# Alan Bates (1934-2003)—a key figure in British drama

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Alan Bates, who died aged 69 on December 27, 2003, was an actor with as celebrated a record on screen as on stage. He was at the forefront of his craft for over 40 years, working with most of the major writers and directors of the contemporary British stage and screen.

Bates played a key role in the development of a new British theatre in the late 1950s and early 1960s. He was among the earliest, and best, of the "red-brick" actors—those from regional backgrounds who gave shape to the "kitchen-sink" dramas of lower middle-class and working class life that were articulating new concerns on the British stage. His participation in the first production of John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*, the play that came to exemplify that whole trend, identified him with this new voice.

Bates was born in Allestree in Derbyshire. His parents were both musical. His father, an insurance salesman, was an accomplished cellist, while his mother played the piano. Bates first began acting in school plays. From the age of 11 his mother took him regularly to the Derby Playhouse, where he noticed two actors who were subsequently to become friends and associates, the playwright John Osborne and the director John Dexter.

His two years at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art—broken up by his National Service with the airforce—were spent in the company of fellow students Peter O'Toole and Albert Finney.

After a disastrous final show at RADA, he scraped a job as stage manager and bottom-of-the-cast actor in repertory theatre with the Midland Theatre Company. Six months later, after a successful audition, he was taken into the founding company of George Devine and Tony Richardson's English Stage Company (ESC) at London's Royal Court. His third production with the ESC was *Look Back in Anger*.

The ESC stands at the heart of the development of British theatre in the 1950s. Devine was an actor-director who had run the Old Vic School. He had an evangelical zeal for the art and craft of the theatre, and was looking for a theatre that was actively engaged in the world about him. "There had been drastic political and social changes all around us," he said. "No man or woman of feeling who was not wearing blinkers could not but feel profoundly disturbed."

The theatre he sought would be a serious artistic enterprise, which gave expression to those changes and that disturbance.

Richardson was rather more cavalier than the fastidious Devine. They had met when Richardson directed Devine in an adaptation of a Chekhov short story for the BBC, an organisation Richardson called "an out-front-and-proud-of-it bastion of mediocrity."

If neither of them were clear about what form their new theatre would take (Richardson said of their collaboration: "A new theatre—he didn't know what. I wanted a new theatre too, and I didn't know how"), they both knew that it had to show a definite artistic quality.

What this meant was a new attitude towards the audience, and a new self-respect for theatrical art. When Devine talked of the "right to fail", he meant the necessity of taking risks artistically, of having sufficient regard for your art and your audience that you do not compromise in your efforts to produce something both new and worthwhile. This uncompromising seriousness, bordering on the ascetic (Devine came to be known as a "secular saint"), came as a refreshing challenge for audiences tiring of the affected drawing-room comedies that had dominated the West End in the early part of the decade.

Having assembled a professional company and established a regular London home, Devine and Richardson's main task was to find plays that fitted their artistic criteria. They began by approaching novelists to adapt their own work, but the results were disappointing. Devine was also not impressed by the response to an advertisement for new plays. Of the 750 scripts he received, the only one of any interest was *Look Back in Anger*.

In many ways *Look Back in Anger* was the ideal vehicle for this new theatre. Its plot borders on the conventional melodrama of the day, but what marks it out as new is the language in which it is written. Although confused, and at times incoherent, in its rage against the seemingly baffling world around it, the play does find a new way of expression. In Jimmy Porter's splutteringly idealistic attempts to "pretend we're human beings, and that we're actually alive," Osborne created something magnificently vigorous.

Jimmy's rage could easily have become too hectoring for an audience to bear. That it does not and he remains sympathetically drawn, is largely down to the complimentary character of his friend, Cliff. It was this part that Alan Bates made his own. The sympathetic Cliff, who goes along with Jimmy's games, allowing the audience to see an attractive side to his friend, before finally finding the fury too much and deciding to leave, was perfect for Bates' qualities as an actor. He brought to it a mildness and likeability (Osborne described Bates in rehearsal as being "agreeable and bent on pleasing"), while at the same time portraying an inner emotional life. This quality of reserve was to be a hallmark of his subsequent work.

Bates played Cliff for two years, both with Kenneth Haigh as Jimmy and in subsequent casts. He toured New York and Moscow with the play, before returning to London to great critical acclaim as the younger brother Edmund in Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey Into Night*.

Although he was to return to the classics several times, it was in contemporary drama that he achieved his greatest successes. Overlooked for the part of Cliff in the 1959 film adaptation of *Look Back in Anger*, he belatedly made his screen debut in another Osborne piece, *The Entertainer* (1960), directed by Richardson. Here he and Finney played the sons of Archie Rice (Laurence Olivier), a second-rate end-of-pier comic whose determination that the show must go on despite his evident disintegration is used as a metaphor for British society.

On stage Bates was working with another major new voice in the British theatre, Harold Pinter. As Mick in *The Caretaker* (1960, filmed 1963), he was showing another aspect to the reserve and reticence. Mick was fiercely protective of his brother Aston, but also a nasty bully of the tramp Davies. Beneath the surface, Bates was able to reveal something hard and vicious. His first starring role in a film was John Schlesinger's *A Kind of*

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*Loving* (1962), which traded on the more resigned, stoical kind of character. But he was already developing a range of intelligence and detached sardonic contempt. The possibilities Pinter's script opened up for him clearly met with an enthusiastic response. He said of *The Caretaker*, "It was an unforgettable piece of good fortune, the only play I have ever done in which I have not for one second thought 'Oh, god, I've got to do this again next week'. It was sheer joy to play all the time."

Jonathan Kent, who was to direct Bates on stage years later, commented, "He has an air of mystery. There's an impenetrable heart to him." Although he was talking about Bates' private life, this is true of his performance style. He was capable of making an audience aware of the huge reserves of a character without roaring and ranting. He was notably successful in the works of contemporary playwrights who sought to examine either the seething character beneath an inarticulate facade (Pinter) or those bitter characters that have isolated themselves from the world around them through ironic and intelligent detachment (Simon Gray).

However, although there was a typical thread of reserve within Bates' characters, he sought too to explore the full gamut of his capabilities. This is both admirable and increasingly uncommon. A review of Bates' career reveals both a huge body of work, and his determination that each role should "cut across the previous one, so people won't know what to expect next."

Through the 1960s he made such films as *Whistle Down the Wind*, *Zorba the Greek*, *Georgy Girl*, *Far From the Madding Crowd* (working again with Schlesinger), and Ken Russell's adaptation of D.H. Lawrence's *Women in Love*. Between the films he appeared on stage in Arnold Wesker's *The Four Seasons*, and played *Richard III* and Ford in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. He fought hard against being typecast.

*Women in Love* gave him perhaps his most infamous on-screen moment, the nude wrestling scene with Oliver Reed. If, like much of Russell's work, it teeters dangerously on the overblown, it is also redeemed, like all Russell's best work, by the performances within it. Unlike many of his peers among the new actors of the early 1960s, Bates was never particularly a physical actor. Where Reed's machismo was his strength (utilised magnificently by Russell both here and, particularly, in *The Devils*), Bates was better by far carrying something beneath the surface, for example in Joseph Losey's *The Go-Between* (scripted by Pinter).

He also sought to extend his understanding of his craft, which he explored most successfully through the work of his contemporaries. Returning to the ESC in 1969, he appeared to huge acclaim in David Storey's *In Celebration*, directed by Lindsay Anderson. He said that Anderson "showed me that acting wasn't to do with power games or insecurity or trying to prove anything. It's to do with knowing yourself, not hiding behind techniques or disguises."

He became a patron of the Actors' Centre, established in the 1970s by Sheila Hancock, John Alderton and Clive Swift for the training of actors. When his son Tristan died of an asthma attack in 1990, Bates endowed the venue with a theatre in his memory.

Although he returned several times to Shakespeare, he was never able to bring to it the capacity he had for modern work. In his 1970 *Hamlet*, for example, one critic said that his failure to show the audience "a glimpse of ... grace, tenderness or charm" meant "our hearts go out quickly to his victims."

He continued to champion emerging writers, and triumph in their work. He also returned to their work several times (working on Storey's *Life Class*, for example).

Coming between disappointing productions of *Hamlet* and *Taming of the Shrew*, his performance in the title role of Simon Gray's *Butley* (also subsequently filmed, by Pinter) provided another longstanding professional relationship. Here was the classic Bates character—self-destructive, confused and cruelly detached, but never simply a disastrous spectacle. The catastrophes of the character's life were illuminated by the intelligence Bates brought to the part. He appeared in several more Gray plays, most notably *Otherwise Engaged* (1975) and its sequel *Simply Disconnected* (1996) playing a distantly polite publisher.

He had some stage successes with Chekhov and Strindberg, where his detachment proved an appropriate vehicle for such characters as Trigorin in *The Seagull*. On film and television screen he continued to explore his range, and test his classical repertoire by appearing in such pieces as *The Mayor of Casterbridge* and *Hard Times*.

He remained as busy as ever. For any actor who works continuously over the best part of 50 years, there will always be work of poorer quality. What is remarkable is how few really low points there are in Bates' career. While acknowledging that there had been a tendency of late for him to fall into precisely the sort of typecasting he had always resisted, his performances, and more particularly his evident dedication to ensemble playing, remain consistently in evidence. His performance in Robert Altman's *Gosford Park* (2001), for example, was striking.

He continued to give his finest performances with his contemporaries. Alan Bennett's television plays offered him an unusual chance to explore the marginalised and obsessive. Playing Proust in *102 Boulevard Haussmann*, he offered a magnificent study of the meticulous obsessive, while his performance as the English spy Guy Burgess in *An Englishman Abroad* (reuniting him again with Schlesinger) is a masterful study of self-absorption and self-pity.

There is about his best performances a sense of something profoundly damaged beneath the surface of the characters. This may be the reason for his lack of success with Shakespeare: he was better at suggesting the pressures his characters were under than at demonstrating their own headlong flight into catastrophe. One critic suggested that his 2000 Marc Antony in *Antony and Cleopatra* seemed "mildly dissipated rather than recklessly obsessed."

Contrast this, say, with his performance as the head butler Jennings in *Gosford Park*, drinking in moments of crisis whilst completely oblivious of the attentions of those who care for him. The performance as Jennings captures everything about that character precisely because it cannot be expressed openly.

This is not to say, though, that he was incapable of explosive performances, as he demonstrated with Jonathan Kent's 1993 production of Thomas Bernhard's *The Showman*. For the best part of two hours Bates gave a towering performance as the megalomaniac actor fallen on hard times, railing against the injustices of having to work small stages in front of ignorant audiences. Nor was he afraid to eliminate his own natural flirtatious charm, as in his portrayal of the state agent Nicolas in Pinter's *One for the Road* (1984). Simon Gray commented approvingly that this was "the most violent and hateful performance of his career."

His work with Gray opened up the possibility of playing the self-destructive and chaotic, without ever allowing them to slip into something uncommunicatively self-pitying. He won a Tony in 2002 for deploying precisely these abilities in an adaptation of Turgenev's *Fortune's Fool*. Even when a character was self-pitying (as with Burgess, for example), the performance was always marked by an intelligence that prevented it from degenerating into something unwatchable.

It was this ability to portray a vulnerability to society, even in a vicious and vindictive character, which brought out the full measure of his talent as an actor. He was unafraid to play the marginalised and brutalised in an unsentimental and realistic way. It is no coincidence that his sole Oscar nomination came for John Frankheimer's *The Fixer* (1968), in which he played an early twentieth century Jewish handyman falsely accused of murder. Unlike many heterosexual colleagues he was never afraid to play homosexual characters, and his portrayals were in no way caricatured. The humour and humanity of his portrayal of Guy Burgess, for example, remains one of his most beguiling performances.

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It was this confidence in playing the victims of society that enabled him to reach one of his greatest triumphs—that can be seen as the synthesis of what made him a significant performer. In 1983 he starred in a revival of John Osborne's *A Patriot for Me*. Playing Colonel Alfred Redl, a career soldier in the Austro-Hungarian army blackmailed because of his homosexuality, Bates' performance brought about a critical reassessment of the play. Totally at ease with Osborne's writing, Bates' performance brought out Redl's external life of iron military discipline, while all the time indicating the vulnerable inner man. To quote Richard Findlater, Bates' "tiny vocal inflections, quick facial tics, faint finger twitches and lightning eye-changes are giveaway signals of a secret life inside the military armature of stiff-backed, blank-faced obedience. As with all front-rank actors, his silences speak volumes."

These were all techniques that mark out the best of his screen performances, too. In itself that would be worthy of comment at a time when television, film and theatre are becoming increasingly separated fields of artistic endeavour. What makes Bates a key figure in late twentieth century British drama was his ability to use these formidable talents to articulate characters representing the concerns of his generation. Bates' intelligence as an actor allowed the best of his contemporaries to put flesh on their vision of the world. He responded by producing some memorably brilliant performances.

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