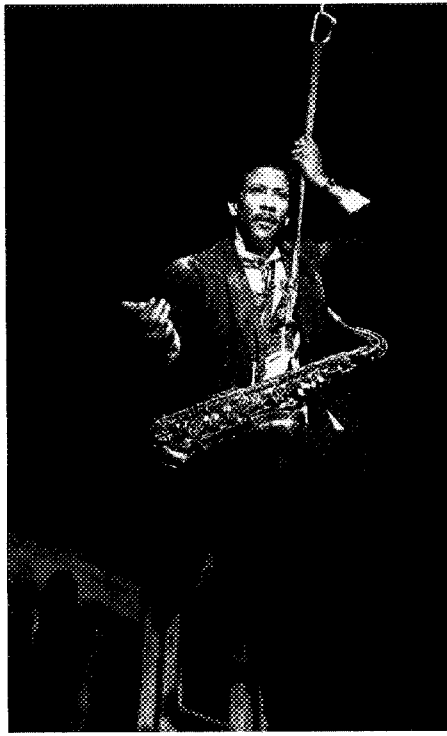
What work was particularly important for you then?

I went to see everything. I saw the last production of the Open Theater. I saw the Performance Group's *Tooth of Crime*. Mabou Mines was really getting going then, and Richard Foreman, with *Rhoda in Potatoland*. It was an exciting time in New York theatre, and those works made a huge impact on me. Something like *B. Beaver* is still, for me, almost a perfect theatre piece. That and *The Lost Ones*—another Lee Breuer piece, which was a Beckett adaptation.

So you really didn't get interested in theatre until you started seeing experimental work. That's true. I was more interested in poetry, although I think there are always instances or occurrences in life which pre-



KATHERINE OWEN



TOM BRAZIL

Reg E. Cathey in En Garde Arts of New York's premiere production of *Crowbar*, which inaugurated the renovation of the long unused Victory Theatre on 42nd Street. Richard Caliban directed.

gods. It always has terrified authorities and the better class of religion.

As I was reading some of your plays, they reminded me of Jacobean tragedy, in terms of their verbal and spectacular excess. I think that's one of the great periods, because the language as we know it was being invented by all these people. Shakespeare was only the smartest of a very smart bunch.

That's precisely what you're doing in your own work—inventing a vocabulary. I think this is what we do in life. There's a very American notion that one's life is a performance. So self-invention goes along with it. The hardest thing for me as a playwright in the early days was to figure out how to be a poet and a writer for theatre at the same time—to write in a way that involved an interrogation of language, and also was germane to what was going on in the world. If art's not contemporary, then it's geezer theatre; it's embalmed from the start.

It seems to me that your plays are never about illustrating or advocating a fixed political agenda. Rather, it's as though you're using language to disrupt every kind of programmatic politics.

Yes, I think I am. Partly it's a deconstructive thing. Let me explain: The language of plays like *7 Blowjob*s or *Sincerity Forever* is derived from earlier pieces like *Cellophane* and *Terminal Hip*, which came out of a totally different strategy. I was frustrated as a writer then, so I set myself a little task: to write badly. I wanted to see what would happen, how far I could go in breaking rules. So I wrote a page of legal pad every day for two and a half years. To my great surprise—and I wasn't trying to make any sense or tell a story—I found certain patterns emerging. I found a sort of lofty poetic line developing that reminded me of Whitman. I found that a lot of clichés, or dreadful expressions that I would make up that were like clichés, were more speakable than the supposedly literate stuff I was writing. They came trippingly off your tongue. There's a lot more bad language in the world than good language.

Then I also found there was a spiritual dimension, a yearning that came through for a better America, for transcendence, a

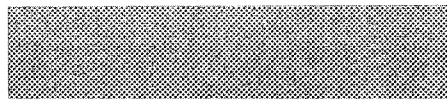
dispose people to like theatre. For me it was my father dying when I was a young boy. We had one of these classic Midwestern attics full of stuff, including a Punch and Judy set. I remember those figures being quite horrifying, which they are. I played with them until they fell apart. I think that was really a constitutive event—meaningless in terms of its actual content, but it predisposed me to theatre dementia later on.

There's a kind of luscious materiality of language in your work which is very different from the other people you've mentioned.

Those people—and a lot of people who are exploring language now—showed me that theatre can be excessive. The mainstream theatre I knew was naturalistic and realistic in a way I found claustrophobic and dull; it was not a theatre of excess, except for the musicals. It was a theatre of penury and littleness and paucity and deprivation—spiritually, emotionally, ethically and theatrically. A lot of us responded against that. Why do theatre if it is so tame? I'm stunned, even to this day, by how many people I respect think that theatre is about cutting your losses, trying to present things believably and sequentially in a rational way. As far as I'm concerned that's the last thing to put onstage.

I find your notion of excess so interesting because I connect it, both in and out of the theatre, with pleasure.

Exactly. It's a very, very important aspect of the theatre that often gets short shrift. I was on a theatre panel a few years ago in Los Angeles organized by Audrey Skirball-Kenis Theater Projects with all these major playwrights. At the end, we all had to explain what we thought theatre was for. And all these people were saying the right things—that theatre was important politically because one had to be morally involved in the issues of the day. At the end they got to me. I said I was



"I was in theatre because it was a low, sleazy, discredited art form that had to do with sex and things of the Devil."

in theatre because it was a low, sleazy and discredited art form that had to do with sex and things of the Devil, and that I got into theatre for the same reasons that most people do, to meet partners and sexy people and low-life types who were having a good time when no one else in town was. The moralism of contemporary theatre worries me a lot. Theatre respects no

reaching for the stars even though you have your feet in clay. There was a political dimension that came up, too, a sense of betrayal. And class envy, too, which began to really permeate the writing. Just in the language, the voices began to become acutely aware that they were lower class and not as good as somebody else. I then began to use that to make political statements. Of course, to write about these things indirectly is more interesting than expressing my opinions, because in this society one's head becomes full of junk.

You talked about your approach to politics as deconstructive. So often I'm reading something of yours, and I think, *Who is speaking?* It's as though all of your characters are haunted by a culture they don't understand and can't control.

As I said earlier, nobody knows anything. People just say things. Go out onto the street and listen to people talk—it's amazing. I think the relationship of people to speech in a country like this is different than in a European culture. I don't agree with everything the deconstructionists say, because I don't think language is meaningless. But context and social construction are much more complicated in our society. It's why I'm interested in journalism, because that shows our obsession with representations of ourselves. I watch TV and I get angry. Same thing with the newspaper. Do I have a doctrine or a set of beliefs that I want to replace all that with? No.

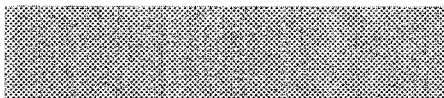
Is your own obsession with different media related to the many characters in your plays who are obsessed and driven? So many of them seem mesmerized or possessed—by the past, by other characters, not to mention their own fears, desires and hatreds.

I am interested in people in a possessed state. Kierkegaard said that you can tell you're becoming a demon when you start to dwell upon unlimited possibilities. I think Americans are extraordinarily demonic. We don't understand restrictions of any kind. That operates in every cultural activity I can think of. I acknowledge a demonic attribute in myself. I am part of this morass of ill-thought-out social constructs and general lunacy.

Tell me about your process of writing. How does a play usually begin?

I don't generally say, "I want to write a play about the problem of such-and-such." It's more a question of ideas or images that puzzle me. I wrote an early play called

Harm's Way because I always wanted to write a play in which everybody was angry, just to see what that would be like. I'm always more interested in negativity, because there's a lot more individual energy and associations buried in places you don't want to look. Sometimes I'm interested in a word. I was interested in the word *harm*, which seems to me a more appropriate way to describe social conditions, like violence, that I wanted to deal with. There's violence in love, in building; in nature it's called the sublime. But the concept of harm seemed more interesting. Sometimes I start with an image. One play began with an



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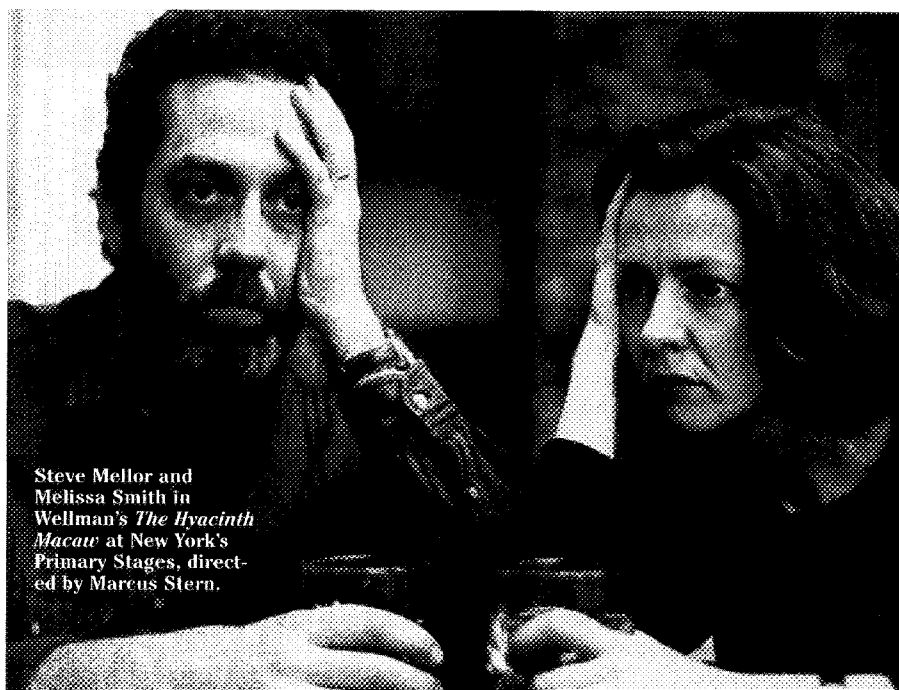
image of two people playing cards at a card table, only all three objects were floating above a river and that was enough for me to write the play. Lately I've been starting more with stories. *Second Hand Smoke* and the play that follows have been obsessed with how awful the workplace is, so I construct the worst workplace and the worst boss in the world.

For me right now the two main weaknesses with American drama are, first, that it's phony—overly dramatic in unconvincing ways. Second, it's so sentimental. The trouble with sentimentality is not that it's silly or emotional, it's that it's a lie. And yet if you write a play, it almost *has* to be sentimental—everybody from the producer to the actors will want you to have a happy ending. They joke about it, but it's true.

I usually try to make some initial outline of all I know about the play. After I make a few notes, generally, I just let the thing sit for a long time. When I finally do write the play, I usually write as fast as I can. I try to get out ahead of the schema so I'm not filling in the blanks. I always think I write better when I don't know where I am, because then it's not the first most obvious thing that comes to mind, but the second and third and fourth—the things that you don't know you knew.

Free association?

It's more about being disciplined about association so you can get past the things you always think about. You get stuck in patterns—all this junk we're saturated with. As I grow older I am less easy on myself, so I can tell now when I'm treading water, when I recycle things from other plays. When you've been writing for a while you should be harder on yourself. The hardest thing when you *start* to be a writer is creating the ego that allows you to be a writer in the first place, because writing plays is not a natural thing. Making theatre is natural, but



Steve Mellor and Melissa Smith in Wellman's *The Hyacinth Macaw* at New York's Primary Stages, directed by Marcus Stern.

ANDREW LEVINE

writing involves kinesthetic things with words and different senses—synesthesia. If you do not create the ego for that, it's overwhelming. The danger comes if you get a little too comfortable with that ego, if you turn into a pompous fraud or something worse. So you have to be able to inhabit that space, and then leave it so you can deal with family and lovers and other people.

Freeing the unconscious is only a small part of it?

I consider myself more of a constructor. I'm always trying to escape my nature,

need some of it to create narratives, but you need far less than many American dramatists think. The problem with motivation and foreshadowing is that if you do it in a straight-ahead way, the drama is always happening elsewhere. And it reduces all characters to something that may be plausible intellectually, but it's not very satisfying.

Do you think of your work as being autobiographical?

Yes—in the Wittgensteinian sense. Since it comes from me, it is. When a writer is young, there is a tendency to write about

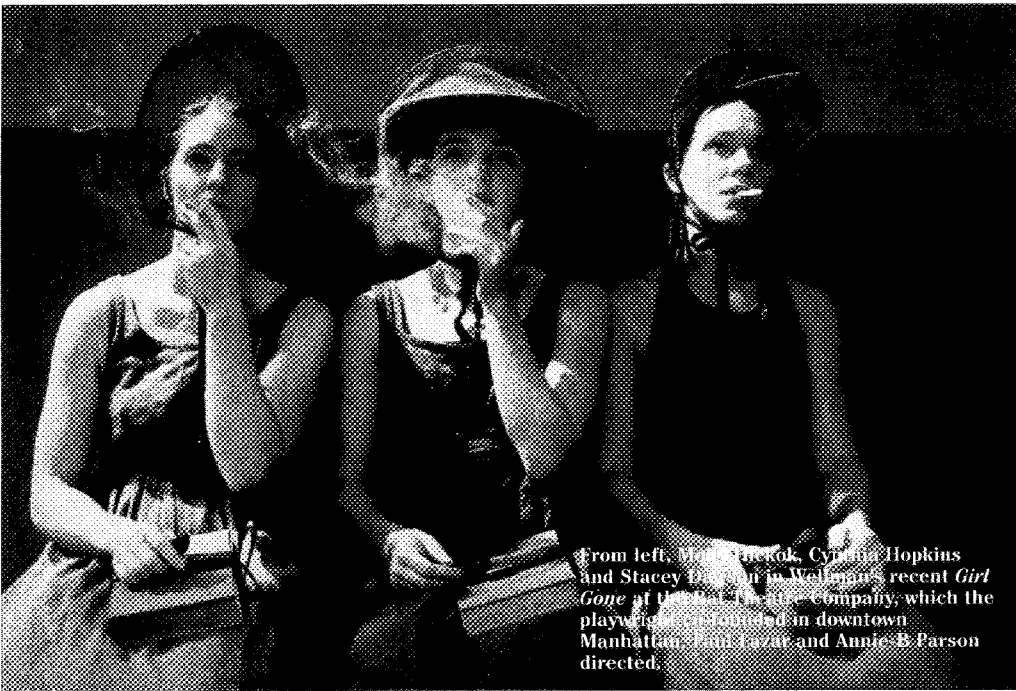
Simon Callow was talking about theatre at the TCG conference two years ago and why he was involved with it. He said, "For me it's not the great stories, or even the great language or the great drama—it's great characters who can will exactly contradictory things at the same moment. That to me is what theatre is about." I think he's right, because that's the way we experience our lives in a historical context. The only way to experience your life in any kind of meaningful sense is with some notion of historical experience. But we live in a country that has very silly notions of what history is. History's supposed to be somehow edifying or make sense or lead to something, but it doesn't. What's important about it is that it's particular and strange.

It seems to me that theatre since the 1960s has been defined as an oppositional cultural formation, opposed both to TV and film and to the social and political status quo. It seems to me that your work participates very clearly in that dynamic. Does this make your work subversive?

I'm not sure theatre is all that oppositional. I am tired of the "playwright goes to Hollywood" play: *Hollywood is evil, and I was corrupted there, and I've come back a sadder but wiser man*. It just seems silly because New York theatre seems just as corrupt, just as blockheaded as Hollywood, and just as much part of the system. So I'm not sure I'm particularly subversive. What interests me more is interrogating contemporary reality as I see it, interrogating theatre itself. That might be subversive. I don't flatter myself that I'm achieving anything profound. I find the theatre as a whole to be dominated by a culture of theatre, which tries to say things that are provocative, but mostly ends up being shrill, knee-jerk and self-congratulatory.

In the introduction to your plays you describe yourself as a cheerful pessimist. Does that characterize your feelings about the theatre?

Yeah, I think so. I like the theatre. I think it's dominated by a culture that's mediocre, that's careerist in petty ways, not even in intelligent ways. I used to think I could change it. Now I realize I'm not going to change it at all. On the other hand, there are a lot of really wonderful people in it and you can do certain things. I can pretty much go my own way and people will leave me alone. That's a good place to be. **AT**



From left, Debra Fritsch, Cynthia Hopkins and Stacey Lee, in Waldman's recent *Girl Gone at the End of the Company*, which the playwright premiered in downtown Manhattan last fall and Annie B. Parson directed.

TORRY WALKER

always wanting to write in a slightly different way. I think my work has changed more than most of my friends' over the years, so I'm impatient with it; I try one thing and then try another. I'm not very romantic about it; I think it's just work.

In a lot of your work I get a sense of a gulf or chasm between text and subtext. It's crucial in your work to realize that it can't be played the way American Method actors play subtext, because that would just destroy it.

A better way to think of it is that these plays are somehow the subtext for some absent realistic play. I just dispense with writing the text altogether and write the subtext because it's more interesting. Actually you do get a subtext, but it's not understood in terms of motivation. Motivation is always boring to me. You

things that are close. But you have to be careful about that because you can actually use up your experience. When you write a play you use up things, in a way that's different from other kinds of writing. People who know me will be able to read my experience easily. I never talk about it. Usually it's in the details—sometimes it's a word or phrase that's been going through my head for 25 years that means something to me, and it gets stuck and it illuminates the piece for me. I think I'm far less autobiographical than most American playwrights. The older I get, the less I think that self-expression is among my goals.

I'm curious about your understanding of history, because it seems to me that all of your plays recycle historical detritus in one way or another.