

BRIAN McNEIL

## We do the living: a text analysis of Arnold Wesker's *I'm Talking About Jerusalem*.

Act Three, Scene Two opens with the voice of a radio announcer: "... These latest results bring the Conservative majority up to 93 and will ensure the return to power in the House of Commons for the Conservative Party for a third time in succession since the end of the war..." (p 208)

It is 1959, but the stage set – a country kitchen – is of an earlier period. The stage directions indicate that it is dark and very cluttered. The radio should be, I think, also old-fashioned with an ornate wooden case and placed in a prominent position to indicate radio's importance in that epoch. Wesker's stage instructions suggest that the information could be transmitted by a character reading from a newspaper. So that he can screw it up and throw it away, a more dramatic gesture than simply switching off the radio.

There are four characters on the stage: Ronnie Kahn and his sister, Ada Simmons, Sarah, their mother, and Dave Simmons, Ada's husband. The light which comes from a doorway and window at the back of the proscenium arched stage is dying. It should continue to fade throughout this final scene of the play. Thus creating an atmosphere of sadness, regret, despair and anger. It should evoke the same kind of emotions in the audience as Dylan Thomas's line "...the dying of the light" with its anger, or, perhaps, the sound of the axes biting into Chekov's cherry trees.

The curtain has fallen on Scene One with Esther, a maiden aunt, speaking "... You want to build Jerusalem? Build it! Only maybe we wanted to share it with you..." (p 207) And Scene Two has opened, somewhat ironically, with the announcement of a Conservative victory. This sets the atmosphere of the period – 1959 – and the family are packing to move to London, away from their dreams of *Jerusalem* in the Norfolk countryside. The family may be talking of *Jerusalem* but their dream is fading. *Jerusalem* is taken from the Blake poem and came to symbolise Socialism for British Socialists. It implied, I think, for Blake and for the Socialists something more than a new economic order and, for the latter, it contains much of Blake's spirituality.

As the curtain rises on Scene Two, Dave is carrying a box out to a removal van – seen through the open doorway – and Ronnie sits by a pile of books. Sarah is holding a broom and Ada tends the baby. Thus each character's pose indicates or emphasises their nature and their role in life, the family and society.

Ronnie says: "Well – you've chosen the right time to return anyway. You came in with them and you go out with them." (p 208) Ada and

Dave's William Morris-like dream of rural and individual Socialism, their flight to the country, may well have been a reaction to what they would have conceived to be the failures of the previous Labour governments. Now they are leaving. When Ronnie says "...I'm all washed up..." (p 208), he is speaking the epitaph not only to Dave and Ada's dream but also to his own. He then sings a verse of an American folksong: "Come O my love and fare ye well..." (p 209) This is a farewell to the country, to the dreams of *Jerusalem* and also to youth. I think the use of song and radio may owe a little to Brecht.

This is the final play of the Wesker trilogy and the audience will only feel the full force of the poignancy if they have seen the complete trilogy, if they have seen the characters in their youth, in the first play of the trilogy (*Chicken Soup With Barley*).

Ronnie continues as he ends the song: "You realize you two that having come with explanations you must leave with explanations ... Jesus, one of us has got to make a success of something." (p 209) Ronnie has also failed – it is made clear that he has not finished his novel. But although he does not share Ada and Dave's dream, he wishes them well, in part because of his loving relationship with his sister.

A note of optimism is now injected by Sarah: "What is it, a funeral here?" (p 210) Dave asks for a cup of tea and she replies: "Tea I can always make." (p 210) Sarah does not feel defeated because she did not share their dream of Socialism in the country, in the first place. Also the Yiddish-English rhythm of the speech partially defines Sarah's character. At the same time she is the *Mother* of the family, the provider and source of consolation. Relations between her and Dave are cordial, even affectionate. *Tea* here is a metaphor for consolation. A theme which is taken up again later.

We are reminded of their Jewishness when Ronnie suggests they "do an Israeli dance" (p 210). But there is, it seems, another, underlying theme: the State of Israel, like the Labour government, is not as the idealist had hoped. Jerusalem in this passage is both the city itself and a metaphor of Socialism. This is the dual theme: the State of Israel and the survivor quality of the Jewish people, and the dream of Socialism. Is there a hint of the sharp ideological differences between the Zionists who sought a better society in Palestine for the Jews and the Jewish Socialists who had a vision of a better society for all humanity. One might question at this point why Ada and Dave went to a tied-cottage in Norfolk rather than a Kibbutz in Israel. Why did they try to build an allegorical *Jerusalem* in Norfolk instead of going to Jerusalem itself? It is another aspect of the Zionist/Socialist discussion which Wesker does not develop in this play.

There is also the related theme of strong, practical women and men who are dreamers and poets. A Jewish stereotype perhaps? As Ronnie says: "Ada's like you Sarah, strong! I'm charming, like my father, and weak." (p

210) And: "Look at old Mother there, like a patient old tigress – she's still waiting. Nothing suprised you did it Sarah?" (p 211) Dave has found a basement workshop in London and Ronnie is unhappy at the idea of a man who started work in the open, singing *Linden Lee*, returning to a London basement, but Ada interjects: "We've found a home – a roof over our heads" (p 213)

Ronnie talks of his father, now physically and mentally disabled. It is perhaps that the parallel between aging and physical decline, and the failure of political aspirations are here used in an almost allegorical way.

Towards the end of the passage I am considering, the theme of consolation returns with Ronnie quoting what his father had said about Socialism containing "the seeds of its own purification", and adds: "Maybe that's the victory..." (p 211) Ronnie clowns and sings to keep their spirits up but he ends in tears and unnerves (as the stage directions indicate) the others, and they turn to their ideological differences. Sarah praises Dave who fought for the Spanish Republic: "You were the God that fought in Spain, Dave, remember?" (p 214) But Dave thinks it a useless war, a failure: "A useless, useless bloody war because Hitler made it, didn't he, eh? And out went six million Jews in little puffs of smoke." Sarah replies: "We put a Labour government in ..." But Ronny retorts: "They sang the Red Flag in Parliament and then started building atom bombs." (p 214) However, Ada represents what might be called the eternal human spirit as much as Sarah does: "But they're going to have to turn to us in the end ... Us! Us! Because *we* do the living. *We do* the living..." (p 215)

Arnold Wesker. *I'm Talking About Jerusalem*. Penguin Books, 1970.



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Box 23400, 104 35 Stockholm.

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