

## ***The Becoming Room* - Introduction to the Film of the Play**

The playscript for *The Becoming Room* was written in 2015 at the request of Tom Alter who had played the child Bion's father in the original film of *A Memoir of the Future*, which was partly made in India in 1982 but never finished. The idea was to retell the film from the point of view of Bion as an old man 're-remembering' his life history, not just his literal life story as told in *The Long Weekend* but his dream or phantasy life as presented in the *Memoir*. Consequently scenes from the original film are played in the background and occasionally the original soundtrack penetrates the action of the play and interrupts the voice of its narrator and protagonist.

Tom Alter only gave one, experimental performance of the complete play, on 27 May 2017 at the India International Centre, New Delhi. He had intended to tour the play but very sadly, and unexpectedly, died of cancer just three months later. A few months earlier in Bombay he had included the middle section of the play (about the War) in a series of seventeen one-man performances based on figures from the history of India, *Jashnemaazi* (The Play of History).



### **Main themes of *The Becoming Room***

The play is divided into three sections: **Childhood**, **War**, and **Psychoanalysis**.

The underlying theme, and 'underlying pattern' as Bion terms it, is the difficulty of acquiring an endoskeleton rather than taking refuge in an exoskeleton offered by sheltering inside some basic assumption. Endoskeletal growth is a complex process to which he believes we have an instinctive resistance, owing to the fear of the unknown shape which the personality may take if it passes through a 'catastrophic change' however small or indeed natural. Every step forward entails some degree of catastrophic change, altering the structure of the mind, which undergoes a type of death-and-rebirth or 'death to the existing state of mind'. The personality resents and fears hatching out because 'the shell is breaking and it does not know the chicken'.

This is the primary underlying 'trauma', rather than any specific episodes recounted from his life history. He often affirms that these are all illustrations of a mental constellation that pre-exists their activation. Separation from his mother and home in childhood when he was sent to boarding school in England, and even the war, do not constitute the cause of the nightmare of 'nameless dread' which Bion dramatises in his autobiographical narratives. Rather, this fear is a part of his and everyone's constitutional makeup: one end of a spectrum of fear-and-attraction that can never find a container, or at least, not until a real psychoanalysis begins to take place in his mind: 'Who'll buy my nightmares?' 'I will. If you have tears to shed, shed them now.'

Therefore the film tries to emphasise the underlying pattern, the structural repetitions that are merely fictionalised and brought to life by the life episodes. Hence the mingling of past and future in the present, in the process of 're-membering': that is, of gathering past memories and future premonitions or 'shadows' into the caesura or receiving-screen of the present moment. Bion's 'ghosts' belong to the future as well as the past and he meets them time and again. Hence the recurring metaphor of the 'caesura of birth' at which the pre-natal meets the post-natal and the voices from these different vertices of the personality try to get their feelings across to one another. For the germination and growth of an idea cannot take place unless this caesura becomes a place of communication rather than of hostility or rigidification into basic assumptions that appear to protect, but in fact squeeze the mind to death, as there is no room for growth.

Examples of exoskeletal mentality are represented by: the tank in the War, by the Major who is oblivious to the meaning of the deaths of the young men, by the surgeon who is an expert technical operator but fails to involve his 'mind' so 'the child dies' (a metaphor for death of the idea). The Devil for example is always trying to use pure sensuality to block the search for the kind of psychic intuition that is analogous to the physician's interpretation of sensuous information; this results in the 'language of substitution' rather than the 'language of achievement'. This basic-assumption mentality is also represented by the confusion caused in the family by the basic-assumption values of the Raj which allow no space for either the voice of feeling or for scientific oedipal curiosity (K), so this has to be fulfilled by the Indian servants: a social hierarchy that is reversed in dreamlife where the 'tiger god' rules - the Great Cat Ra who threatens to take revenge on the naughty children who try to trap and imprison these unruly emotions.

By contrast with the 'devilish' exoskeleton and its 'hero dress' is the 'true voice of feeling' (as Keats called it) – the germ of an idea that lodges first in the prenatal part of the mind and that then tries to cross the 'caesura' and be born. This is the point of 'passionate love' (LHK) that generates a new state of mind in the personality, whether represented by birth or death which are both features of 'becoming' oneself. In order to become midwife to this kind of mental birth we need to develop a better 'organ of discrimination' as the Psychoanalyst suggests when the Devil produces his atom-bomb mind and offers it as a final solution to the confusion of the Group. 'Wisdom or oblivion?' as Bion puts it at the end of the *Memoir*.

YouTube link to the film: [https://youtu.be/14Wc8U6m2\\_w](https://youtu.be/14Wc8U6m2_w)

YouTube link to film with Italian subtitles: <https://youtu.be/pc2xVHFX6rY>

Tom Alter and Jashn-e-maazi: [http://www.artlit.info/pdfs/Alter\\_Jashnemaazi.pdf](http://www.artlit.info/pdfs/Alter_Jashnemaazi.pdf)