

ROYAL COURT

Chicken Soup with Barley

by Arnold Wesker



BACKGROUND PACK

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1. ABOUT THE PRODUCTION

The Royal Court Theatre presents

Chicken Soup with Barley

By Arnold Wesker

Chicken Soup with Barley was first performed at the Belgrade Theatre, Coventry on 7 July 1958 and subsequently at the Royal Court Theatre, London, on 14 July 1958.

The complete Wesker Trilogy was first presented at the Royal Court Theatre, London, in the summer of 1960.

Chicken Soup with Barley was revived at the Royal Court Jerwood Theatre Downstairs, Sloane Square, London on Thursday 2 June 2011.

Cast in order of appearance

Sarah Kahn	Samantha Spiro
Harry Kahn	Danny Webb
Monty Blatt	Harry Peacock
Dave Simmonds	Joel Gilman
Prince Silver	Ian Gillman
Hymie Kossof	Steve Furst
Cissie Kahn	Alexis Zegerman
Ada Kahn	Jenna Augen
Young Ronnie Kahn	Charlie Cancea, Sonny Ryan
Ronnie Kahn	Tom Rosenthal
Bessie Blatt	Rebecca Gethings

Director	Dominic Cooke
Set & Costume Designer	Ultz
Lighting Designer	Charles Balfour
Sound Designer	Gareth Fry
Music	Gary Yershon
Dialect Coach	Penny Dyer
Casting Director	Amy Ball
Assistant Director	Monique Sterling
Assistant Set Designer	Mark Simmonds
Assistant Costume Designer	Kristen Dempsey
Production Manager	Paul Handley
Stage Manager	Ben Delfont
Deputy Stage Manager	Fran O'Donnell
Assistant Stage Manager	Laura Draper
Stage Mngmnt Placement	Jon Snowdon
Costume Supervisor	Jackie Orton
Set built by	Object Construction
Set painted by	Richard Nutbourne

2. ABOUT THE WRITER

ARNOLD WESKER

Arnold Wesker, F.R.S.L., born London 1932, has written over 45 plays, the most well known being the Wesker Trilogy, *Chips with Everything*, and *Shylock*, most of them performed worldwide. He has written two opera librettos, published volumes of fiction and non-fiction, poetry, a book for young people, and an autobiography *As Much As I Dare* (1992). His work has been translated into 17 languages. Wesker may be unique in having had 16 world premieres abroad.

In the last seven years he has written five new plays and other works, including his first novel, *Honey*, published by Simon & Schuster 2005. In 2008 he published his first volume of poetry *All Things Tired of Themselves*. In that year he also completed a commission, to celebrate 75 years of the BBC World Service, for a radio play, later adapted for the stage – *The Rocking Horse Kid*. He has just completed his latest play *Joy and Tyranny*. The recipient of honorary degrees and prizes, Wesker's vast archives have recently been purchased by Texas University. He was knighted in the 2006 New Year's Honours List for services to world drama.

Extract from Observer article by Rachel Cooke, Sunday 22 May 2011

Arnold Wesker: 'I've never understood my reputation for grumpiness'

After decades on the sidelines, this great British playwright is back on the national stage



Playwright Arnold Wesker in his back garden in Hove. Photograph: Andy Hall for the Observer

...We discuss the two revivals. I understand entirely why the National is to

stage *The Kitchen*, Wesker's first play: it chimes resonantly with our obsession both with restaurants (it is set in one), and the issues surrounding cheap immigrant labour. But the Court's choice of *Chicken Soup with Barley* – the first play in the trilogy that also includes *Roots* and *I'm Talking About Jerusalem* – is more curious. It's about the emotional collapse of an East End Jewish family from 1936 to 1956, a disintegration that is largely provoked by the loss of its members' political faith. The Kahns are communists, and the play traces their relationship with the party from the high of Cable Street, when working men and women successfully forced Mosley's parading fascists into retreat, to the low of Soviet tanks rolling into Hungary. On the page – I've never seen it staged – it could not be more of a period piece if it tried. The world it conjures has entirely disappeared. The East End is Asian now, not Jewish, and I've never even met a communist. Plus, it's so very talky. (Wesker's friend, Margaret Drabble, once told him that there is never any sex or violence in his plays – and reading this one, you do see what she means.) Hasn't the heat rather gone out of it in the 53 years since it was first staged?

"I don't know, is the answer," he says, mildly. "But it was done [in Nottingham] five years ago, and it seemed to make an impact. So I must assume that there is still something in it that touches people. The audience does not need to know in its bones exactly what it was like to be a communist or an anti-communist: the argument between Sarah [the mother, and the only member of the family to retain her faith] and Ronnie [the son, who loses his completely] spells it out. They feel it passionately, and that passion and antagonism will communicate itself. I am hopeful. Dominic [Cooke, the artistic director of the Royal Court] wrote to me the other day, saying how everyone is loving doing it, how he's coming to admire the main thrust of the play more and more. So..."

Of all Wesker's work, it is *Chicken Soup with Barley* that is the most autobiographical. Sarah and her wastrel husband, Harry, are thinly disguised portraits of Wesker's own parents, Leah and Joseph, who were the children of immigrants from eastern Europe and who worked as tailoring machinists. They brought up Arnold and his sister Della, first in rented rooms in Fashion Street, Spitalfields, and then in a new council flat in Hackney. Both were devout communists. "My father wasn't much committed to anything [Joseph, like Harry, found it hard to stick at any job for long], but in argument, he was a communist. My mother, though, was deeply concerned about justice and good behaviour and honour, and she felt you had to be a communist to be that, or rather, she felt that those who weren't communists were frequently unpleasant people." Was Wesker proud of their politics? "No, I took them for granted, though I enjoyed all the gatherings: the May Day demos, being carried shoulder-high through Hyde Park, all the banners."

Like the Kahns, the family was poor. "But I don't remember it in terms of suffering. The only time there wasn't something to eat – this was one of my proudest moments – I sold my stamp collection for three pounds and 10 shillings and we bought fish and chips from Alf's fish shop on Brick Lane. That said, my mother did once have to go to the Jewish Board of Guardians to get help. They made her feel awful, but they did help." So, in

spite of their politics, his parents held fast to their religion? "No. They were completely atheist. But they were also – this is difficult for gentiles to understand – fiercely Jewish."

The Wesker parents were not bookish. It was his older sister, Della, and her fiancé, Ralph, who gave him his first reading list – Orwell, Ruskin, Morris, and those now all-but-forgotten novelists, Howard Spring and AJ Cronin. "I loved and admired Ralph, and wanted to please him, so when he was conscripted into the RAF during the war, I wrote him these dreadful poems." At this point, though, Wesker wanted to be an actor, not a writer. "I joined an amateur dramatics group, for which I wrote a play called *And After Today*. It was about my spinster aunts. I was exploring the nature of spinsterhood. I must have been about 16, which made me a great authority." The group never staged this searing early work but, later on, he was able to cannibalise it for *Chicken Soup*.



3. SYNOPSIS OF CHICKEN SOUP WITH BARLEY

The play spans twenty years - 1936 to 1956 - in the life of the communist Kahn family: SARAH and HARRY, and their children, ADA and RONNIE and a whole host of activist friends.

We first meet the family and their 'comrades' in 1936, on the day of the anti-fascist protests in the East End. There is a fever of excitement, anticipation and resolution, as the comrades prepare to march against the BUF. Against the dusky colours of this dingy flat, father Harry brandishes a Communist flag, illuminating the room with its striking red. But from the outset of the play, we observe the chinks and complexities in their political ideologies. Dave is 'a pacifist really', but considers joining the International Brigades to fight fascism in the Spanish Civil War. Young Monty is full of anger against the BUF, hungry for the fight, but doesn't understand exactly what he's fighting for. And Harry spends most of the march sheltering at his mother's house, drinking tea. All are unhappy with their lot, but seem increasingly unable to organise themselves into action. 'You have to start with love', Sarah offers, 'How can you talk about socialism otherwise?' Despite accusations of political ignorance, Sarah is the only character that remains politically active and animated throughout the play.

Interestingly for a 1950s play, *Chicken Soup* gives the strongest roles to its women: wife and mother Sarah is our protagonist; her perspective drives the play and its political debate. Sarah provides domestic warmth and chicken soup-nourishment to her comrades, always looking after her house guests and over-feeding them around her table. But the solidarity that we witness in the first act turns sour: as the family begins to fragment, symbiotically, so do political allegiances. Gradually, we learn of Harry and Sarah's marital unhappiness; daughter Ada then loses heart, becoming an embittered intellectual; and son Ronnie pities his failure of a father, too apathetic and cowardly to fight.

One by one, the comrades become disillusioned by their former values: they cannot maintain faith either in each other or in socialism, as Wesker suggests a correlation between political and human strength. The *community* of comrades is lost: in the final act, Harry comments that he doesn't know his neighbours; and, despite her yearning for company, Sarah's visitors pay only dutiful visits. Towards the end of the play, having nursed her debilitated husband to bed, Sarah returns to a bare living room and takes in its empty expanse through a slow breath. Like her emotional loneliness, Sarah is politically isolated in her constant ambition: playing a game of cards at the table, she begins to complain about the NHS, but is hushed by the others - no one is listening anymore.

The ending is tinged with dissolution, tempered by hope. Harry exclaimed in act one, 'Show people what Communism means and they see life, a future', but as he predicted, 'not in our lifetime'. Sarah cries to her now indifferent son that he must remember her politics, to rescue her life from vanity; almost heroically, she protests that just because her Communist ideologies failed doesn't mean they are untrue. In a final, rousing monologue, Sarah simply concludes, 'If you don't care, you die', just like the broken spirit of her husband and daughter.

-Monique Sterling, Assistant Director

4. ABOUT THE SET DESIGN

In approaching the set design for *Chicken Soup with Barley*, the designer Ultz and director Dominic Cooke felt it was very important to create authentic representations of the Kahn's flats in the 1930's, 1940's and 1950's. Because the play is semi-autobiographical, they used Arnold Wesker's autobiography as a starting point for researching the way the flats would have looked at the time. Arnold Wesker also provided some pictures of his two homes during these periods. In addition, the director and designer were lucky enough to gain access to the flat Wesker lived in on Fashion Street in the East End of London as well as the building in Weald Square, Clapton which Wesker's family moved to in 1942. This detailed research allowed Ultz to create a set that was very true to the real places Wesker lived in his childhood and young adult life.



Model Box of *Chicken Soup with Barley* Set Design (Act One) © Ultz 2011

Your Decision

In the Royal Court's current production of *Chicken Soup with Barley*, the First Act is set in an attic, to reflect the setting in Wesker's original script. In the first production in 1958, the director John Dexter decided to set Act One in a basement flat. Compare the photo of the 2011 set on the previous page with this archive photo of the set in 1958. With a partner, try to decide the following issues:

1. Why do you think Dexter may have changed the setting from an attic to a basement? What advantages could that have had in terms of the action in Act One of the play?
2. Why do you think the director Dominic Cooke and designer Ultz wanted to use the setting of an attic as originally conceived by Arnold Wesker?
3. Imagine you are designing a set for your own production of *Chicken Soup with Barley*. Would you choose to set the First Act in a basement flat or in an attic flat? Why would one work better than the other for your particular production?



Chicken Soup with Barley Set Design 1958

Changing the Set for Acts Two and Three

The play requires a major scene change between Acts One and Two. The Kahn family move from their cramped attic flat in the East End into a more spacious council flat in Hackney. The Kahn's move in the play mirrored the Wesker family's actual move in 1942. Wesker describes their new flat in his autobiography:

We had a front door at the end of a landing – which meant neighbours on only three sides instead of four – two bedrooms, a front room, a dining room, a separate kitchen, our own lavatory. No separate bathroom, no hot running water, no central heating – just a coal fire – but we had space. Space, space, space!

-from As Much As I Dare by Arnold Wesker

1. What major differences do you notice between the Act 1 set and the Acts 2 and 3 set in the current production?
2. How do you think Wesker's autobiography may have influenced the design for Acts 2 and 3?
3. How would you describe the different atmospheres Ultz has created in the sets for Act 1 and for Acts 2 and 3?



Chicken soup with Barley Set design (Act Two and Act Three) © Ultz 2011

5. RESEARCH

It was vital for the cast and creative team of Chicken Soup with Barley to discover the historical context of the play. With the help of the assistant director, Monique Sterling, they researched in detail the real political events that fuel the action of Chicken Soup with Barley. Here is an introduction to help you understand some of the key events such as the Battle of Cable Street, the International Brigade and the Hungarian Uprising.

THE BATTLE OF CABLE STREET

Take your boys to Cable Street. The Fascists are assembling! Come out of your houses! Come out of your Houses!

Act One, Scene One

The Battle of Cable Street or the Cable Street Riot took place on Sunday October 4, 1936 in Cable Street in the East End of London. It was a clash between the police, overseeing a march by the British Union of Fascists (BUF), on one side and anti-fascists including local Jewish, socialist and communist groups on the other.

The leader of the BUF was Oswald Moseley. He had set the party up following a trip to Italy where he had been impressed with Mussolini and his fascist party. Moseley and his party tried to gain support in areas where unemployment was at its worst. These were often areas where there were large numbers of immigrants and also where the communist party was trying to gain support. Anti-semitism and racism was rife in such areas.

London's East End

The East End of London was targeted by the BUF. In 1936 the Jewish population of Britain was 350,000 (0.7 per cent of the total population) However nearly half of the Jewish population lived in the East End – 60,000 in Stepney alone. The BUF announced that it would be organising a march of its members wearing their black shirt uniforms through the East End. All through the summer of 1936 it had organised street-corner meetings, fire-bombing and smashing the windows of Jewish shops, racist abuse and physical attacks. When they heard about the proposed march the Jewish People's

Council organised a petition calling for it to be banned but the government refused to ban the march.

Running battles

The anti-fascist groups erected roadblocks in Cable Street in an attempt to prevent the march from taking place. The police tried to clear these to allow the march through. There was a series of running battles between the police and anti-fascist demonstrators and eventually the march did not take place.

The Public Order Act

As a result of the Cable Street Battle the Public Order Act was passed in 1936. This made the wearing of political uniforms in public and private armies illegal, using threatening and abusive words a criminal offence, and gave the Home Secretary the powers to ban marches.

Commemorative plaque

In the 1980's, a large mural depicting the Battle was painted on the side of St. George's Hall. This old Town Hall building stands in Cable Street, about 150 yards west from Shadwell underground station. A red plaque in Dock Street also commemorates the incident.

Source: *The Anne Frank Guide*, www.annefrankguide.net



The International Brigade

You think I'm going to enjoy shooting a man because he calls himself a Fascist? I feel so sick at the thought of firing a rifle that I think I'll board that boat with a blindfold over my eyes. Sometimes I think that's the only way to do things. I'm not even sure that I want to go, only that if I don't then- then- well. What sense can a man make of his life?

Dave, Act One, Scene One, on joining The International Brigade

In August 1936 Harry Pollitt arranged for Tom Wintringham to go to Spain to represent the CPGB during the Civil War. While in Barcelona he developed the idea of a volunteer international legion to fight on the side of the Republican Army. He wrote: "You have to treat the building of an army as a political problem, a question of propaganda, of ideas soaking in."

On 10th September 1936 Wintringham wrote to Harry Pollitt that he had arranged for Nat Cohen, a Jewish clothing worker from Stepney, to establish "a Tom Mann centuria which will include 10 or 12 English and can accommodate as many likely lads as you can send out... I believe that full political value can only be got from it (and that's a lot) if its English contingent becomes stronger. 50 is not too many."

Maurice Thorez, the French Communist Party leader, also had the idea of an international force of volunteers to fight for the Republic. Joseph Stalin agreed and in September 1936 the Comintern began organising the formation of International Brigades. An international recruiting centre was set up in Paris and a training base at Albacete in Spain. Battalions established included the Abraham Lincoln Battalion, British Battalion, Connolly Column, Dajakovich Battalion, Dimitrov Battalion, Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion, George Washington Battalion, Mickiewicz Battalion and Thaelmann Battalion.

A total of 59,380 volunteers from fifty-five countries served during the Spanish Civil War. This included the following: French (10,000), German (5,000), Polish (5,000), Italian (3,350), American (2,800), British (2,000), Canadian (1,000), Yugoslavian (1,500), Czech (1,500), Canadian (1,000), Hungarian (1,000) and Scandinavian (1,000). These men were organized into the 11th, 12th, 13th, 14th and 15th of the Mixed Brigades.

Men who fought with the Republican Army included George Orwell, André Marty, Christopher Caudwell, Jack Jones, Len Crome, Oliver Law, Tom Wintringham, Joe Garber, Lou Kenton, Bill Alexander, David Marshall, Alfred Sherman, William Aalto, Hans Amlie, Bill Bailey, Robert Merriman, Fred Copeman, Tom Murray, Steve Nelson, Walter Grant, Alvah Bessie, Joe Dallet, David Doran, John Gates, Harry Haywood, Oliver Law, Edwin Rolfe, Milton Wolff, Hans Beimler, Frank Ryan, Emilo Kléber, Ludwig Renn, Gustav Regler, Ralph Fox, Sam Wild and John Cornford.

Women were active supporters of the International Brigades. A large number of women volunteered to serve in Medical Units in Spain during the war. This included Annie Murray, Thora Silverthorne, Salaria Kea, Mildred Rackley, Sylvia Townsend Warner, Mary Valentine Ackland, Lillian Urmston and Penny Phelps.

Volunteers came from a variety of left-wing groups but the brigades were always led by Communists. This created problems with other Republican groups such as the Workers Party of Marxist Unification (POUM) and the Anarchists.



International Brigade Flag



International Brigade at Casa del Campo

The Hungarian Uprising of 1956

I don't suppose you've bothered to read what happened in Hungary?...What has happened to all the comrades Sarah?...Why do I feel ashamed to use words like democracy and freedom and brotherhood?

Ronnie, Act Three, Scene Two, on the Hungarian Uprising

Hungary in 1956 seemed to sum up all that the Cold War stood for. The people of Hungary and the rest of Eastern Europe were ruled over with a rod of iron by Communist Russia and anybody who challenged the rule of Stalin and Russia paid the price. The death of Stalin in 1953 did not weaken the grip Moscow had on the people of Eastern Europe and Hungary, by challenging the rule of Moscow, paid such a price in 1956.

From 1945 on the Hungarians were under the control of Moscow. All wealth of whatever nature was taken from Hungary by the Russians who showed their power by putting thousands of Russian troops and hundreds of tanks in Hungary. The Hungarian leader, Rakosi, was put in power by Stalin of Russia. When Stalin died in 1953 all people in Eastern Europe were given some hope that they might be free from Soviet (Russian) rule.

In February 1956, the new Russian leader Khrushchev made a bitter attack on the dead Stalin and his policies and in July 1956 in a gesture to the Hungarians, Rakosi was forced to resign. In fact, the Hungarians had expected more but they did not get it. This situation, combined with 1) a bad harvest 2) fuel shortages 3) a cold and wet autumn all created a volatile situation.

On October 23rd 1956, students and workers took to the streets of Budapest (the capital of Hungary) and issued their Sixteen Points which included personal freedom, more food, the removal of the secret police, the removal of Russian control etc. Poland had already been granted rights in 1956 which had been gained by street protests and displays of rebellion. Hungary followed likewise.

A ruined statue of Stalin in Budapest

Imre Nagy was appointed prime minister and Janos Kadar foreign minister. They were thought to be liberal and in Moscow this was felt to be the best way to keep happy the "hooligans" as the Moscow media referred to the protesters. As a gesture, the Red Army pulled out and Nagy allowed political parties to start again. The most famous man to criticise the Russians was released from prison - Cardinal Mindszenty.

On October 31st, 1956, Nagy broadcast that Hungary would withdraw itself from the Warsaw Pact. This was pushing the Russians too far and Kadar left the government in disgust and established a rival government in eastern Hungary which was supported by Soviet tanks. On November 4th, Soviet tanks went into Budapest to restore order and they acted with immense brutality even killing wounded people. Tanks dragged round bodies through the streets of Budapest as a warning to others who were still protesting.

Russian tanks in Budapest

Hundreds of tanks went into Budapest and probably

30,000 people were killed. To flee the expected Soviet reprisals, probably 200,000 fled to the west leaving all they possessed in Hungary. Nagy was tried and executed and buried in an unmarked grave. By November 14th, order had been restored Kadar was put in charge. Soviet rule was re-established.

Source: www.historylearningsite.co.uk



6. Interview with Director Dominic Cooke

This revival of *Chicken Soup* is happening more than fifty years after the play's premiere, what was the drive or impetus to produce it now?

Well, I came back into contact with the play about three years ago having read it first when I was at university. I was really struck by, first of all, what an extraordinary play it was about family, but I thought it would particularly hit home now because of this central idea which is about the loss of political idealism. Which, from the point of view of communists in the 1950's they'd experienced, but for most of us, it's something we experienced more recently - I'd say, from the sixties, depending on what generation you are from, or even from the eighties (where at least there was a stronger and clearer opposition on the left, a consensus). I thought that feeling and that sense of doubt that the young man expresses at the end, and confusion, would really hit home for people today. And I think it has, especially the final lines of the play, I think it really speaks to people.

Can you tell me a little bit about the research that you and Ultz did in preparing for the play?

One of the salient features of the play is how autobiographical it is. Arnold Wesker was writing about family, about his own family. He is the young man in the play. He is Ronnie. So we read Arnold Wesker's autobiography and discussed it, anything that was useful, and then we went to the two homes that he lived in, which he put on stage.

The first one was in Fashion Street in the East End, just off Brick Lane and the other one was in a council estate called Weald Square which is in Clapton, Hackney, and we got into the flat (actually we got into the wrong flat, it was the one directly above!) And we had a look... we were very lucky with the way things turned out. We managed to get inside in the flat in Fashion Street which was very instructive about the kind of space the characters were in.

And we really based the stage sets very closely on those spaces. The first one, the first flat was two rooms on the top floor of this flat, in this building on Fashion Street. We got into the flat which was converted now into a bed-sit, with a bathroom (there wasn't a bathroom in those days) and there was actually a picture by a guy called John Allen, a painting which had the family, the actual Wesker family, in the picture. So some of the details, like the original wallpaper and where the furniture was, and things like that, we got from the picture.

In the text, when Arnold Wesker wrote the play, he did set it in an attic in the first draft, and then John Dexter, the director of the original production, thought it would be really good to see people's feet running past to indicate the riot. So he then asked Arnold to re-set it in a basement, which Arnold - and there are houses around that area that did have basements - agreed to do. But we wanted to set it back in the attic,

partly because that was the original setting, partly because we thought it would be good to create the crowd through sound and through the actors being able to look down.

The second flat was in Clapton. The character of Dave in the First Act is based on Ralph, who is Arnold's brother in law, and Ralph did a ground plan of the original layout of the flat in Clapton because they'd rebuilt the flat. It's very different now so we wanted to get a sense of how the flat actually was.

We did a lot of research into that. And then we also did a lot into period; Ultz is very meticulous about detail and authenticity, so he did a lot of research into period shapes for the costumes, the hair... and it's very, very thorough, the work that he did.

And when you got into these flats, what really struck you?

Well, I think the first thing that happens is, you actually go, 'okay, this is real lives that you're putting on the stage' because it is uniquely autobiographical. Every writer uses their autobiography in different ways, but some, more frequently what they do, they abstract it in their own imagination so they're not even aware they're using it, whereas this is so *consciously* autobiographical.

So the first time I went to see the flat on Fashion Street, I was reading the autobiography at the time, and reading about the family in these rooms, reading about sitting in the tin bath, reading about the life of Arnold's mother Leah, who is very much who Sarah is based on.

And it was very moving really. There's a unique opportunity with this play because you've got this extra information that's not in the text, from Arnold himself, from the real places, from the autobiographies of the characters which really helped us in rehearsal. But the other thing is just how small, especially Fashion Street was, for four people to live there for a long time. **(you can feel that on the stage)** Yes, tiny space! **(And the number of people coming in and out)** Yes, and in fact it was used, the flat, for communist meetings, and the sense you get in the play, which is why we did a lot of eating and drinking and preparing at the beginning, is that her family, and the communist party, and – if you like – the workers, are all one and the same to her. So her home is a public space.

That causes all sorts of problems for kids growing up, which is one of the reasons why Ada is so angry at her. I think that's often the case for children of political activists, or probably, the case for children whose parents work a lot, is that they feel angry that their needs weren't met, and the needs of other people were met instead, and we wanted to capture that in that sense.

It was a unique experience, I've never had an experience like it, because of that sense of autobiography. Because we were also rehearsing just two streets away from Fashion Street, so we would walk by all the places that

are mentioned in the play every day. Because Ultz is the kind of designer he is, he really loved all that. He really enjoyed honouring that.

In your view, what idea drives Chicken Soup with Barley?

It's difficult to say. I suppose, the obvious answer to that is the failure of a political ideology played out through family life. That's the core idea. But with that comes the notion of political and personal things being at one. Because they are a political family, it's more apparent, but the notion that our lives, political ideas, and political movements, and what's happening historically, are one and the same.

If you were to have to choose, would you say it's Ronnie's play, or Sarah's?

Sarah's play, undoubtedly, it's Sarah's play. The play is about people leaving Sarah, and Ronnie is one of the people that leaves, and he has the climatic scene because she invests - as everyone leaves her, bit by bit, one by one - she invests more and more hope in him. And in that there's that archetypal Jewish mother and son, the Jewish archetype... the stereotype where the hopes of the mother are invested very, very strongly in the son. And when she, in Act 2 Scene 2 she talks about the failure of her husband (which of course, she does a lot) she says, 'you won't be like that, will you? you won't?' He has a terrible weight to carry, it's not really fair. He is the final person to threaten to leave.

But really the play is an investigation of her psyche, the psyche of a fundamentalist, and a religious zealot. It's about a religion really, I mean, it's not a play about communism at all, I don't think. That's the dressing of the play. It's a play about how and why people believe what they believe. She's an emotional creature and her belief comes from an emotion. It's about a religious faith - you can't prove it. Opposite in the Throughout her lifetime, it started to come out in the mid 50's, about Stalin and what had actually happened in the Soviet Union. She chose to ignore that evidence... Stalin's regime and the ideas of the party she was a member of; murdered people on the street, murdered protestors, regular people on the streets of Hungary, Budapest, protesting against oppressive rule. Her heart really should be with those people and yet she's chosen not to... because her belief is in the *concept* of brotherhood.

How did that sort of idolatry feed into the family unit?

I think the family is like a fundamentalist state, and that's one of the reason it fails. It fails as a family because there is only one way of being in that household, and the only way is not to be is to leave, is to go and live in Norfolk, or Paris. Or desert the party. And that's her problem, she's uncompromising. It's why Harry leaves her, in a way, not physically, but he does, by having the stroke and being unable to be what she wants him to be. These things are played out, in her perfectionism and her idealism, which it's very hard for people to live with, with people like that.

What do you hope the audience might take away, after seeing Chicken Soup?

I think the play leaves you with very strong questions: Is there a way forward from where we are now? Is there another big idea? Is there a way of assimilating the principles behind Sarah's belief - the idea that we are all connected, if you like, the idea that there is a better way of us organising our society that somehow takes on the lessons of the failures of the communism movement? Is there a way of interpreting that for our times? Because I think Wesker's heart is very much with Sarah, even though his head is not. It's a very balanced argument, the argument at the end, with all Ronnie's doubts and his rejection of the simplicity of her ideals, but at the same time she is given the last line of the play.

Her need to connect is interesting, given that she's managing express it in a way that pushes her family away.

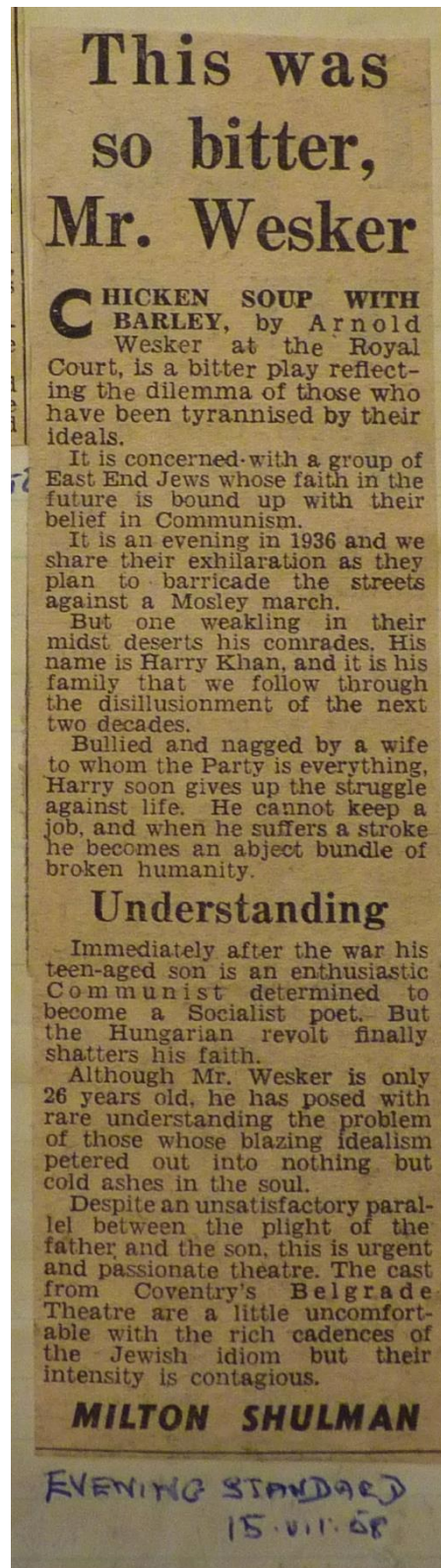
The play shows it's very difficult in practise, but is it a good principle? I think a lot of people in collective endeavours sacrifice their personal lives and relationships around them, and the people around them, in order to achieve that goal. It's quite a common thing that people who are good at the public world aren't so good at the private. But there's a hopefulness in the play - Arnold says this - the principles are noble principles. And how is there a way of encouraging them?

At the moment, we are told by the environmental lobbyists, 'if we don't care, we *will* die.' So what is the way for us? It's not an easy question to ask or to answer, but I think the play asks that. Which is why I'm relieved that people are getting it. When we first put it on in front of an audience, I really worried that people weren't getting it. That they would think it's just a play about a bunch of old communists in the 50's, but who cares? But I think people are reading beneath that, and seeing the bigger idea of the play, because I think those questions are universal questions. They will always speak to every time.

Is there a big idea that we can believe in that can help us move forward? There isn't much in the way of hope, is there, for big ideas? I mean, Big Society doesn't really seem to be catching on!

7. CHICKEN SOUP WITH BARLEY - THEN and NOW

The Evening Standard Reviews from 1958 and 2011



Chicken Soup with Barley is meticulous and impressive**By Henry Hitchings, Evening Standard, 8 June 2011**

When Arnold Wesker's play first appeared at the Royal Court in 1958, it was passionately acclaimed. Since then his star has declined, to the point where his work is largely neglected - although he was knighted in 2006. Here Dominic Cooke makes a case for renewed interest in the now 79-year-old Wesker, reviving this authentic portrait of a disintegrating Jewish family.

We follow the Kahns, who live in the East End, over the period from 1936, when they confront Oswald Mosley's parading fascists, to 1956, when Soviet tanks are trundling into Budapest.

Their relationships are tested, and so are their political commitments. Doubt, apathy and material anxiety replace idealism and fervour - for all except the bustling matriarch Sarah, who's forever brewing tea and trying to preserve her family's integrity.

Many of the incidents that shape their lives happen far away - early on there are repeated references to the Spanish Civil War - but world events resonate domestically for the Kahns, who respond to the constant churning of history with a vivid, argumentative emotion that reveals their personal frailties.

There are two stunning performances: from Samantha Spiro, whose Sarah is a nugget of vitality and a model of resilience, and from Danny Webb as her feckless husband Harry, who shrivels unbearably as a result of two strokes.

Among the support, the standout is Harry Peacock as a firebrand whose spirit is snuffed out by prosperity.

The play itself has a deep core of humanity. Its title is a reference to a memorable, evocative flavour that remains after everything else has gone - a reminder of the warm, enduring nourishment afforded by friendships.

But Wesker's writing doesn't slip down easily. He depicts misery and bleakness with great assurance, and there are flashes of humour but as he makes connections between the personal and the political, the dialogue often labours its significance. This feels didactic, and his characters can appear too neatly illustrative of different strands of ideology.

In the Fifties, Wesker was applauded for bringing to the stage a stratum

of working-class experience that was alien to most theatregoers.

Today, the substance of this family chronicle seems less novel, but it's a lot more than just a dusty period piece, and Cooke's interpretation, with an affectionately detailed design by Ultz, is meticulous and impressive.

In the Director's Chair

The critics in 1958 and now in 2011 have found *Chicken Soup with Barley* a moving play about the disintegration of a family. If you were to direct *Chicken Soup with Barley*, how would your production bring across the play's 'deep core of humanity' cited by Henry Hitchings while at the same time making it the sort of 'urgent and passionate theatre' mentioned by Milton Shulman?



8. CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

Drama Exercise

Characters' Physical Centres and Internal Rhythms

Here is an exercise from Chicken Soup with Barley rehearsals that you can try. In the first week of rehearsals it helped each actor develop their character's physicality.

Physical Centre

Begin by standing in a neutral position with hands down by your sides. Close your eyes and decide what part of the body would be your character's centre. For example, if your character is very flirtatious, the centre might be the eyelashes or if your character is a labourer, the centre could be the forearms. Once you've decided, start walking around the space, focusing your energy on that part of the body. Experiment with moving at different speeds, but always being aware of your character's centre. After the exercise, feed back to the others in the group regarding how your movement was affected and how the character's physicality is different from your own.

Internal Rhythm

Sit in a circle on the floor with the others in your group. You each take it in turn to tap out a simple rhythm that shows the internal rhythm to which you think your character moves through the day. After each person has a go, the group can discuss what is revealed about each character through these rhythms. Everyone then stands and experiments walking around the room allowing their characters rhythm into influence their movement.

Scene Study

Ask students to read the opening scene of Chicken Soup with Barley (up to Monty's entrance) in pairs, one person taking the part of Sarah and the other the role of Harry. Once they've read it through, ask them decide the following for Sarah and Harry:

1. What is each character's objective in the scene?
2. What is preventing her/him from achieving this objective?
3. Does s/he overcome the obstacle/s and if so, what tactics does s/he use to do so?

9. EDUCATION AT THE ROYAL COURT

As the Royal Court is a centre for excellence and innovation in theatre-making, the Education Department aims to stimulate and inspire students of all ages, encouraging learning and participation in every aspect of the theatre's work, from the process of writing plays to pioneering rehearsal room techniques.

We offer a wide-ranging programme of work designed to open up and de-mystify the craft of making theatre. Royal Court Education activities include:

Workshops for productions

INSET workshops for teachers

Post-show talks

Royal Court in a Day Study Day

Drama School in a Day Study Day

Performing Arts Business Study Day

A full description of all education events can be found on the education pages of the Royal Court web-site, www.royalcourttheatre.com. If you would like more information, please e-mail Lynne Gagliano, Education Associate, at lynnegagliano@royalcourttheatre.com or phone 020 7565 5174.

For more information about Royal Court productions and the Young Writers Programme, please visit our web-site, www.royalcourttheatre.com.

The Chicken Soup with Barley Background Pack compiled and written by Lynne Gagliano and Monique Sterling, June 2011. The Chicken Soup with Barley set design by Ultz ©2011. Production photographs by Johan Pearsson © 2011.