

AN INTERVIEW WITH STEPHEN SPENDER

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Introduction

The interview took place on Wednesday, June 24, 1964 at the offices of the *London Magazine*. The conversation was recorded and the original tape is in the Library of the Department of English, Edvard Kardelj University of Ljubljana, Yugoslavia. The interview is printed without essential changes, only some redundances and sentence fragments have been omitted, and I tried to preserve the atmosphere of the conversation as much as possible. The text in brackets [] has been added for this article in order to clear some points or to provide the additional bibliographical information.

Some passages taken from this conversation were used in my Ph. D. thesis (1967) on politico-poetic plays written by W. H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood, Stephen Spender and Louis MacNeice published in part in *Glavna problemska območja v angleški poetično-politični drami v letih 1930—1940* (Main Spheres of Problems in English Politico-Poetic Drama in 1930—1940. Ljubljana: Filozofska fakulteta, 1968, pp. 40), and in a revised form of my dissertation also published in Slovene and with a summary in English titled *Dileme parabolične umetnosti* (Dilemmas of the Parabolic Art. Ljubljana: Partizanska knjiga, 1975, pp. 213). I have drawn on this material in some articles published in English in various reviews. These are: »English Political Verse Drama of the Thirties: Revision and Alteration.« *Acta Neophilologica*, I (1968), pp. 67—78; »The Group Theatre: Its Development and Significance for the Modern English Theatre.« *Acta Neophilologica*, II (1969), pp. 3—43; »Dramaturgic Concepts of the English Group Theatre: The Totality of Artistic Involvement.« *Modern Drama* (Toronto), XVI (1973), 1, pp. 81—86; »Commitment and Character Portrayal in the British Politico-Poetic Drama of the 1930s.« *Educational Theatre Journal* (New York), XXVI, 3 (Oct. 1974), pp. 342—351; »Louis MacNeice and Stephen Spender: Development and Alterations of Their Plays Written for the Group Theatre.« *Acta Neophilologica*, VII (1974), pp. 59—65.

THE INTERVIEW

QUESTION: Mr Spender, would you, please, tell me something about your activities at the Group Theatre, the policy of the theatre, and your responsibility as the Literary Director, as you were called in 1936.

* I wish to thank most warmly our Fulbright Visiting Professor Robin Bates for having read the typescript of this interview and commented upon it.

ANSWER: Well, I've rather forgotten about the Group Theatre, but as far as I remember, the idea of the Group Theatre was that we should form a company of actors and actresses who stuck together, rather like the Moscow — what we imagined to be — the Moscow Arts Theatre. And this is lacking in England. In England plays are done, or were done before the War, by companies which were simply brought together in order to perform that play. There was no idea at the beginning that the Group Theatre should be particularly on the Left, or political, but as it was the 1930s and as the best plays that were being written were of that kind, we tended to do a good many political plays.

QUESTION: *What do you think of the production of your play [Trial of a Judge] now and what did you think about it at that time? I unfortunately haven't seen any of these plays produced, but I've read them and about them. For instance, in the criticism of your play, it is very often said that the choruses were the worst part done in that production [directed] by Mr Doone. Would you agree with that?*

ANSWER: Well, I think that my play was impossible to do anyway. It's really a kind of lyrical poem, or dramatic poem, rather than a play, and I would hate to see it put on again. On the other hand I think that the whole idea of my play is a very good idea indeed. It's curious you are asking me about this because during the last month or two I keep on asking myself whether I shouldn't rewrite this play, because I think it's a very interesting idea which is completely spoilt. The *Trial of a Judge*. Even the name is very good. Even the title is very good.

QUESTION: *Now that you've mentioned that you would rewrite it, I've got another question. It took you quite a long time to write it, I think about three years, and I'd like to know whether you have changed the play during the writing or what were the reasons for writing it so slowly?*

ANSWER: Well, I tend to write everything slowly, but I think the real reason why it was difficult to write it quickly was because it was in verse and I write verse very slowly, because I write a kind of free verse and this is only arrived at in my case by constant rewriting and constant research and discovery of what I myself am trying to do. I always feel that whatever I write in this kind of verse cannot be changed. I mean that I feel that I arrive at something which was my original idea, as a matter of fact, and I am always in search of my original idea but it takes me a long time often to get there. If I rewrote it now I think I might write a lot of it in prose; that's one of the things I have to decide.

QUESTION: *Though I think that verse was generally praised at the time when the play came out. Do you think it is bad verse compared with the rest of your work?*

ANSWER: No, I think some of it is quite good, but the important thing is the play, and the idea, and I feel that perhaps what is lacking in this play is realism and strong characters. And when I was young I didn't know enough about people, but funnily enough the kind of characters that I've drawn in that play, in verse, could be made much more realistic. And therefore I would like to do it in this way.

QUESTION: *The Black soldiers were often considered as very convincing. Would you improve, maybe, the characters generally because you couldn't improve the Chorus very much, or otherwise the play would not remain poetic any longer.*

ANSWER: As far as I remember the play, I think that one of the best scenes was with the Chorus, with confrontation of the Red Chorus and the Black Chorus, as verse. I think this is one of the most successful things. I don't know whether this would have to go, I think I would try to keep this. Of course, I think I understand a great deal more about the ideas in that play than I did at the time that I wrote it.

QUESTION: *I think that the Reds and their ideas are very often rather abstract in the play. Very often I think they use the same words, they are fighting for humanity, and so on, for ideas, so maybe the play would not be clear for an average audience. So I think at the same time the positive ideas of the Reds (well, I take them as positive, anyway) at that time were not strong enough to persuade the audience, if the play had this intention.*

ANSWER: Yes, I think this is quite possible, because to me at that time the Blacks represented the present and the Reds represented the future, and of course it's much more difficult to write about the future, except in an abstract way, than it is about the present. I myself was very much involved in the debate about Marxist ideology, which was a very important part of the 1930s. Nowadays it is always thought that we were all communists, we were all to the Left, we all had sort of Left wing ideas. But people forget how in the 1930s, on the Left, there was a very bitter debate going on, which to some extent still continues. I mean, for instance, the debate between Camus and Sartre, is a kind of 1930s debate, and carried on in a very theoretical kind of way. So I think I might find it difficult to make this less theoretical; it's a good point.

QUESTION: *In the World Within World* [S. Spender's autobiography; London: Hamish Hamilton, 1951] you say about the thirties: »I was 'political' not just because I was involved, but in feeling I must choose to defend a good cause against a bad one.« [World Within World, p. 250.] You felt you had to choose to defend a good cause against the bad one. Did you expect the play to have a positive influence on the audience or on the readers, on the proletariat?

ANSWER: No, I didn't at all, and I'd never really thought seriously in that kind of way. I mean, I've often been criticized for not writing for the workers, but I've never really thought for one moment about writing for the workers. It's very difficult for me to write what I mean to say anyway, and I never really think for one moment whom I am writing for. I just am trying to get something clear.

QUESTION: *In the New Country* [ed. by Michael Roberts], in 1933, in the article »Poetry and Revolution«, you said: »The art which is being and which can be created today is not in any sense proletarian art. It is not easy to think of any writer today who is an artist and whose work appeals to a proletarian audience.« [p. 65] Did you change this opinion by 1939?

ANSWER: No; well I still think this is difficult, because I don't think the proletariat is interested in seeing plays about themselves. I don't know whether they enjoy them in Yugoslavia, but they don't enjoy them in this country. The proletariat always wants to see plays about kings and queens and rich people and middle-class life. All the proletarian plays which we have had — by John Osborne and people of this kind — are admired by middle-class audiences, not by proletarian audiences at all, and I think that proletarian plays, anyhow, can only rarely be written, by people who have led the life of proletariat, either because they are workers or because, like George Orwell, they have joined, they've lived a great deal with the workers, which I've never done. I am just a hopeless case, I am a hopelessly middle-class person, that is all it comes to.

QUESTION: You wouldn't say then that a middle-class person can write about, well, about the workers and about their problems?

ANSWER: Well, I think the heroes of the middle-class, of the workers, the heroes of the revolution, really are people like Shelley and Byron, people who are aristocratic, or rather middle-class. Well, then there is Maxim Gorky, or Dickens even, who have lived very intensely, and with very great understanding and very great interest in a sort of mass society, and these, of course, are people I very much admire and envy, and I think that they appeal to the worker because they appeal to all classes, because they are extremely human people, very full-blooded, very instinctive, with a very wide understanding of life, and are great writers. I don't feel that I am in this class at all, I am a sort of rather subjective kind of writer, a lyrical poet. Lyrical poets are not really a working class, I think.

QUESTION: To return back to your play. I have a few more questions. You didn't try to use many expressionist devices, except for a dream, which was quite a normal one. For instance, it was Kenneth Allott who regretted in the *New Verse*, in an article about your play [»Play for Puritans, *New Verse*, No 30, Summer 1938, pp. 20—21], that Hummeldorf had a dream, which you put in the middle of the play. I'd like to know why didn't you use more expressionist devices, more popular songs and so on? Was it just to make the play more easily politically understandable, or was that not a question at all?

ANSWER: Well, possibly because I didn't think about it objectively enough. I always tend to think that I can discover entirely for myself how to do something and I never really ask myself how other people have done it. It would probably be a very good idea if I did, although I don't think at the moment — I am not sure whether I regret very much — not having expressionist devices, because I don't think that expressionist plays seem very interesting at the moment.

QUESTION: . . . *Something else puzzles me a great deal and that's the female figure, which is presented very black in your play, the Judge's Wife, who is like a monster (and there are women in other plays, well in Auden's The Ascent of F6, and so on). Would you say that it was just the influence of Freud? was it Strindberg? or what else might have been?*

ANSWER: Well, this is certainly one of the things I would change. I would try to make the Judge a person with a wife. Because, after all, there are arguments which could be used against the Judge, which can be used without making the woman into a monster. This is one of the big mistakes in the play. I would like to have a new character whom I often thought about but was not able to write about, who could be the Judge's son, and I would like to give some idea of the kind of decadence of life in Germany at the time, and perhaps I would try to make the Judge's son be a kind of beatnik, and a kind of person who lived in bars, in sort of brothels. One of the great mistakes about the play is that this is a situation in which there could be a great deal of life. But, as you say, instead of dealing with it, instead of trying to make it a situation in which there is a great deal of life, I've treated it as a kind of abstract state or situation rather than argument about ideas. What rather fascinates me about the play and makes me think I might go back to it is that it is a very good idea. I think. It is something that really might have happened. And in fact it is the sort of thing that did happen. It's a play about the liberal conscience, essentially, and one could treat it much more realistically.

QUESTION: *Do you remember any dramatists that you might have been influenced by at that time or earlier? I didn't find much about this in your autobiography.*

ANSWER: No, I can't really. I suppose I might have been influenced a little bit by German expressionist drama, Ernst Toller and that sort of thing . . .

QUESTION: *Did you read . . . ?*

ANSWER: I had read Ernst Toller, yes, Georg Kaiser, yes. I had seen them even when I was an undergraduate at Oxford. They did plays by Georg Kaiser. I don't know whether I'd read *Danton's Death* — perhaps I had — by Büchner. I translated Büchner at one time, but this is certainly the kind of play that I thought was possible to write, I think.

QUESTION: *There is one symbolism which is not clear to me. That's when the Fiancée mentions towards the end of the play that Petra and her brother were not seven-pointed indrawn stars [Trial of a Judge, p. 101]. The Jewish star has six points. Do you remember maybe this little detail?*

ANSWER: Well, I am sure it had nothing to do with the Jewish star. I think it probably meant they were not introverts, they were not drawn in upon themselves, as far as I remember. Because I don't think I even knew about the Jewish star at that time.

QUESTION: *Could you tell me something about the meetings with Mr Auden and Isherwood, and Rupert Doone. In your book [World Within World] you mention them, that you've met quite a few times, and I believe they [the meetings] were more or less informal. I've read in some articles — I think it was in Mr Doone's article — that there were some meetings which were public. Did you attend any of them and do you know if the minutes of the meetings were kept?*

ANSWER: I don't remember that any minutes were kept. They were private meetings which were to discuss how little money we [The Group Theatre] had, and how to get the money and what plans for productions there were, to suggest

ideas, things like that, just committee meetings, and then occasionally they were meetings which were public in which the plays that had been produced were discussed. I know my play was discussed and it was very much attacked by all the communists, because it was supposed to be mystical and so on and people got angry and said it was not a really revolutionary play, that kind of thing.

QUESTION: Some of the reviewers, for example, the Scrutiny, were rather hostile towards all of the plays produced by The Group Theatre. Do you think it was just different views that you had about art and politics, or was it because in some of the reviews you and Mr Auden wrote, you criticized them as well, F. R. Leavis, for instance. Would you say it was just a difference of opinion or maybe just a reaction because you didn't like them?

ANSWER: Well, no. I don't think I ever criticized Leavis until very much later.

QUESTION: Maybe somebody else did.

ANSWER: Perhaps, yes. I think that the point about Scrutiny is that very valuable criticism of past works and of a few contemporary works was written, but on the whole, Scrutiny worked out a position for itself which made it impossible to accept anything that was badly written, really. Because the whole position of Scrutiny was that everything that was written had to be rooted in tradition and the way in which it was rooted in tradition had to be discernible to someone who was on the staff of Scrutiny and this is a formula that was almost impossible for any writer to fulfil unless he happened to be a writer who belonged to the staff of Scrutiny. Therefore Scrutiny got itself into a position in which, although it could go on publishing very valuable criticism of past works and sometimes quite valuable criticism of work with which the editors had some particular kind of sympathy, everything outside this was completely banned. There was no possibility really of them being able to like anything, I think.

QUESTION: You have just now criticized the way Scrutiny treated other writers. Don't you think that at least during the years you and Mr Auden and Mr Isherwood and MacNeice worked more closely together, published in the same reviews, that it was a kind of an affront towards the other writers and other poets? That you were — even if you were not recognized — a group at that time. You were quite friendly, let's say not just friendly, but you were quite critical towards the others. And you had some common features.

ANSWER: Yes, this is possible, although I can't really remember whom we attacked. Occasionally we attacked people for ideological reasons like we attacked Roy Campbell and we always felt extremely uneasy, I think, with the people who were further to the Left than we were, and we were always being attacked by them, for example, John Cornford, Christopher Caudwell. We were under constant attack from the communists, in fact, which is probably the kind of attack that we took most seriously because we felt that we did have, I mean, we felt there was some justice in saying we did have petty bourgeois attitudes. I think that communism is a kind of conscience really, and if you are in a situation in which you feel that you ought to be on the side of the workers, that you ought to be on the side of the poor, and you yourself are a rather successful middle-class person, but sympathizing with the communists, you are very open to criticism by them, I think. This would certainly be the criticism that I felt most deeply myself and which, of course, sometimes I got angry about and I tried to answer.

QUESTION: In an article in New Writing [»The Poetic Dramas of W. H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood«, Autumn 1938, pp. 102—108] about the poetic dramas of Auden and Isherwood you mentioned that they portrayed public figures in The Ascent of F6. Could you remember whom they had in mind? And in the same article you expressed the hope for a new poetic drama but then none of you wrote any poetic dramas after 1939.

ANSWER: Well, I probably thought that Ransom, the hero of The Ascent of F6, was a bit modelled on T. E. Lawrence. You know, the airman and the climb and so on. I can't remember any other public figures. Well, the poetic drama was something that I was very interested in, but at the same time the whole movement

which was The Group Theatre and so on, was really much too weak a movement and too marginal and it didn't really have enough force of any kind behind it, it didn't have an audience, didn't really have money, it just had a sort of vague desire that poets should write plays. This is a desire that always exists. If you interviewed twenty poets in England today they'd all say they want to write plays. They somehow think it's a good thing to do and that they should try and do it. But I don't think we really felt strongly enough about it. The English theatre really had a stimulus after the War when a new kind of playwright came forward who had much more feeling for ordinary life than any of us had.

QUESTION: Maybe I am not so pessimistic about this drama because I think these [poetic plays] were the best plays of the decade. It was a revolutionary change to take politics and serious subjects into drama. At that time... [other theatres were either doing] renewals or comedies and nothing serious. The Unity Theatre was another theatre which was oriented towards the Left. Were there many differences between Unity and The Group Theatre?

ANSWER: I should say there was a strong class difference. The Unity Theatre really was an attempt to start a working class theatre, it was ideologically communist, whereas the Group Theatre was sort of middle-class with the literati. But the real trouble about this theatre [The Group Theatre] was, that the theatre is a thing that requires an enormous amount of attention, an enormous amount of ambition. And the conditions in the theatre are such that anyone who wants to write [for the theatre], who thinks of himself as writing poetry or writing novels, tends only to have half an eye on the theatre. I mean he thinks »well maybe I might write a successful play and then everything would be much easier for me.« But he is not really prepared to sacrifice, to write under conditions which he can lay down with the really awful kind of gamble which is writing for the theatre. For example, this is a figure you see that is impressive: of all the plays that appear in London, the average time between their being written and sent to an agent or to a theatrical company and their actual appearing, is four years. There's a gap of four years. Plays... they are often unsuccessful. There are very few revivals of a play. Well now, if you are a poet or a novelist and you have a reputation, you turn in your manuscript, you get your advance, your book appears within a matter of weeks or months and so naturally this seems much more safe than the sort of gamble of writing for the theatre. Because that's another thing about playwrights, that playwrights in a way hardly seem to be writers, they don't seem to be able to write anything except plays and in a way they hardly seem to belong to contemporary literature.

QUESTION: Would you say that this disillusionment was the cause for you and the other writers, poets, for not writing new poetic dramas?

ANSWER: Well. Yes. For instance, if I think today of rewriting the *Trial of a Judge* I realize that I can't think of anyone who would be at all interested in staging it; and in fact I would only be doing it to please myself, I'd only be doing it because I consider that it's a good idea, that it's a problem which I didn't solve at that time. Therefore because one wants to solve problems and because I think it's one in a way, it [the play] could be one of my best works, therefore I want to do it. But the idea that I could interest anyone... I mean, I would be afraid even to go to a manager and say I want to rewrite *Trial of a Judge*. They'd just be polite and that's the last I'd hear about it. You have to be right in the theatre, you see, for people, for managers and companies to be interested at all.

QUESTION: Do you think that the poetic drama of the thirties, the political-poetic drama — if I may call it so — had some influence on the later decades?

ANSWER: Well, that's very difficult to say. I mean, I don't know the answer. I should've thought that, for instance, on *Oh, What a Lovely War*, there was a certain influence of the 1930s. Because there's a reaction today against the 1930s and yet often people seem to be doing the same kind of thing, either just imitating it or sometimes doing it much better; sometimes you feel that they are doing what we were trying to do, but that they are much better equipped to do it. So I don't really know.

QUESTION: Mr T. S. Eliot spoke about your play at the International Theatre Congress in Stratford-upon-Avon in October 1938 [»The Future of Poetic Drama,« Drama, 17/1, Oct. 1938, pp. 3—5]. He said he was afraid that you had too many interests. Do you think that this was true?

ANSWER: He said this about me, did he?

QUESTION: He said this about you, yes. He mentions you especially as a promising writer of poetic drama. But he was afraid that you had too many interests. And he continues that he would like poets to write poetic plays because that was the only solution to the decay of the stage, of the theatre in that time.

ANSWER: He thought that I had too many interests? Well, he is quite right, of course. I am sure, he was quite right about that.

QUESTION: And even there in the play? Yes?

ANSWER: That I don't know about so much, no.

QUESTION: What is your attitude towards the role of propaganda in the theatre? or let's say, what was it in the thirties?

ANSWER: I think in a way it is an unreal question, because I think that the moment anything is called propaganda, it's bad. I think there are certain things which are implicit propaganda in that they make you feel that you ought to act, that life ought to be different, and things like that. But I think that anything that you start to call propaganda, which you think is propaganda, is bad, probably.

QUESTION: In your article »A Modern Writer in Search of a Moral Subject« published in The London Mercury in December 1934 [31/182, pp. 128—133] you say that one of the things that a subject should be related to is politics. Do you think that that was a solution at the time and do you still think that a modern moral subject should be like that?

ANSWER: No, I don't at all, no. I mean I thought, you see, that in the 1930s there was a great political cause, which was anti-fascism, and I therefore thought that everything should be related to this and we should try to identify ourselves with this. But, it seems to me today, in the first place, there are not really very simple causes like this, and in the second place, ... well, yes there are some [simple causes], for instance, the cause of race. This racialism and desegregation in the United States, they certainly are very great causes in the world. I don't sort of feel there's a kind of general duty that we all, that we have to participate in them.

QUESTION: Mr Spender, in your article on the importance of W. H. Auden in London Mercury in April 1933 [»The Importance of W. H. Auden,« 39/234, pp. 613—619], you said, »The task of modern poetry is not so much to create new values as to interpret permanent human values in forms which have a significant bearing on our environment and the circumstances of our life«. Don't you think that after some revolutionary changes and especially in your period, in the thirties, when you tried to pull down all the established political, moral, religious [norms], that you should try and create some new moral, aesthetic values as well?

*ANSWER: I don't think there is such thing as a new value, because I think it's a value because one associates it with the past, it's a value because it has been a value. Even Communism, for instance, is not really new. After all, it's preached in the *New Testament* and it appeals to a kind of humanism, and humanism has existed for a long time, if you consider it simply as a value and not as a political programme, and a means that appeals to a sense of human justice. If you consider it as a moral force, it's entirely human, or traditional; something has existed always. One way of putting it would be to say that Communism is a Christian heresy, maybe.*

QUESTION: I think that one should take sides, if an important question has to be decided. Do you think one should do that?

ANSWER: Well, I wouldn't quite say, if you say one should, I suppose it means everyone should. (Yes.) No, I don't think that everyone should, because I don't think there's any point in everyone being concerned with things which they don't have any experience of, or any feeling about. But if you ask, should I, I think this is so, I think that one, I and you, and most of my friends, I think that on the whole one should, yes. I think one should be on the side of human freedom and so on, but I would have to give the whole list of things which one should [do, I] think, and they are often very legalistic things. There shouldn't be secret trials and so on, people shouldn't be sent to prison for long periods without being tried, and I think that often these things are very tied up with the law and structure of society and one should certainly take sides about that. I think that one should be on the side, for example, in America today, of the Bill of Rights and desegregation, and so on, one should be against what's going on in South Africa.

QUESTION: Here I have another quotation of yours. It's a sentence which was printed in The Left Review in February 1935 [»Writers and Manifestoes«, I, 5, Feb. 1935, pp. 145—147] in which you say: »The contest (between the two worlds) is so important that the neutrality is impossible.« If I take the Judge of your play, for example, if he had taken action, I think that maybe he could have prevented some of the deaths which had occurred.

ANSWER: I am sorry I don't know quite what you're asking me?

QUESTION: ... For instance, the Judge who did not take a side, he was at the same time guilty of the other people's deaths.

ANSWER: Yes, possibly. Again, I haven't read the play for a long time. I always rather think of him as taking sides, slowly, but perhaps he didn't. When I rewrite the play, this is something that I'll certainly think about. Yes, I think he should take sides. I don't think as a matter of fact in that situation he probably would have been able to prevent deaths. I think the real question is whether you should do what you think is right quite regardless of the consequences, and I think that on the whole you should.

QUESTION: Mr Ashley Dukes said in one of his articles [»The English Scene. A Word About the left.« Theatre Arts Monthly, 20/4, April 1936, pp. 265—269] that the political writers and the poets, the dramatists of the 1930s, were most angry if somebody accused them that their dramas were just a kind of safety-valve. Would you comment upon this statement?

ANSWER: Well, it wouldn't make me angry if someone said that, because I think it might be true and of course it depends a bit *whose* safety valve. You might say that everything that a writer says is a safety valve in so far as he is not acting, he is writing. So I don't think it's a very good argument, really. You have strong feelings about what ought to happen in the world and you express these feelings, but in expressing these feelings you aren't actually acting, you aren't doing anything. It can always be said that you aren't doing anything, you aren't sitting down on the pavement in front of the American Embassy to stop atomic tests, and so therefore it can be said that by staying at home and writing a poem about it you are just sort of blowing off a safety valve. But it isn't an argument that has very much value, because it cuts every way. You could say that anyone who doesn't succeed in an action is just acting as a safety valve, because we all know very well that the sitting down on the pavement in front of the American Embassy or the Soviet Embassy doesn't stop atomic tests so that people can always say that any kind of attitude which doesn't seem to produce results is just subjective interest and just persistent blowing off steam on the part of the person. But I think it is a very unimportant argument, really.

QUESTION: Would you say then that the poetic plays in the 1930s had some influence on the people because probably a poet, a writer, desires to influence the reader.

ANSWER: I think that on the whole the leftism of the 1930s, the antifascism, had a very great influence. Yes. For instance, to an extent that it often made one quite ashamed. A whole generation of people who had been brought up in the 1930s afterwards became the pilots who won the Battle of Britain. We weren't being pilots, we were sort of going on writing about other things and we weren't taking part in any kind of action. I knew some of those people and I know quite well that they were very influenced by the antifascism of the 1930s. People like Auden and to some extent myself had persuaded many members of a generation that the great mission in their life was to destroy fascism. So I think to this extent it did have real influence.

QUESTION: Was this done by their reading your plays or by watching them?

*ANSWER: Not my play, I don't think. How things are done is you write a few books and something is abstracted from your books which is really the idea of you, the idea that there were these young people who wrote poems, and who wrote... were writing all the time, who were demonstrating all the time. They became symbols through the fact that they wrote their poetry or their plays or whatever it was, they themselves became symbols for something, just like Pasternak became a symbol in the Soviet Union. I mean, they are two separate things. In the first place he did write, he wrote *Zhivago*, he wrote his poems and these give him enormous credit. But it wasn't really because anyone who read *Zhivago* and who read the poems... I don't think they probably got very much political message. But there was an idea that there was a man who went together with it and who — yes, the man himself — who is devoted to his work and who goes on writing his work in spite of censorship, and so on. The two things become identical, I think. I don't really think that if plays or poems were written by computers, which is possible, just conceivable, if they were written by machines [even if] they were very beautiful, whether they would have the same effect. I think that somehow it is important that one associates the work with the person who's made the work.*

QUESTION: ... Can you, maybe, remember what kind of audience came to see The Group Theatre plays?

ANSWER: Yes, a lot of schoolteachers and kind of Left-wing people and other writers and very few workers. The plays of Auden and Isherwood especially were written with the idea that anyone who came in, by chance, would be interested, but on the whole, I think, they were exclusive. And they weren't even very popular. I think that Auden and Isherwood's plays ran for quite a time, perhaps a month or two months at the outside. My play ran for ten days, I remember, and it [the theatre] wasn't full all the time; it was in a very small theatre, so it couldn't have had a very wide public.

QUESTION: Do you think this had something to do with the play? or just that the public wanted musicals, light plays, »At the White Horse Inn,« I remember, or Cochrane (I do not know how to pronounce this name), his revues were done a lot)...

ANSWER: Yes.

QUESTION: ... Do you think that the audience just didn't like the poetic plays, or this kind of drama, and preferred something light at the time, in the 1930s?

ANSWER: I think that part of the merit of a play is that it must attract the audience. It's quite different from every other kind of work, because a poem, for example, it doesn't matter at all whether it attracts an audience. It may be much

better than other things that are being written. The test of it really is whether it goes on being read over a hundred years, not whether 25,000 people read it in a month. But the important thing about a play is that it must attract 25,000 people, or whatever, in six months in order to keep going at all, and this is an element which you simply can't ignore. So therefore, if these plays bored people it was partly the fault of the playwrights and not entirely the fault of those people. I always have quite a respect for things which draw large audiences. They may do it through being bad but they may also do it through being good, and I think that a good play that doesn't attract an audience is an awful waste of effort. If a play is worth doing, it is worth making it so that it does attract the audience.

QUESTION: Mr Spender, thank you very much.