

ALL GOOD MEN: DRAMA OF DIALECTIC

Supposing you had been in Britain on 31 January 1974 and supposing you had been spending the evening at home, what choice of entertainment would there have been on television? Opening your copy of *The Times* newspaper you would have found that after the main news on BBC1 at 9.p.m. there was a new play by Trevor Griffiths in the 'Play for Today' series called *All Good Men*. Meanwhile, on BBC2 there was variety featuring the veteran popular singer, Vera Lynn, or if you were in a more serious frame of mind, you could switch to the commercial channel and watch the current affairs programme 'This Week'. Had you hesitated over *All Good Men*, *The Times* would have advised you: 'Bill Fraser, best known on TV for Snudge and other comic parts, turns to drama as an old politician ...' (1)

'Nothing very exciting there', you might have concluded - unless you had been alerted by the fact that this was the same Trevor Griffiths whose new stage play, *The Party*, was running at the National Theatre and taxing many of the regular patrons with its detailed scrutiny of the current state of revolutionary politics set against the background of Paris in May'68. Then you might have suspected that *All Good Men* would not be *just* about an old politician, with a comic actor in the part. It might even have occurred to you that perhaps the play would have some bearing on the current troubles in Britain, which were featuring so prominently on the front page of your newspaper. Because in January 1974 Britain was in deep crisis. For three months the miners' union, the N.U.M., had successfully operated a ban on overtime in pursuit of a pay claim that would destroy the Conservative government's incomes policy. Helped by a 400% increase in oil prices following the Yom Kippur war in the Middle East, the miners forced the Prime Minister, Edward Heath, to introduce legislation restricting the supply of electricity to industry to only three days a week.

There were further measures designed to meet the emergency - or, as many in the labour movement claimed, to make it even more of a crisis and so discredit the miners' action. One such measure was the closing-down of all television at 10.30p.m. each evening.

Whilst not actually opposing the miners, the leadership of the Trades Union Congress adopted its customary role of conciliation with the government, and distanced itself from what many miners clearly wanted: that this should be not merely a dispute about wages but one that would immobilise the country and bring down the government. Within the N.U.M. itself a member of the executive attacked 'communists within the union who were making an open attempt to wreck democracy' (2), and there was open conflict between the right-wing N.U.M. President, Gormley, and the Communist vice-president, McGahey. Wilst McGahey stated publicly that: 'This is a wages struggle. It is not politically motivated', there was little doubt as to his real objectives. And why not? The industrial climate in Britain was very different then and less than 2 years earlier in 1972, the N.U.M. had gone on strike and won a massive pay-rise, thanks to brilliant organisation and solidarity with the labour movement. This was just one of a series of major victories for organised labour since the Heath government had come to power in 1970. Some years later, Raymond Williams recalled:

« The whole series of battles up to the climax of the miners' strike of 1973 / 74 was a return to real class politics. The re-emergence of genuine socialist militancy on a massive scale under a Conservative government seemed to me to confirm my assessment of the Labour Party: once its manipulation of class forces to avoid any actual class *battles* no longer held, the situation became much more dynamic and explosive. » (3)

So what of the Labour Party in January 1974? Whilst the leadership remained predominantly right-wing and concerned only with the humane management of capitalism, the Party's rank-and-file was organising itself and moving decisively to the left. The policy document *Labour's Programme for Britain*, adopted by the 1973 annual conference, has been described as 'a decisive break with revisionism' and 'a greater reorientation of Labour's policy goals than anything seen since 1918' (4). Its proclaimed aim was 'to bring about a fundamental and irreversible shift in the balance of power and wealth in favour of working people and their families'. Whether Labour in government would honour that pledge is another question. It was to be answered soon enough: the miners voted overwhelmingly for all-out strike and Heath was forced to call an election. On 28th February, the Tories were defeated and Labour returned, albeit with no overall majority. The miners had brought down the government and Labour was to remain in power until 1979, when Thatcher became Prime Minister. It was around 1973 that the bitter conflict that still divides Left and Right in the British Labour movement had its beginnings, though its real roots extend back much further. It is this conflict, between parliamentary Labourism on the one hand and radical extra-parliamentary socialism on the other, that is central to the conflicts of individuals in *All Good Men*. It is what made it, quite literally a 'play for today' in January 1974, and makes it still, in its main concerns, a play for today in March 1986. This, as much as anything, was my reason for choosing to concentrate on it this afternoon.

The circumstances in which *All Good Men* came to be written have been described before, both by myself and by Poole and Wyver in *Powerplays* (5). Nevertheless, I will describe them now, because I think they are important for a proper appreciation of the form that the script and production eventually assumed.

In the summer of 1973 Trevor Griffiths was suddenly invited by the 'Play for Today' script editor, Ann Scott, to write a 75-minute play for the series to replace another that had failed to materialise. The production budget was to be extremely limited, with no more than a multi-room studio set and no allowance for filmed inserts. The script had to be completed quickly. But the offer was irresistible. At that time, Griffiths' dramatic work for television had been restricted to his contribution (under the pseudonym 'Ben Rae') to the Granada series *Adam Smith* (in 1972), plus an adaptation of the Hugh Walpole short-story *The Silver Mask* for London Weekend Television in 1973. *Such Impossibilities*, commissioned in 1971 by the BBC for its exercise in nostalgia, *The Edwardians* series, had been rejected on the dubious grounds of cost. So now the opportunity of a platform to speak to the large audiences commanded regularly by 'Play for Today' overruled any reservations that Griffiths might have had about writing to order.

Within a few days of receiving the invitation he had conceived the idea for a script, and within six weeks it was written. What followed went far beyond the writer's common experience of the tyranny of television schedules: due to the 10.30p.m. curfew resulting from the miners' action it was necessary to cut the text of *All Good*

Men from the original running time of 75 minutes (this is roughly the published version) to 63 minutes, losing the greater part of the opening scene. The sacrifice was considerable, but it was more than outweighed by the relevance of the play's central conflict to the political and industrial events of the moment.

The action centres around the preparations for an 'in-depth' interview of Edward Waite, retiring Labour MP, ex-miners' leader and cabinet minister, and soon to be elevated to the peerage. On the eve of the interview, 'Lord Waite' celebrates his seventy-first birthday with his daughter Maria, an art-teacher in a state comprehensive school, his son William, a left-wing research graduate in politics at Manchester University, and Richard Massingham, the ex-public school television interviewer. Ostensibly to rehearse the forthcoming interview, William challenges his father to justify the record of the Labour Party in office over the past fifty years. This Waite does in a flow of impatient rhetoric, a shade too well practised to be wholly convincing and subtly undercut by inflections and mannerisms that suggest figures of the Labour establishment, particularly, with the cunningly deployed but never smoked pipe, the Party leader Harold Wilson. Yet it remains a powerful and sincere display, and seemingly, enough to crush William. All William can reply is 'Look. You're old and you're ill. And you're my father. There's no way I can win. I asked my question, you answered it' (6). For Griffiths has taken care to invest the situation with a more urgent excitement: firstly, we have seen Waite a few days earlier suffer a mild heart attack, so we know that now he may be in danger of collapse; secondly, William is not just any chance left-wing adversary, but his own son, and a reflection of the young working-class idealist that he himself may once have been. Much of William's resentment towards his father springs ironically from the fact that he has been given the chances Waite never had: early in his life, the family had moved from a dingy little house in his Beswick constituency in Manchester to suburban Didsbury, 'four bedrooms, attics, cellars, gardens, playschools, parks ...' - and later to his present sequestered property in Surrey, where the worst problem is the squirrels attacking the yew trees. William is objecting both to his own and to his father's deracination, and by analogy to the Labour Party leadership's loss of touch with true working-class origins and aspirations.

Goaded by his father's patronising scorn, William resumes the attack and gives his version of Labour's achievements: not a social revolution, but 'a minimal social adjustment'. The debate reaches a climax of acrimony when son questions father on his conduct during the General Strike of 1926; and thus we arrive at the true motive behind William's original challenge: in the course of his research he has gained access to confidential Miners' Union files, which have revealed that Waite opposed the strike in his Union District Executive Committee from start to finish, and then acted as vice-chairman of the committee to agree pay reductions and redundancies - a fact that Waite has been careful to exclude from his autobiography. There is no defence, and Waite can only align himself with Beatrice Webb's view of the General Strike as 'a proletarian distemper that had to run its course'. For good measure, he reveals his acceptance of a peerage to William, and retires to bed, apparently discredited. Yet an uneasiness persists: as Waite has already remarked, William has set up the exposure of his father in Massingham's honour, and he now reveals that he has had photo-copies made of the incriminating minutes for use in the forthcoming interview. For his part, Massingham is probably planning a hatchet job on Lord Waite in any case: so they emerge as an unappealing alliance, and William is

not much redeemed by his contempt for Massingham's phoney objectivity, his claim to be 'simply the film camera, the tape recorder, the lighting man ...'

The closing scene shows the first take of the interview in the conservatory, with Massingham immediately broaching the question of Waite's view of the General Strike. As Waite starts to reply, his lips move soundlessly and the image is bright, washed out, like a pallid waxwork. The camera pulls back and cranes up to show him alone in a deserted space, draped in his baronet's robes. The credits roll, to the strains of 'There'll always be an England', as though sounding a requiem for a whole era of Labour government.

Yet even if the play has persuaded one to question the shabby pragmatism of Labour in office, the alternative represented by William of high-minded social revolution has a certain dogmatic certitude about it that is no closer to working-class humanity. Whether the audience can find any alternative between these two extremes is doubtful: whereas Waite's daughter, Maria, is shrewd, warm, uncompromised, and equally a product of the same family background, she remains in terms of political alternatives a peripheral figure, merely suggesting qualities that her father and brother have lost sight of, offering a critique of them both.

Whilst the focus of the play's conflict is the events of 1926, this is only one part of a whole history of conflict, a conflict inherent in the very project of democratic socialism within the context of advanced capitalism. Whilst the handing of ammunition by William to Massingham to help destroy his father may discredit him in our eyes, equally it suggests the compromises inherent in operating within an ideology that controls every means of mass communication. In *The Party* we see the television producer, Joe Shawcross, even more enmeshed in the system. The impossible choice between tactical compromise and an ineffectual stand on principle is a recurring theme throughout Griffiths' work. It is an example of what Poole and Wyver call his 'binary oppositions - revolution and reformism, authoritarianism and libertarianism, « hard and soft »; Lenin and Martov, Gramsci and Kabak, Scott and Amundsen'- (7) though personally I question that *quite* the same balance is intended with Scott and Amundsen in *The Last Place on Earth*. Whereas little is left standing of Scott and everything British that he embodies, one's reservations about Amundsen are relatively minor - particularly when one viewed the series in the sickening afterglow of Britain's Malvinas adventure.

Otherwise, in none of the instances mentioned does either extreme offer an acceptable pattern for action. Nor is the solution to be found in a neat dialectical synthesis. The audience is left to seek its own way forward - because anything easier would mean falsifying the difficulties of the real situation.

The argument can be further demonstrated by means of a comparison with *Days of Hope*, Jim Allen's four-part series for television first transmitted in 1975, eighteen months after *All Good Men*. This series, too, examines the split in the British Labour Movement between Parliamentary Labourism on the one hand and militant activism on the other. Beginning in the First World War, the sequence culminates in the General Strike of 1926. Like *All Good Men*, it locates the conflict within a family, with Philip Hargreaves, the moderate Labour MP, increasingly at odds with his wife Sarah and her brother Ben, who in the final play of the series joins the Communist Party. The difference from Griffiths is that Philip and, by extension, the Labour Party, end up wholly discredited, whilst the stand taken by Sarah and

Ben, though ineffective, is endorsed. However much we may confirm this as an interpretation of the events of 1926 (and it tallies closely with the version embodied in Lord Waite in *All Good Men*), the outcome does little to *engage* the viewer. In fact, it says little more than 'we must get it right *next* time'. It is a pattern that recurs throughout Allen's work: again and again, both organised labour and the Labour Party end up discredited whilst the true standard-bearers of socialism live on to fight another day. It is not that one is arguing for a fair deal for Labour - far from it - rather, one is saying that Allen's dramaturgy (and his politics) encourage a revolutionary empathy and escapism that substitute for hard-headed political struggle and an acknowledgement of all the contradictions entailed.

As Britain was awaiting the results of the 1974 election Griffiths' conceived the idea of a television series about a left-wing Labour M.P. that was to become the eleven-part series *Bill Brand*, transmitted by Thames Television in the summer of 1976. Brand himself (played by the same actor, Jack Shepherd) is close in political position to William Waite in *All Good Men*, except that like so many young people on the left of British politics in the mid-seventies he has entered the Labour Party. He defines his position: 'I am a socialist, of the sort that Bernard Levin and his trail-blazing clique would describe as reactionary. I actually believe in public ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange. I actually believe in workers' control over work, community control over the environment. I actually believe that the real wealth of any society is in its people - all of them, not just the well-off, the educated and the crafty, which I suppose makes me a democrat too.' (8) Once he enters Parliament, as well as coming to blows with a Tory, he collides head-on with the right of the Party. The most effective critique of his position is articulated by the veteran Party chief whip, himself not an intellectual like Brand, but an ex-docker. Reluctantly accepting a move to the House of Lords (unlike Waite) he offers Bill the benefit of his experience:

« You won't see it Bill, but we've changed this country. *We* have changed it. In 1931 - in that year we could have just phfft! Finished! Gone under. But we didn't: we got our heads down, and we stuck, and we were ready in '45; and we changed this country: coal, steel, railways, road-transport, electricity, gas, N.H.S., education, social-welfare. But we could have gone under, not stuck ... You've got to love this Party. You're in it, of it, but you don't love it - not family. » (9)

The echo of Lord Waite's defence in *All Good Men* is unmistakeable and the rebuke to maximalism similarly unanswerable; only this time it is untainted by any overt association with 1926. However, later in the series we see the same wing of the Party heading for compromise with social democracy, remarkably anticipating the breakaway that was in reality very shortly to occur.

I have made this brief reference to *Bill Brand* simply in order to emphasise the balance of argument implicit in *All Good Men*. It is perhaps tempting to conclude from the *printed* text that Lord Waite ends up totally discredited, and that William, for all his dubious association with Massingham, is the sole bearer of the truth. To think that is, I believe, to make a similar mistake as the friend who came up to Trevor Griffiths after a performance of *Occupations* and said 'What a bastard that man Kabak is!' A similar mistake is made by Massingham when he says to William, 'so you hate your father'. William replies 'You listen but you don't hear, Mr. Massingham'.

In his book *New British Political Dramatists*, John Bull says:

« One of the obvious attractions of television for Griffiths is the potential that it affords for a more pressing version of the dialectic. Unlike theatre, television can be easily utilised to present a multiplicity of viewpoints, so that a viewer is not looking in on the total event but is able to become involved to some extent with the experience and analysis of a number of differing characters. On stage, the writer, and indeed the actor and director, has at his disposal any number of ways of focusing attention on the individual—the power of rhetoric, the use of soliloquy, techniques of blocking, lighting effects, and so on—but no way of *enforcing* it in the way that film or television can. This is not just to speak of talking heads. Rather, it is its ability to present events from differing perspectives that is important. » (10)

What more literal way of doing this is there than with a three-camera set-up in a television studio? *All Good Men* on the screen supports the argument. As I said earlier, the available resources were minimal, but in any case Michael Lindsey Hogg's direction is content largely to work well within the externally-dictated limitations of studio production, relying on deeply concentrated performances by Frazer, Shepherd and Frances de la Tour as Maria, and numerous revealing reaction shots. Even the lengthy rhetoric becomes plausible, given that Waite has clearly held forth many times in similar terms to larger gatherings and William has evidently rehearsed what he intended to confront his father with. As Waite says to Massingham '... It's been *created* in your honour'.

The language metaphor remains mostly verbal: the implicit parallel between the squirrels' gnawing the trees to death and Waite's gradual erosion through compromise; the reiterated (over reiterated perhaps) reference to the fate of the North American Indian, betrayed, like the British working class, by their own people. The two conspicuous *visual* metaphors are the closing waxwork image of the robed Lord Waite that I have already described, and the rapid succession of jerky close-ups and echoing voice-overs from the past when accumulated guilt, triggered by his acceptance of a peerage, seems to bring on his heart-attack. In this last instance alone, the production seems to stretch its form to breaking point and the result is confusion for the viewer.

Returning to the subject of rhetoric and debate, it is worth quoting what Michael Billington had to say in *The Guardian* shortly after the opening of the National Theatre production of *The Party*:

« Far from being agitprop, as someone said, it is the most open-ended play in all London. It is a play of ideas that doesn't tell us what to think: And if Griffiths does nothing else, he at least obliges his audience to concentrate with the same intensity you find at a concert in the Festival Hall. » (11)

Agreeing with John Bull, I would maintain that this level of concentration is better sustained through the medium of television. An often-quoted dissenting view has been expressed by David Edgar:

« The inherent problem with television as an agent of radical ideas is that its massive audience is not confronted en masse. It is confronted in the atomised a-collective arena of the family living room, the place where people are at their least critical, their most conservative and reactionary. » (12)

Trevor Griffiths' response to this is too well-known for me to need to quote it here. But I would add one comment in support of it: how frequently does a play in the theatre become an 'event' that reaches the *news* pages and editorials of the press? Perhaps French and German comrades organise these matters better, but in Britain at least I can think of only one instance in recent years, and that was when Howard Brenton's *Romans in Britain* was attacked for obscenity - which, ironically, deflected all attention from the play's comment on the British occupation of Northern Ireland. Against this, the list of television plays and films that have become headline news is almost inexhaustible. Just at random: Sandford and Loach's *Cathy Come Home*, *Days of Hope*, Bill Brand, Griffiths' *Through the Night*, seen by 11 million and provoking a massive correspondence, Bleasdale and Saville's *Boys from the Blackstuff*, Hines' and Jackson's nuclear war film *Threads* (and the American *The Day After*), *The Edge of Darkness*, Troy Kennedy-Martin's anti-nuclear series which made such an impact on BBC2 that, like *Blackstuff*, it was shown immediately for a second time on BBC1. Finally *The Last Place on Earth*, which seems to have had a small audience (relatively speaking) but which again sparked furious and outraged controversy and made Roland Huntford's original book on Scott and Amundsen once again into a best-seller.

Thus, whilst David Edgar may be correct on characterising the immediate act of viewing as 'solitary' he takes no account of TV's capacity to generate interest, concern, even conflict in the aftermath of transmission.

If there is one feature of television drama that is guaranteed to generate this level of response it is its 'unfairness', its 'lack of balance'. Coexisting, as it does, alongside documentary and news programmes that claim objectivity for themselves, television drama (and *All Good Men* is a good example with its cunning exposure of Massingham and the subterfuges of the in depth interview) shows how 'unfair', how slanted, how manipulated, how selective, all television is likely to be. Before he settled on *All Good Men*, Trevor Griffiths had intended to call the play *History*. The reason is made clear by these lines :

« William: (to Mass.) ... You're too intelligent, too clever, *really* to believe that you can talk as it were neutrally about the past ... you must have some ... framework ... some point of view, attitude, mmm? ... to hold the thing together.

Mass: I don't see why.

William: But that would mean ... you didn't *care*. You were indifferent.

Mass: The conventional rules of biography and historiography will be observed. I can't see that it makes better history if one has an axe to grind. »

I'm not sure about Massingham, but I'm quite certain that by the time he wrote these words, Trevor Griffiths had read E.H. Carr's classic Cambridge lectures on historiography, *What is History?* (1961). In one of them, Carr says:

« It used to be said that facts speak for themselves. This is, of course, untrue. The facts speak only when the historian calls on them: it is he who decides to which facts to give the floor, and in what order or context. It was, I think, one of Pirandello's characters who said that a fact is like a sack - it won't stand up till you've put something in it. » (13)

It has been the consistent achievement of Trevor Griffiths' 'history' plays and films (and in a sense that describes them all) to show that there is little to separate the work of the historian from the work of the dramatist. The only real difference is that the dramatist tends to be more frank about his intentions, and the audience is allowed more space to exercise its judgment: the dialectic is overt, the political perspective undisguised and the acknowledgement of the problem clear. It only remains for the viewer (and the critic) to be similarly honest with him or herself: That's your problem -and mine. When we 'interrogate' the text or the videotape we must examine *our* motives for placing the helpless victims in solitary confinement, for belabouring their bodies and for shining harsh lights in the faces.

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NOTES

- (1) *The Times*, 31 January 1974.
- (2) *Ibid.*
- (3) Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters*, London, 1979, p. 376.
- (4) Paul Whiteley, *The Labour Party in Crisis*, London, 1983, pp. 126-127.
- (5) Edward Braun, 'Trevor Griffiths' in George W. Brandt (ed.), *British Television Drama*, Cambridge, 1981, pp. 60-63 ; Mike Poole & John Wyver, *Powerplays*, London, 1984, pp. 63-71.
- (6) All textual quotations are taken from Trevor Griffiths, *All Good Men and Absolute Beginners*, London, 1977.
- (7) *Op. cit.*, p. 5.
- (8) *Bill Brand*, Episode 1, Act 2 (unpublished).
- (9) *Ibid.*, Episode 11, Act 2.
- (10) John Bull, *New British Political Dramatists*, London, 1984, pp. 138-139.
- (11) *The Guardian*, 5 January 1974.
- (12) David Edgar, 'Ten Years of Political Theatre, 1968-1978' in *Theatre Quarterly*, vol. VIII, n° 32, p. 30.
- (13) E.H. Carr, *What is History?*, London, 1961, p. 5.