

Wesker knew you can speak Norfolk and be eloquent

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Sir Arnold Wesker has died, aged 83. In the recent EDP obituary, he was described as "a well-known playwright". When I was in my last years at school in the 1960s, he would have been called THE well-known playwright. He was very famous.

But for some he was infamous. Wesker was an East End Jewish boy who campaigned for working people's rights, including rights to access to high culture. For many of us he was a bit of a hero, so it was a wonderful thing when he came to talk to our Inter-Sixth-Form Society. In those days of single sex grammar schools, one of the strongest motivations for attendance at meetings was to get to know members of the opposite sex. But Arnold brought the young people in because they really wanted to listen to him. He even stayed afterwards and went for coffee with some of the keener sixth-formers. Arnold had spent lots of time in Norfolk and married a Norfolk girl, so he clearly felt very much at home with a bunch of local 16 to 19-year-olds.

One of the ways in which Wesker's political views meshed with his writing could be seen in how he reproduced the speech of ordinary people in his dramas. He portrayed lower-class people being



■ Prolific playwright Sir Arnold Wesker, who has died aged 83.

Picture: PA/STEFAN ROUSSEAU

eloquent, as he knew from his own background they often were. And he presented Norfolk country people being articulate and expressive. From his time here, Wesker knew that speaking Norfolk in no way renders you incapable of eloquence.

He knew this not least from working on a Norfolk farm – and in the kitchens of the Bell Hotel in Norwich. This was an experience he drew on in his famous play *The Kitchen*, which was also made into a film. I saw it in the Noverre cinema, not far from the Bell.

His most famous play was – is – *Roots*, which was performed on the West End stage and all round the world. In it, a Norfolk country girl called Beatie returns from London, waiting for her middle-class liberal boyfriend who never turns up. As she waits, she gradually emerges from under his influence and finds her own voice.

And it's a Norfolk voice. "Blust," she says, "you don' wanna take no notice of what them ole papers say about the workers bein' all-important these days – that's all squit!"