

TREVOR GRIFFITHS' PLAYS AS INTERROGATIVE STATEMENTS

The term « interrogative statement » is taken from Catherine Itzin's book *Stages in the Revolution* (1980: 174). Itzin quotes Trevor Griffiths who described all of his plays as « interrogative statements » in a process of « strategic penetration » (Itzin 1980: 174).

Griffiths' plays can be called « statements » because they state facts and express views, but most of what seem to be statements on the surface, are really questions or inquiries. These plays are based on painstaking observation and experience. They are, however, not merely descriptive, they are also analytical. Griffiths when dealing with his findings asks questions like: What do we think of this? How do we judge it? What are we going to make of it? Where does it lead us? Which way should we live? He doesn't pretend to know the answers, let alone a specific model for a future Britain; he observes developments, states facts, asks questions, but deliberately leaves many of the questions open.

« Interrogative statements » seem to be indispensable to this playwright in a gradual process of insinuation or what he calls « strategic penetration. » Naturally, plays are always persuasive. Trevor Griffiths, however, as he put it in a letter I had from him some time ago (Glaap 1977), is « interested in persuading people (or educating them) only on the basis of their being wholly and consciously involved in the process ». The decisive difference between a Griffiths play and the play written by many of the other contemporary dramatists is that Griffiths' plays « seek, beyond the audience agreement on the descriptive truth of the piece, to present argument and evidence with enough dramatic force to engage the audience in a thoroughgoing critique of its own behaviours and assumptions » (Glaap 1979: 51). He is not interested in theatricality for its own sake, he is rather seeking a new definition of what is theatrical. The purpose of this paper is to go into detail about this. It will attempt

- to account for Griffiths' plays as *statements*,
- to elucidate, why these plays are referred to as *interrogative* statements,
- to ferret out the *theatrical means* which help to unsettle the audience and force it into changing its perception of what is taking place on stage.

Griffiths' plays are statements

Facts, views and problems are stated fully and clearly in Griffiths' plays. The statements made are often based on his own experience. *Sam Sam* (written in 1968 and 1969) is the most obvious example of this. It is a semi-autobiographical play about two brothers, which is based on the fact that Trevor's elder brother had no chance to profit by the 1944 Education Act. He was born too early for that; he became a brick-layer. Trevor, however, knows that he owes a lot to this Act: he went to grammar school and to university, became a lecturer, was a teacher, a BBC education officer and started writing at the end of the sixties. *Sam Sam* contrasts the lifestyles of the two brothers and thereby makes a statement about the experiences of people who live at different ends of society. *Through the Night* (1974) also stems from real

experience. His wife, when in hospital for a breast operation, kept a diary of about 35 pages, which Griffiths built the play around. In order to get across what he had in mind with this play (Test it against your own experiences of other hospitals!), he thought it necessary to be very particular about every detail of his wife's experience.

Making statements about personal experience is but one way of stating one's views in Griffiths' plays. Another way has to do with the playwright's view on the past. « I think the future has to be made (...) by people who understand the past. That is why history is so important », he said in an interview with Alison Summers (1980: 25). And he makes a difference between two ways of confronting contemporary audiences with the past. One way is « to set straight the record », the other way is « to enlarge the *usable past* in contemporary consciousness by bringing our attention to those men and women, (...) those movements, which have never been put on the record. » (Summers 1980: 26). Griffiths is particularly interested in what has happened since 1968 when people made new choices which were stepping-stones for achievements that cannot but be recognized - even today.

Occupations (written in 1970), which came out of 1968, is - to a certain extent - a history play dealing with the 1960s. « What I was simply trying to do », Griffiths says in « Transforming the Husk of Capitalism », « was to square the circle of, how do you become a full-time revolutionary in a part-time society, where you have to make temporal commitments to counter-productive processes (...). It was an atmospheric, a Chekovian play of 'Here are the problems - this is what happens, isn't it?' » (Griffiths 1976: 42). That there is more to *Occupations* than a statement like this suggests, will be clear when we come to discuss the interrogative aspects of the statements made.

Griffiths' plays are statements also in the sense that they are realistic plays. There is, in most of them, a certain adherence to naturalism which - needless to say - is linked up with a critical attitude. We find this naturalism in Act I of *Sam Sam*. Sam One, by delivering funny monologues, comments on how imagination and intelligence are suppressed by social conditions. Griffiths has been criticized for his reliance on a naturalistic form in this act. But he has also been criticized for presenting his ideological contradictions too explicitly. The truth is that he never confines himself to just giving a naturalistic description of what is going on. In the case of *Sam Sam* (Act I) the audience is constantly being forced into changing its point of view, which reflects Griffiths' intention to mobilize those who come to see his plays. *Sam Sam* can, I think, be considered a suitable starting-point for a discussion of the interrogative aspects of his plays as « statements. »

Griffiths' plays are interrogative statements

The characteristics of *Sam Sam* come to light when you compare this play with a thematically related play like Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*, which is « a serious attempt to *de-class* 20th-century British society *from without*, as an act of will or rhetoric. *Sam Sam*, however, is essentially a play « about class and its mystifications. » The voice we hear is « more self-mocking, self-aware and compromised. » (Glaap 1977). Osborne's play ends in a sort of regressive romanticism. The ending of *Sam Sam* is completely different. Its second act is almost a parody of *Look Back in Anger*. There is no need any more to discuss the necessity for a change in contemporary British society. Griffiths takes this necessity for granted. Rather, he explores the

possibilities of change - without trying to find a dramatic resolution. *Sam Sam* is not just a statement meant to make an audience see that there are winners and losers, but an incentive to reflect on the critical views developed by people who experience life under differing social conditions.

The « interrogative » element as a characteristic feature of Griffiths' plays is likewise detectable in *Comedians* (1974). The play can be understood as being about humour. But it can also be read as a play about two different traditions, one that tries to change things through education, the other which driven by anger and violence - tries to re-define, in the context of our times, what the world can be like.

How can « being interrogative » - with reference to Griffiths' plays - be more accurately defined? Certainly, « dealing with problems analytically » is only one side of the coin. It refers to the dramatist's strategies. But Griffiths goes further: the spectator, being as it were on the other side of the coin, must be made critical of what is being presented and should thereby become productive. He must be made conscious of his function in the social process. Benedict Nightingale, the theatre critic, is quoting the playwright himself when he says that Griffiths' plays « are meant to provoke speculation and argument, not provide fixed solutions. » And Nightingale goes on to say that « ... audiences must be permitted to react freely to the points of view the characters represent. » (Nightingale 1982: 448-449).

Both to analyse problems and to generate critical attitudes in the audience are integral parts of Griffiths' so-called interrogative statements. How does he succeed in making statements of this kind?

Thinking in terms of opposites seems to be very important to him. There is, for instance, the device of using two brothers. It applies to *Sam Sam* where two brothers are separated - not only because they live at different places, but also because of their different lifestyles. In *The Party* (1972) there is hardly anything that the two brothers have in common, and Eddie, the textile worker, is fully aware of the difference between his TV-producer brother and himself.

Being ambiguous is another means of making interrogative statements. This is reflected in Griffiths' predilection for equivocal titles: *Occupations* refers to the Italian workers' occupation of factories in Turin in 1920. The title also alludes to any of those things which occupies one's time and hence *Occupations* is somehow a play about love, too. *Comedians*, the title, encapsulates different approaches to comedy and refers to actors who play comic parts. But it also refers to foolish people who cannot be taken seriously. The whole play was deliberately structured on contradictions. Griffiths himself pointed out that *Comedians* raised more questions than it answered: « It asked: 'what do we do?' I don't think the play answers that. I just think it says that there is a potential for doing something enormous and poses the question to an audience that is willing to answer it or *wants* to answer it in some way. » (*Gambit* 1976: 34).

In *The Party* we find statements which are as interrogative as interrogative can be. Diverse revolutionary strategies are being examined, none of which, however, is clearly identified as right or wrong. The author gives his audience food for reflection, but no solutions, no definite answers.

To refer to but one more example - *Oi for England* (1983), a TV-script (cf. Poole/Wyver 1984: 169-179), in which Griffiths deals with the Oi-skinhead

phenomenon: it shows that the more contemporary the issues are that Griffiths concerns himself with, the more important his « interrogative statements » seem to be. His statement could be: the Oi-skinhead phenomenon is pre-political; it may develop in any direction. The question to be asked, however, is: can working-class resistance develop into racism? Is it capable of being racist?

Someone who has statements to make, interrogative statements of the kind described above, wants to get them across to those whom he wants to be active and productive. The didactic potential of drama, in general, and theatrical devices and means, in particular, have to be used in order to achieve this aim. In a number of books dealing with Griffiths' plays one finds the sentence that Griffiths did not decide to become a playwright, that he rather resorted to drama as a way of discussing important issues.

Interrogative statements and the didactic potential of drama

Earlier in this paper reference was made to a letter written by Griffiths in 1977 in which he pointed out that at that time he was somehow in the process of seeking a new definition of what is theatrical. He was referring, in this context, to Tagg's 20-minute-speech in *The Party*, following hard upon Ford's 17-minute-speech. He was also thinking in terms of Gramsci's long factory speeches in *Occupations*. Having his characters make long speeches is certainly one means of strategic penetration in Griffiths' plays. Various speakers articulate their opinions in *The Party*. Ford argues against the traditional Marxist analysis of revolution or class-conflict. His point is that now that the urban proletariat is part of the consumer society, the real battles will be fought in the so-called Third World. Tagg tries to refute Ford's argument point for point. His analysis is uncompromising for he has remained the old-style Trotskyist who thinks highly of a party organization. Possibilities are suggested in these speeches, but they do not make it easy to give answers.

Another means of strategic penetration applied in Griffiths' plays is having the audience slip into a dual role. *Occupations* is a good example of this. Here the audience is not just an assembly of spectators in a theatre. To some extent they are partly also the workers who are occupying the factory. The idea behind this seems to be that the play cannot offer a satisfactory solution in its own terms.

As « interrogative statements » are often based on oppositions or juxtapositions, the play-within-the-play technique can serve the purpose of making the audience find out about different aspects of one and the same matter. The second act of *Comedians* does this. Also the juxtaposition of what seem to be unrelated images can produce something coherent. An eye-opening example of this can be found in *The Party*. While the television producer masturbates - he is a leftist -, a film is shown of French students on the barricades.

As no fixed solutions are intended, most of Griffiths' plays have an open-ended structure, and some have ambiguous titles, as was mentioned before. Some are plays about different men, their different surroundings and their different philosophical and political perspectives.

By means of those theatrical and technical devices like the ones mentioned above, Griffiths attempts to make the audience understand his plays as interrogative statements and thereby initiate the desired process of strategic penetration. This can

be even more easily achieved through TV-plays. Unlike the theatregoer, the TV-viewer can be given an insight into more than one aspect of the total event. He can familiarize himself with the seeming contradictions within a play by means of both the action and the flashbacks. And he has a better chance than in the theatre to understand the dialectical relationship between objective events and subjective feelings, which applies, to name but one example, to *Through the Night*. By presenting things from different perspectives, Griffiths makes the viewer understand that Christine's distress is largely due to the fact that the hospital staff did not engage itself personally with the patient at the time help and understanding was needed most by her.

To conclude: as Griffiths doesn't want to offer fixed solutions, and as he leaves it rather to the readers, the viewers or the theatregoers to draw their own conclusions, this paper cannot but be open-ended as well. I will not even try to give a summary. This being the first paper read at our Symposium, I thought it should also serve the purpose of priming the pump and paving the way for our further discussions. And I would particularly like to reinforce its *preparatory* and *ancillary* functions by quoting from our playwright a few statements which to varying degrees encapsulate what he has to say about his writing plays as interrogative statements.

Seven Times Trevor Griffiths

- (1) « Everything comes from how I've lived, and what I've lived .»
- (2) « I have never delivered a simple play .»
- (3) « My plays say: yes, laugh and feel terror but locate that inside your own experience, your own thinking .»
- (4) « I've always thought in terms of dialogue, or dialectically if you want to enhance that a bit. I've always thought about opposites, about the possibility of opposites for ideas .»
- (5) « I'll probably never complete a play in the formal sense. It has to be open at the end: people have to make choices, you're not actually living .»
- (6) « I'm interested in persuading people (or educating them) only on the basis of their being wholly and consciously involved in the process .»
- (7) « My plays seek to present argument and evidence with enough dramatic force to engage an audience in a thoroughgoing critique of its own behaviours and assumptions .»

And - a final interrogative statement from me:
Perhaps you'd like to think about them.

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