

THE ROLE OF VISUAL IMAGES IN
DAVID STOREY'S THE CONTRACTOR

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David Storey (1933-) is a contemporary British playwright who came to the theatre after a successful career as a novelist. Among his important novels are : The Sporting Life (1960), Flight into Camden (1960), Radcliffe (1964) and Saville (1976). His first play The Restoration of Arnold Middleton (1967) won the Evening Standard Drama Award for most promising playwright. Among his important plays which Storey was encouraged to write after the success of his first play are : In Celebration (1969), The Contractor (1969), Home (1970), The Changing Room (1971), Cromwell (1973), The Farm (1973), Life Class (1974), Mother's Day (1976), Sisters (1978), and Early Days (1980). James Gindin comments on Storey's new career as a playwright :

The Restoration of Arnold Middleton was the first of a series of plays, all widely recognized with prizes, enthusiastic reviews, and slightly varying

popular acceptance, that made Storey's work central to the productions at the Royal Court Theatre in the late 1960 and early 1970s.¹

David Storey's plays were received favourably by many critics. William J. Free believes that Storey's plays "manage to achieve a degree of dramatic excitement and intensity which establishes him as one of the more talented playwrights of the contemporary British theatre."² B. A. Young states : "My admiration for Mr. Storey's writing goes up with each play I see. He has begun to work quite independently of any stage conventions generally accepted, yet he has an instinctive knowledge of what 'comes off'."³ Other critics still view his drama enthusiastically. Peter Ansoage acknowledges Storey's status as a contemporary playwright :

With the possible exception of the Bond plays, Lindsay Anderson's productions of Storey's The Contractor, Home and The Changing Room have provided the Court with its clearest and most consistent artistic statement of the late 1960s and early 70s. The Storey opus has proved to be the one vital link with the early naturalistic days of Osborne, Wesker and Arden. Each of Storey's plays has transferred to the West End and, recently, The Changing Room ... ran for six months on Broadway.⁴

In his book British Theatre since 1955, Ronald Hayman assesses Storey's achievement as a playwright:

None of Bolt's, Mortimer's, or Shaffer's plays has ever been staged at the Royal Court, where nine of David Storey's received their premiers- a total exceeded only by John Osborne's. But, though the Court, more than any other full-sized London theatre, has been a cockpit for experiment, Storey no less than Bolt, Mortimer, or Shaffer- or Osborne- has repeatedly gone back to naturalism, after repeatedly falling out of love with it.⁴

Critic Phyllis R. Randall in 1984, highly praises Storey's creative abilities : "David Storey is one of these rarities, a novelist and a playwright. Moreover, he has been successful as both, as attested by five awards for his novels and seven awards for the eleven plays that have been produced."⁶

By the production of The Contractor, Storey's fame as a playwright had been well-established. The Contractor, the subject of this paper, was produced by The Royal Court Theatre on 20 October 1969, then it was transferred to Chelsea Theatre Center-Manhattan, New York, in 1972. According to James Gindin "The Contractor (was) distinguished among Storey's plays by the longest initial run and the most prizes, which included the London Theatre Critics Award in 1970, and the New York Drama

Critics circle Award in 1974."⁷ This paper focuses on the role of visual images in The Contractor and their implications on the play's themes. As The Contractor is a good representative of Storey's drama, such a study would yield a commentary on Storey's dramatic work as a whole.

The Contractor portrays in details the erection of a tent used as a marquee in which a wedding reception is to be held. After the reception which takes place during the interval between Act II and Act III, is over, the tent is shown to be dismantled. During the play's three acts the characters are portrayed sketchily as to belong to three classes and to different age-groups. Mr. Ewbank, the contractor of the title and the tent manufacturer; his wife ; his workmen who are erecting the tent for the marriage of Claire, his daughter; Claire's fiance, Maurice; his son, Paul; and his father and mother, Old Ewbank and Old Mrs. Ewbank. His son and parents come to attend the wedding and then to leave at once. During the first two acts, the stage is turned into a setting for five workmen, Kay, Ewbank's foreman, Marshall, Bennett, Fitzpatrick, and Glendenning, who are erecting the tent, interrupted from time to time by Ewbank himself and by some of the members of his family. As the first two acts describe the physical labour of the workmen in

erecting the tent, similarly, the third act is devoted to portray the same workmen as they are dismantling it. During the three acts, the workmen eat, talk, banter, joke, fight and laugh. There are under-developed personal or class fights, but the general mood is one of relaxation. William J. Free maintains : "The dominant mood of the play is joy in the act of building the tent. Except for one emotional flareup which dies down almost as quickly as it started, the men are jovial and satisfied with their lives."⁸

The erection as well as the dismantling of a tent need an extreme stage realism. Philip Roberts comments on the technique of the play: "The Contractor began a process of minuting life as ordinarily lived, as opposed to the devising of theatrical confrontation."⁹ Contrasted to the contemporary political plays of post-1968, The Contractor gives the impression of conventionality because of the neat, direct and realistic pattern of the well-made play which the play's surface exhibits. John Russel Taylor comments on the play's technique by speaking about Storey's dramatic technique in general :

It is precisely this quality- the teasing and elusive feeling that the plays have a sort of weight and density which one cannot logically justify- which

makes David Storey's plays (and for the matter his novels) so distinctive in the contemporary British scene. One would guess, I think, that though the plays have an extraordinary and unerring instinct for what works in the theatre, they were written by someone with no passionate interest in the theatre or close involvement in the latest movements, the approved positions for a modern playwright.¹⁰

With the symbolic implications of the play's texture, language and visual images, the play yields meanings beyond its realistic exterior. In Austin E. Quigley's words : "When we ... explore that function, we discover an important aspect of Storey's originality as a dramatist- his ability to transform conventional technical devices into structural images which control the thematic implications of the plays."¹¹

Storey himself, says about his intentions in The Contractor :

I wanted to write something that was not dramatic in the conventional sense. I wanted to do a play without any dramatic gesture where the reality of what people are is the drama rather than the irreconcilable conflicts. ... I just thought the visual texture of the play should be complementary to the emotional texture.¹²

The Contractor, in Philip Roberts's words is a

play "which marked a development in the way Storey perceived theatre work."¹³ The central incident of the play, the marriage celebration, is dealt with indirectly as it occurs off stage. The tension and emotional effect of such an incident are avoided. What concerns Storey is the effect such events leave on people before and after they occur. Thus he avoids violence and confrontation. His aim is to reveal the truth which is buried underneath. Storey's naturalistic setting is functional as it is employed. He uses stage images which turn reality into symbols which reveal the modern man's lot in the modern world. In an essay titled "The Intrusion Plot in David Storey's Plays," William J. Free and Lynn Page Whittaker write about the symbolic level in The Contractor :

In The Contractor Storey creates a form of poetic theatre in which feeling is conveyed indirectly by means of concrete images and actions rather than directly by confrontation and discussion. ... The result is a series of interesting studies of man's alienation and confusion in a complex and shifting world.¹⁴

The erection and dismantling of the tent act as a visual image of the different phases of man's life. The arrival of the workmen at the beginning of act one, their interaction and

work during the first and second acts, then their dismantling of the tent and departure in act three symbolize the three phases of man's life, birth, growth and death; or childhood, manhood and old age. The three Ewbank generations represent this cycle. During the erection of the tent, the stage is full of noise and bustle; by the end of the second act the tent is completely erected and beautifully decorated. It is made ready for the wedding reception. The stage directions read :

The whole place now has been cleared: the floor shining, ... The white tables and chairs have been set round the sides, bowls of flowers put on them.¹⁵

At the beginning of act III the tent is distorted and the whole place is a complete mess after the party is over. The stage directions go as follows:

The tent has suffered a great deal. Part of the muslin drapery hangs loosely down. Similarly, parts of the lining round the walls hang down in loose folds, unhooked, or on the floor. Part of the dance floor itself has been removed, other parts uprooted and left in loose slabs : chairs have been upturned, tables left lying on their sides. Bottles lie here and there on the floor, along with discarded napkins, streamers, tablecloths, paper-wrapping. Most of the flowers have gone and the few

that remain have been dragged out of position, ready to be disposed of.(p.163)

These stage directions which open the third act evoke an image of chaos, ugliness and decay. The image symbolizes something which is superfluous and which must be removed. This image symbolizes the superfluous existence of Old Ewbank who seems to be on the way of others. He appears periodically on the stage carrying a piece of rope which he tells others to have made himself, boasting that it excels machine-made ropes. As a retired rope-maker who hates the modern technological world, he likes to speak about his achievements, but nobody seems to be interested. He is too weak and too disturbed to be left alone. Like the tent which outlived its usefulness, he must be discarded.

The chaotic shape of the tent also symbolizes the mess Mr. Ewbank has been in at the end of the play, as a result of his bitter realization that he failed to bring up his children to value his own way of life, as both his children left him after the end of the party. The tent's falling down coincides with Mr. Ewbank's failure as a father. His children are no longer in need of him because they have become old enough to pursue their own way of life. Their attitude resembles his own attitude towards his old father. Mr.

Ewbank tells his wife after everyone leaves them: "What's to become of us, you reckon?" (p.191) He speaks with Kay, his foreman, after the departure of his son :

- Ewbank : What do you reckon to it, then? Do you know, I've lived all this time- and I know nowt about anything. Least way, I've come to that conclusion ... A bloody wanderer.
- Kay : (watches him. Then) Your lad ?
- Ewbank : I've no idea at all. None. Do you know ? ... Where he's off to. I don't think he has himself. His mother sits at home ... (shakes his head.) The modern world, Kay. It's left you and me behind.
- Kay : Aye. Well. It can't be helped.
(They are silent a moment.
Then :)
- Ewbank : Pathetic. ... A lot of bloody misfits. You could put us all into a string bag , you know, and chuck us all away, and none'd be the wiser.
- Kay : (laughs) : Aye. I think you're right.
- Ewbank : Aye, (laughs) Sunk without trace. (pp.187-8)

Life around him will never stop. He tells Bennett about the lawn which was affected by the tent's

erection, a thought that he can apply to life's cycle : "Aye. Well. It'll grow again. Come today. Gone tomorrow."(p.188) Bennett's answer goes thus: "Everything in its season."(p.188) His last words with his wife symbolize this phased-change :

Ewbank : (shivers. Looks up) Autumn...
 Mrs Ewbank : (abstracted): Still...It's
 been a good summer.
 Ewbank : Aye. Comes and goes.(p.191)

Mr. Ewbank is left at the end of the play to be greatly frustrated as both his children left him. None of them could understand him, especially his son, Paul, the university graduate. The presence of Old Ewbank helps as an example of the gulf which separates son from father. Ewbank's relationship with Paul is tense, awkward and strained. While arranging the flowers on the white tables inside the tent in act two, suddenly they realize that they are alone. Thus "they both fall silent... For some little while Paul works quietly at the folwers, Ewbank standing in the centre of the tent, still."(p.156) Julian Hilton asserts : "Crises are provoked by broken communications consequent on the lack of a common language through which to talk and release aggression."¹⁶ Paul's relationship with his mother is more relaxed. Ewbank describes her after her son departs as weeping "bloody buckets." (p.187) Albert E. Kalson comments on the disintegration

of the family thus : "Ropes come to pieces, tents are dismantled, families drift and empires wane."¹⁷

The visual image of the construction and falling down of the tent which symbolizes the modern families' disintegration, represented by that of the Ewbank family, also symbolizes the disintegration of the individual, and his dividedness in the modern world. Mr. Ewbank is a self-made man who raised himself up from a working-class origin into the position of a rich firm owner who employs others to work for him. Yet, at heart, his loyalties go to his origin. Storey describes him in the stage directions thus :

He's a solid, well-built man, broad rather than tall, stocky. He's wearing a suit, which is plain, workman-like and chunky; someone probably who doesn't take easily to wearing clothes, reflecting, perhaps, the feeling of a man has never really found his proper station in life.(p.99)

He is a fine artisan who excels anybody else in decorating tents. He tells Kay : "That's a lovely bit of sewing (looking up) Look at that seem. (Reads.) 'Made by F. Ewbank to commemorate the wedding of his daughter Claire.'"(p.122) Though not a soft employer, he becomes happier in the company of his employees. He shares with them the left-overs of the party's refreshments :

Kay and Bennett laugh. Behind them Ewbank has come back with a bottle and several glasses on a tray, together with several small pieces of wedding cake.)

Ewbank : Here, now. You've not finished. Get it off, now, and we'll have a drop of this... Glenny. Fetch us in a table.(p.186)

He shows special kindness to his young workman, Glendenning, who is half-crazed, as to spare an extra piece of cake for him : "I've a bit extra for you. (Takes a bit of cake from his pocket.) E't it now when they're not looking, or they'll have it off you."(p.190) Albert E. Kalson comments on Ewbank's dividedness and disintegration thus: "The contractor is obviously uncomfortable in his managerial capacity. Still a worker at heart, he is happiest when he involves himself in the labour of raising the tent. Throughout the play, he comes on the scene ostensibly to see how the job is progressing, but actually to work alongside his men."¹⁸ Benedict Nightingale describes him: "Ewbank's manner is direct, blunt, brusque, aggressive, rude, but ... he is more complicated than he seems. He feels his age and a sense of emptiness and waste He drinks too much. Money hasn't brought him content."¹⁹

His son Paul seems to be infected by his father's sense of loss and misplacement. His university

education raised his station in life. The play's stage directions describe him thus :

Paul, Ewbank's son, is a bit slighter in build than his father, a little uncoordinated, perhaps... . His initial attitude, deliberately implanted, is that of a loafer. His hands are buried in his trouser pockets and a cigarette hangs, largely unattended, from the corner of his mouth. His manner is a conscious foil to his father's briskness. He has no particular refinement of accent.(p.102)

Benedict Nightingale sees Paul as representing restless young men in Storey's plays : "Like many of Storey's young men, he evidently feels deracinated, split by his education : he has become an obsessive traveller, wandering in search (at bottom) of an identity."²⁰ Paul shows his readiness to help the workmen in their labour, but his inability to work is symbolized by the fact that he puts his hands in his pockets. He is sharply contrasted with the workers whose toil helps to erect the tent. When asking the half-witted Glendenning about his job, Paul finds him fully aware of his position as a nearly crazy person whom nobody would employ except Mr. Ewbank. Glendenning is less misplaced than Paul who is out of both work and purpose: "Well, I'm a sort of a ... No, no. I'm a kind of ... I don't do anything at all as a matter of fact."(p.126) He might be suited only to arrange

the flowers as he does at the end of the second act. Mockingly his father asks his son to arrange the flowers well, "Not to plant them." (p.156) Paul's answer emphasizes his inability to work, and his father's barrenness : "That's right. Don't worry. None of these'll grow." (p.156) Albert E. Kalson comments on Paul's middle-class attitude : "Paul has been educated to the point where he can find no satisfaction in manual labour."²¹ When his mother, who knows his attitude towards his father's work, asks him whether he likes his father's job, he answers : "I don't know. (Shrugs, laughs.) I suppose I do ... " (p.133) James Gindin believes that the character of Paul represents not only all young men portrayed by Storey in both his novels and plays, but also represents the character of the author himself whose working-class father also gave him middle-class education that alienated his son from his working-class origin, and left him misplaced, divided and lost. "He ... frequently deals ... with the child of the working classes estranged by his or her education from the values of the parents who worked so hard ... to help provide the education."²² Paul's presence in the play is marginal as he remains on the fringe. He is too weak to interact with life or with his father whose time is mostly spent with his men. The visual image of the workers doing the job, making noise and moving here and there is juxtaposed

with Paul's image, as he is putting his hands in his pockets unable to offer real help, and is to emphasize his pathetic position. The vivid image of Ewbank's foreman and worker, Kay, who was once imprisoned for embezzlement, who had been employed by Ewbank afterwards and who is now a model of seriousness, honesty and devotion to his work, reflects Paul's trifling nature, and his inability to engage himself in life.

Paul's grandfather, Old Ewbank, senile and troubled, feels greatly misplaced and disintegrated in an age which leans heavily on the machine. He keeps boasting of his physical endurance and workmanship : "You'll find bits of rope I made, you know, floating under the North Pole ... A piece of rope in those days ..."(p.179) He feels more misplaced and frustrated as nobody seems to heed his words or his piece of rope which he is careful to carry in order to convince others, and himself, that his life has not been without meaning. Mr. Ewbank's daughter, Claire is to marry an upper-middle class doctor who is above her class of whom she is very proud and with whom she leaves immediately after the celebration is over. The disintegration of evryone here is due to the social changes which affected the three family generations. Benedict Nightingale comments on Storey's misplaced characters :

Storey's characters tend to be at odds with society, with those who should be nearest and dearest, and even with themselves. At worst, they are cut off from roots, families, satisfying work, fulfilling relationships, and the ability to comprehend and articulate what is wrong. Their hands ... dissociated from their minds, their minds from their tongues.²³

The vivid image of the erection and dismantling of the tent which symbolizes man's disintegration represented by the three family generations evokes the modern man's suffering, and his resistance of a reality he abhors. Man's rationality may be affected, and at a certain time it might desert him. Man's mental stability might not disappear at once. Old Ewbank is shown to be mentally-disturbed. His circumstances might have led him to this condition. Mr. Ewbank's bitterness at the end of the play might lead him to a similar condition. Paul's case is worse, he seems to be more seriously lost. His mental health stands in doubt if he remains purposeless and misplaced for long. Albert E. Kalson comments : "What so many quickly label insanity, more often than not, Storey tells us, is part guilt, part fear—the quiet desperation which constantly threatens man's reason."²⁴ The two concrete images of the tent, first as it appears, by the end of the second act, to be beautiful and impressive, second, as it appears, at the opening of the third act,

to be distorted and chaotic, symbolize man's mind first in its prime, then after its collapse under life's pressure. The image of the half-crazed Glendenning who was mentally disturbed since his birth, is contrasted sharply with those people who are born sane then lose their mental balance, exactly like the tent after losing its glamorous shape, due to heavy pressures. While Glendenning is happy and contented, Old Ewbank is frustrated and discontented, because he feels all the bitterness of a misplaced and disappointed being.

The visual image of erecting then dismantling the tent represents a static situation. Before the tent is erected the stage is bare. After its dismantling the stage becomes bare again. The sense evoked by this vivid image could be a sense of loss and futility which applies to the Eubanks, especially, Mr. Ewbank and his father whose life's toil avails them nothing. This image can be applied to Storey's vision of life : man is born, grows up, struggles and toils, then finally dies. James Porter explores this idea : by trying to find some affinity between The Contractor and Waiting for Godot : "Nothing meaningful takes place in either play. The characters and society are going nowhere. Godot and The Contractor merely reflect existential moments : Godot from philosophical viewpoint,

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The Contractor from a labour viewpoint."²⁵ Phyllis R. Randall gives his own interpretation of Storey's vision of the futility of human exertion which is evoked in the play :

The irony of the despairing artist writing plays of acceptability is perhaps strongest of all in The Contractor. Despite all the sources of real and potential conflict in the play ... work is accomplished. The ... workmen ... unite long enough to put up a tent. And the Ewbank family, separated by education, geography, age, and goals, do unite and decorate the tent. ... But to what avail ? The "art" that each group has structured and worked for, the tent and the decorations, are in ruins before our eyes in the last act. The members of the family separate and go their own way. Even the Storey surrogate, potential-artist Paul, far from being an artist-saviour figure, is less forceful and dynamic than his crude, drunken, materialistic father.²⁶

Benedict Nightingale gives another interpretation to this evocative image which the play poses :

The end of all that effort, care and trouble is something essentially impermanent and dubiously useful ... Some may think that this only too characteristic of a society that depends on ever-accelerating production, built in obsolescence, disposability. ... It's a society, not just likely to frustrate those seeking to fulfil themselves through their hands,

but designed for those unattached to and uninterested in what they do, and calculated to make anybody a 'misfit'. There is no going backward : Old Ewbank is an absurdly anacronistic figure... And what is the way forward ? Paul's confusion and bewilderment is its own answer.²⁷

The different interpretations of the visual and vivid images in the play stem from their rich associations. Still, the images of the tent's construction and dismantling evoke a number of others. Important among them is the interpretation which relates directly to the play's title, the contractor. This visual image symbolizes another aspect of man's life as based on and controlled by contracts. Mr. Ewbank, as a contractor has to fulfil the requirements of the contract of building the tent and other tents later on. By the end of each contract he makes, he gets his price and quits. He says to Kay once : "You pay a price for everything, Kay."(p.187) Man as a contractor has to fulfil certain roles, duties, positions, then he has to withdraw. In the play, Mr. Ewbank has fulfilled the duties of another contract , one which belongs to his role as a father. If Ewbank's men have quitted after fulfilling the duties of their contract with Ewbank, Ewbank has to withdraw from the life of his children who have become old enough to be on their own. In work contracts no pain is felt after the

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transaction is done , while things are different in contracts which involve man's self and soul. The image of the distorted tent "resembling something ready for the dustbin,"²⁸ symbolizes Mr. Ewbank's state at the end of the play. He must be discarded as unnecessary and unneeded. His children's contract with him as a father has been ended. Ewbank himself did the same thing with his own father long ago. His bitterness might lead him later on into a state of insanity like that of his own father. Since this kind of contract which involves parents, relatives and friends, is a human contract, which deals mostly with human emotions, Mr. Ewbank's love-hate sentiments towards his children make him both curse them and long to see them, even after his contractual duties are fulfilled. Austin E. Quigley comments on the symbolic implications of the title of the play :

The very title draws attention to the play's fundamental concern. ... The Contractor deals with relationships that are explicitly limited in nature, limited indeed by their contractual basis. The centrality of this process to the play is given visual embodiment in the erecting and dismantling of the tent, operations which precede and succeed the wedding celebration.²⁹

The critics' different and perhaps conflicting interpretations of the themes of The Contractor.

assert Storey's success in handling various structural devices which symbolize the modern man's fate and his ambiguous dividedness between internal desires and external social surrounding. His realistic devices are manipulated to impart vivid stage images which indirectly and symbolically evoke perceptive interpretations of the modern man's position in life. John Russell Taylor perceptively comments on the play's rich associations :

It absolutely refuses capsulation : it is about a tent, it is about people; beyond that it can be about almost anything you like, because the image it presents, if you choose to regard it as an image, has a true poetic polyvalence- it can be interpreted in any number of ways without being diminished by interpretation or losing its validity on a basic realistic level.³⁰

Storey, the author of this highly visual play comments on the different possible meanings of the play :

I find The Contractor one of the most satisfying things I've written. Each time I see it in a different light. In this revival (when the play transferred to the West End) I see it more and more as being about- or somehow related to- the decline and fading-away of a capitalist society. Or I have seen it as a metaphor for artistic creation: all the labour of putting up this tent, and when it's there, what good is it?

What is it there for ? And I get letters from people who ask me does it mean this, and does it mean that, and I often see some justice in their suggestions; And still the play is not confined to any one of these definitions; it contains the possibility of them, but it still continues to make sense- and complete sense- as the story of these men who put up the tent, that's that. I think it's very important for me to leave all the options open.³¹

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