

A CONVERSATION WITH ROBERT BOLT

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This interview with Robert Bolt was an attempt in a brief conversation to extract his ideas and attitudes, and perhaps thereby to penetrate closer to the personality of this successful “commercial” playwright.

Robert Bolt, known for his serious dramas, was born on 15 August 1924 at Sale, near Manchester, the son of a small shopkeeper. He was educated, or rather considered ineducable, at Manchester Grammar School. After a spell as office boy in an insurance company he escaped to Manchester University School of Economics in 1943. There he joined the Communist Party, which he left after five years. At the end of the Second World War, he returned to College to complete a degree in History in 1949.

Bolt was once a school-teacher. When he first began to write, he experimented with radio plays, with novels, unfinished (“No, I will not try again”), and short stories. After the success of *Flowering Cherry* in 1957, he gave up teaching, shifted his family to a quiet country house in Hampshire, acquired a well set up working room and produced *The Tiger and the Horse* – another West End success. After this came his well known historical plays and film scripts.

He is a man who talks intensely about the process of writing and about the problems and importance of obeying one’s conscience. Bolt has an eloquent deep voice and he is not someone to make one’s attention wander.

Maite de Ituarte- Mr. Bolt, I see that your plays have form, and I think you are all for the formal play. At the same time it strikes me the beautiful and accurate language you use in your plays. Now, these two aspects seem to be very much out of fashion nowadays. Could you comment on the importance of form and language in your work?

R.B.- Yes, they do. Oh goodness! Good heavens, I couldn’t, honestly. I just love the old pattern form of the play. Why I do that I do not know. But I love the old pattern form of poetry. And why I do that, I don’t know. I just don’t know.

M.I.- So it is something you don't do on purpose. It is something that comes out of your personal taste for beauty.

R.B.- Of course. And the same thing with the actual accuracy of language. I don't see the point of using the language inaccurately. I like language used strictly, and I abominate it used loosely because I think every time you use a word loosely you have devalued the currency. That is just a matter of temperament and taste. I do like the beautiful pictures and the beautiful frames, and I don't like, oh I don't dislike but I don't terribly like the free form of pictures.

M.I.- How do you react to rather formless plays, like a Theatre of the Absurd play?

R.B.- Not well. There is great power in it and, therefore, it frightens me. There are many people today who feel that form is artificial, that life, in fact, has no form, and so the Theatre of the Absurd is very significant. However, though I believe that to attack the form itself can be nothing but a gesture, it does seem to me to be anti-theatre with anti-heroes, and I am pro- theatre. I want more theatre, not less.

M.I.- You like writing about historical figures, don't you?

R.B.- The only reason I write about historical figures is not because I think history is more interesting than now. Indeed history is only interesting if now is interesting. It's just Dutch Courage, it enables you to write in a grand manner. Shakespeare never set a single one of his plays in Elizabethan London. I like writing in a big, grand manner.

M.I.- Do you mean you like writing in a classical manner?

R.B.- Exactly. Writers can write grandly by giving an implied importance to what is being said... I believe in the terrible cliché that there is a human predicament and everyone feels it, even if it's a matter of getting on with your wife or lover, or getting to know your children or parents, although many people deny it, and ignore it as a lot of nonsense. And you have to think about this predicament with feeling. Philosophy with feeling is poetry. And because of this predicament one asks questions. To try and answer this problem of the human predicament is to try and find tranquility, and of course, there can be no tranquility with the problem.

M.I.- How do you feel about passion?

R.B.- I think passion is a jolly good thing. Yes... without passion there is no life, no art, no anything. To me passion provides a marvellous opportunity for control. For example, the poets whom I most admire, and who most console and simultaneously disturb me, are the Metaphysicals, where the distinction between passion and intellect simply doesn't exist, in as much as the more passionate they were the more intellectual they became. And the more intellectual they became the more passionate they were. This is the opposite extreme from Romantic Poetry where if there is great passion and beauty of image, as in Keats, there is virtually no intellectual control whatsoever. If there is control, as in the didactic poems of Wordsworth, there is virtually no passion.

M.I.- Harold Hobson, in the New Penguin edition of *A Man for All Seasons*, refers to the balance that there exists in your plays between the head and the

heart. Would you accept that there exists in them a predominance of the intellect, perhaps at the expense of the emotions?

R.B.- In the theatre people often opt for the heart and this entails a loss of shape, a loss of emotions and a loss of values. To me life is only interesting where these two things overlap. And theatre to me certainly entails emotion. Sir Thomas More was quite obviously a man of passion.

M.I.- Now, what brought you to take up Thomas More as the focal point of one of your most successful plays?

R.B.- What attracted me to More was not that he obeyed his conscience but that a man who was so good at being alive, so loved, so good at everything, was not carried away by his enjoyment of life. He knew that finally his life was only really worth living if there was something for which he would give it up. *A Man for All Seasons*, you see, is not supposed to be a play about integrity. It is certainly not supposed to be a play about Catholicism. It isn't supposed to be a play about Christianity. It's supposed to be a play about "selfhood". I chose More first, to speak diagrammatically, precisely because a very few people give a tinker's cuss whether or not the sovereign of England is the supreme head of the Church of England insofar as the law of God allows. This is a very dead letter indeed for all but a very small minority of people. And put like that in that legalistic language, it is a dead letter for me, and I precisely wanted not to choose something like the abolition of slavery, the atomic bomb, social sterilization, or anything of this sort which people do in fact feel hotly about, because this would make it a play about "that thing", and I wanted instead to make it a play about a man whose self was challenged. I think it is very rare to find anybody who loves life as much as More did, who is nevertheless able quite consciously to part with it. And I have a strong feeling that all men who are able to give up life for something which they love, something not concrete or material or even personal – whatever the reason, if you exclude masochism or a death wish – are subscribing to the same reverence for life. In fact, More is more or less my ideal human being.

M.I.- How did you come to think of Common Man?

R.B.- Well, I first wrote a sort of chronicle really of the trial, just the trial, with a little sketchy indication of what the situation had been, and it was an extraordinary success on radio. I kept listening to it again and again and I always found it extraordinarily moving, and, although it was a very static situation, it grew and grew upon me that there must be a stage play in it. And I walked about (I was living in Somerset then), I walked about the lanes with this idea in my head, and I could see no way to do it until I quite suddenly hit on this device of the common man as an interlocutor between the play and the audience. Just as the means of telling the story quickly.

M.I.- Do you think of theatre in any kind of total way? You have said that when you write a play you produce it in your mind. Does it include the set, and so on?

R.B.- Yes. But the only play I've ever written in which, when the curtain went up, the audience saw almost exactly what I wanted them to see, was *A Man for All*

Seasons... Everything was more or less as I had seen it when I wrote it, and this was a marvellous feeling.

M.I.- Do you feel that your film work is not so important to you as the work you do for the theatre?

R.B.- It is just as serious and it is just as important to me while I am on the job. But it is not so important to me because it is much less mine when it is done.

M.I.- Have you found that your film experience has made any difference to your method of working on a play?

R.B.- It has made me much more concerned with the business of telling a story. I am convinced of the necessity to tell a story. This is rather different from what used to be understood as constituting a story. I think, for example, that there is a strong story in *Waiting for Godot*. A story about the emotion of the two characters... So I give a wide interpretation to what constitutes a story. The only difference, I think, is that in the cinema the visual is so very much more important; in the theatre, by and large, all you've got is the word. Of course, there are costumes, lighting effects, coups de théâtre of one sort and another, but on the whole it is nine-tenths verbal; whereas, in the cinema, to my mind, the less dialogue, on the whole, the better. The more you can do it visually, the more you can think of visual images which are both eloquent and striking, and precise, then the better, and to that extent it is a less literary form, certainly. A large part of my work in writing for the cinema is dreaming up the images, thinking of the image that will make the point. If I had to choose, if I couldn't do both, I'd certainly write for the theatre. It's much more a writer's medium than the cinema where you have striking and immediately impressive visuals. Other reason is the immediacy of the live theatre. When it comes off there's nothing like it.

M.I.- Someone has said that you have been influenced mainly by Brecht and by the movies. I myself would say that Brecht's influence on you, if any, is just a formal influence.

R.B.- Right, right. I agree with Brecht the man but I don't agree with his plays. Of course not.

M.I.- However, he is the writer you would most wish to resemble, isn't he?

R.B.- Yes, he is. Because theatrically I think he was right. He knew exactly where we are and how desperately we need the classical. This is why I admire him. I just regret that the particular philosophy to which he was wedded happened to be one that was grossly inadequate to our situation.

M.I.- Did Brecht manage that balance between passion and intellect?

R.B.- No, he did not. I think he was a complicated and involuted man.

M.I.- Would you point out any other influence in your work?

R.B.- Yes, of course. They are mostly poetic. Apart from John Donne, Shakespeare – I just think that all roads end at Shakespeare – and the Romantics, although I have just attacked them, I think I've learned much from Jane Austen. She made the most subtle moral distinctions but made them as clear as day. And I don't see subtlety as being similar to complexity. Subtlety and simplicity are to my mind the same thing, or at any rate go hand in hand.

M.I.- On the other hand, I think it would be correct to say that your dramatic career has been influenced by your formal study of History.

R.B.- Yes, I think so.

M.I.- Your objectivity, your not taking sides in the plays, has been much discussed. Is objectivity something you are consciously trying to maintain?

R.B.- Oh no! I would love to come down on this side or that but I don't feel it like that at all.

M.I.- So, would you say that the playwright should be a committed person?

R.B.- Yes he should and I am not. No, no, no. He should not. The greatest playwrights are up there, above the play. But this is true of the greatest playwrights.

M.I.- Would the fact of your being a historian have anything to do with your objectivity mostly in your historical plays?

R.B.- Oh yes, of course. Because that is two centuries away from us and so it is easy to be objective about it. You see, when you have finished with the objectivity, what is it that there remains?. It is the whole person who is again and again in the sustained picture of today. This is hard to say. Take *A Man for All Seasons*. That is a picture of a man which everybody latches on to, and the fact that he was four centuries ago doesn't make any difference except that it distances him four centuries ago.

M.I.- Something which I again find striking when I compare you to some other contemporary playwrights. You seem to have a great respect, perhaps we should say a great admiration, for your main characters.

R.B.- Oh yes, of course I do.

M.I.- Does that mean that you think you would not be able to write about them otherwise?

R.B.- Yes, of course. And not only my main characters but my villains as well. I have a great respect for them all. There isn't a single one of my characters that I don't have a little respect for.

M.I.- This brings me to *Gentle Jack*. This seems to me to be the only exception in your work. Here, I think, we don't find a sympathetic character. Is it that you didn't feel much for those characters?

R.B.- Oh yes, but you know, I think I felt too much respect for them, and I distanced them accordingly. But it is very true, you know. I hadn't thought of that until you said it.

M.I.- I believe it did not meet a great success.

R.B.- It did not (he laughs). I think we ran for six weeks.

M.I.- Could it be because of this lack of sympathetic characters?

R.B.- It could. I don't know but it could. I think there was a sense of strain from start to finish.

M.I.- Or perhaps because the theme seems to be too abstract for the ordinary theatre-goer to grasp?

R.B.- Yes, right. That I have thought of. You see, in *Gentle Jack* we have the natural order against the social order, that spontaneity which comes from the life of the body, and which implies a certain degree of immorality against repression, which

comes from the life of the mind and social order, and which implies a certain degree of morality. We have the reasonable set against the absurd. And the big question is whether there can be a compromise between them.

M.I.- What was it really you were trying to tell us in this play?

R.B.- Oh well, you see, one thing. That if we dig too deep into ourselves we come across something uncontrollable. And the only person who does it in that play is gentle Jack. He plunges deep into that and finds a madman. It is a very personal play, not at all a social play.

M.I.- This play was coetaneous with many other plays, like David Rudkin's *Afore Night Come*, which also treated the question of ritualistic violence. Could we link *Gentle Jack* up with the renewed interest in the theatre of cruelty?

R.B.- I think that as a theatrical preoccupation cruelty is permissible, understandable, even laudable – the world being as it is just now – but as an exclusive preoccupation it seems to me self-defeating. Just as I don't see how a preoccupation with absurdity in itself can make sense, because you can only define something as absurd if you have some expectation of the reasonable. And what I wanted to do in *Gentle Jack*, among other things, was to set the absurd against a background of reasonable expectation.

M.I.- I see you as a highly conscientious writer. You seem to draw heavily on documental evidence to support your historical themes.

R.B.- Yes, that is true.

M.I.- Therefore, would you say that a playwright should keep faithful to History, and if so, how far?

R.B.- Well, he should be as close as possible to it, of course. When you cramp, let's say, four years of History into two hours then it is impossible that you do keep to the established facts, but you must not twist the History.

M.I.- About *Vivat! Vivat Regina!* Here the action shifts continuously back and forth. I love the part of the letters being interchanged from different parts of the world, and your having the two Queens on the stage without ever meeting.

R.B.- Well, there is an example of what we have just talked about. They never met and so, of course, it was a great temptation to have them meet, but they never met.

M.I.- That is what Schiller did in *Mary Stuart* but that is not historically true. Now, did you use that particular technique for dramatic economy or for theatrical effectiveness?.

R.B.- Oh God! for theatrical effects. And the stage at that juncture is no actual place, the minute that passes is not actual time; it is theatre merely.

M.I.- Now let's talk about *State of Revolution*, which is a much more complex play.

R.B.- Yes it is. I thought that was a very committed play, you know. The Russian Revolution has happened. It was the biggest event of our century. Was it good or was it bad? It was awful in the effect it has had on the revolutionary character of Russia, but it was good in that imagine what would have happened if the Russians had gone along under the Czars. So what is one to think that it is? So what do you make of that? That is the only point that concerns me anyway today.

M.I.- In your other plays what seems to matter is the main character's behaviour. *Revolution* seems to transcend characters or personalities. Am I right in saying that the main issue here is the attitude those characters take towards the changing political circumstances?

R.B.- Of course. Right. Of course. Good.

M.I.- Then, could we say that theme becomes here more important than character? As it somehow seems to have been in *Gentle Jack*?

R.B.- Yes you could. Except that Lenin is up to the theme. He is on a level with the theme. He was an extraordinary little man. And, of course, the play finishes when he has had his nervous breakdown.

M.I.- Why did you choose to write on the subject?

R.B.- I am a political animal. If you're politically interested you've got to be interested in the Russian Revolution and in Lenin. When the idea of the play first came to me I rejected it instantaneously. But I couldn't get rid of the idea. Politically it seemed to get more relevant every month. The character of Lenin has always puzzled and intrigued me. Viewed in one light he was an indefensible monster, in another he was a great and good man. He did and said quite impermissible things but he was also selfless with no love of cruelty for its own sake. My definition of a great man would be someone who withstood the tensions of absolutely irreconcilable demands. He knew what he was doing right to the end and he knew what he was doing was by any ordinary standards horrific. I spent three years reading round and writing the play. Morally and emotionally I found myself bewildered. But gradually a consistent figure emerged in my mind. I had the flavour of the man.

M.I.- Why did you join and then left the Communist Party?

R.B.- I joined for the usual reasons. The better reasons were a kind of generous, impatient impulse which young people have to put things right, a generous indignation against things which were wrong, mixed in with a good deal of arrogance. I left because too often I found I was having to say things which I didn't believe. Now I'm only a Marxist with so many reservations that a real Marxist would dismiss contemptuously any claim on my part to be called one. But my time with the Party has been a help in writing this play. It would be impossible to write the play I've written from within the Party. You couldn't allow yourself an honestly critical appraisal of the things that were done.

M.I.- Your original title was *Lenin's Testament*, wasn't it? How is it that it was changed to *State of Revolution*?

R.B.- When you finish a play you always find everyone has a little rush of creativity over the title. It was felt that *Lenin's Testament* was too downbeat. *State of Revolution* is a pun of course. How can you have a revolutionary state? And how can you stop it becoming just like any other state, dominating and exploitive? But I agreed with Noël Coward.

M.I.- All your plays are very liberally endowed with stage directions and brackets after lines, explaining how to say a particular line. Would you like to comment on this?

R.B.- The reason why there is this proliferation of directions is because, as I say, I'm not writing dialogue that was spoken by real people for actors to try to imitate; I'm writing a line to be said by an actor on a stage. And it seems reasonable that the actor should be given every opportunity of knowing exactly what I wanted. What I wanted isn't necessarily the best thing for me to get, and the actor may say, "No, no, you're quite wrong about that line, I have a better way of doing it," but I see no harm in his knowing.

M.I.- **Thinking now of your work as a whole, Mr. Bolt, what comes first for you, theme or character?**

R.B.- Character is what I reckon as most important of all. Yes.

M.I.- **Finally, Mr. Bolt, I know you have often said you are not even a Christian. However let me tell you that when I read your plays what comes first and foremost is that what you are really concerned with is man, and that the values you'd like to find in man are the Christian values.**

R.B.- Yes, of course. I wish to God I were a Christian, but I am not. I'd take my hat off to anybody who can claim to be a Christian, but unfortunately I don't believe in the whole teaching of Christianity. But the axioms of Christianity, I, well, I accept.

M.I.- **Anyway, I am a Christian and to me the values I find in your work are the Christian values indeed.**

R.B.- Yes, they are, I think.

M.I.- **Thank you very much, Mr. Bolt. It's been extremely kind of you.**

R.B.- Thank you very much.