

From Babel to Pentecost (and back again): the world after the wall came down.

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From Babel to Pentecost (and Back Again): The World After the Wall Came Down

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

From Babel to Pentecost (and Back Again): The World After the Wall Came Down

David Edgar (bio)

More than twenty years ago, I took a journey to try to make sense of what happened in Eastern Europe after the Berlin Wall fell. This quest began in early 1990 when, on a British Council lecture tour, I visited what was still Yugoslavia, subsequently traveling to Romania in order to research a film about the December 1989 revolution there. Out of this came not a film but three stage plays. The third, which opened in 2001 at the Royal Shakespeare Company's studio theater at Stratford-upon-Avon, was about the peace processes that sought to resolve the unexpected and bloody conflicts that emerged in the wake of the Cold War, in places like Bosnia and Kosovo. The middle play, a kind of bridge between them, is called *Pentecost*, but to set that in context, I need to say a word about the first play, which was inspired by the events of late 1989 and was premiered at the National Theatre one day before the first anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, the date that Americans would call November 9 but that Europeans write as 9.11.89.

I'm a date freak. On my fortieth birthday my parents gave me a copy of the newspaper for the day I was born. The lead story—not on the front page, since this was the pre-'60s *London Times*—recorded the big happening of the day before, the communist takeover of Czechoslovakia. If it might be said of any single event, this was the one that set the shape and character of the Cold War world in which I was to grow up. Born in 1948, I was twenty in 1968, and thus in my second year at university at the height of the student revolt against the Vietnam war—that dawn in which it was bliss to be alive, but to be young and in full-time higher education was very heaven, not least because the events of that year, particularly in France, seemed to confirm that the left-wing dream of an utterly transformed social order was back on the historical agenda. In Britain particularly, the next six years—which saw an unprecedented wave of traditional industrial militancy—provided further confirmation that the revolution was imminent. However, if you reverse the numbers of my birth year—as Orwell did to find his most famous title—you get 84, when the defeat of a year-long coalminers' strike signalled, if any single

event did, the death of that dream in Britain. Along similar lines, if you upend '68—literally turn the figures upside down—you get 89, the date of the great popular uprising during which millions of young East Europeans used political tools forged twenty-one years earlier to overthrow the regimes which claimed to be the torchbearers of the socialist ideal. **[End Page 245]**

Although I had never had much time for the Soviet Union, I had increasingly felt that I needed to pay attention to its failings, not least because every existing socialist country had faced the same problems and come up with pretty similar solutions. This feeling was exacerbated by the fact that as communism crumbled, democratic socialism—what might in the U.S. be called liberalism—was having a tough time too, not just in Britain and America but also in the flagship social democracies of north central Europe and Scandinavia. I had visited Eastern Europe quite frequently in the 1980s, and grown interested in and fond of its places and its people. For all these reasons, when the Wall fell, it seemed indecent not to try and write about it. And because, in Eastern Europe, basically the same thing happened five times—in Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria, East Germany, and Czechoslovakia—I decided I could and should create a fictional, paradigmatic East European revolution constructed from the body parts of all the real ones, a model that would show better than any strictly factual account of a particular revolution the underlying processes they shared.

The first project to come up was a film that was...

David Edgar

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David Edgar 245



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