

COMMITMENT AS A FORM OF PRIVILEGE

« The intellectual's problem is not vision, it's commitment ».

Tagg : *The Party* : by Trevor Griffiths

'Committed' is a word which has changed in its usage over the past thirty years. It has grown much closer to the French word, 'engagé', and if you describe someone as committed it almost always means that he or she is a left-winger, probably a Marxist or a Trotskyist. You can talk about a committed Tory, but the phrase has a whiff of paradox to it, as if those who drive on the wrong side of the road have no real right to the term. There are, or were, other meanings. My father used it for almost any kind of compelled or compulsive behaviour, such as being committed to an asylum, and a friend of mine who nearly went to prison, said when he was acquitted, 'Thank God, nobody can call me a committed writer !'.

Commitment, in short, used to be an ideologically neutral word. It referred to the strength of an allegiance, not the nature of it. If you were a Catholic living in Dublin, you would'nt expect to be called committed, however firm your beliefs. But if you were a Catholic living in a Protestant district of Belfast, and proclaimed that fact, thus risking your job and perhaps being beaten up on the way to the pub, then you might well be called committed, and with good reason. Commitment was something which had to be tested in fire. A self-proclaimed left-winger in Hollywood in the early 1950s had to be brave and therefore committed ; but he would not have to be committed in this sense to be a left-winger in Castro's Cuba. The word in the old days would have been deemed inappropriate. It implied a courage that it was not necessary to possess.

When British writers call themselves committed, stirrings of that old usage trouble my mind and I start to feel sceptical. I know roughly what they mean, that they have strong convictions and probably act on them, and perhaps that they are trying to separate themselves on the hard left from the soggy socialism of Kinnock and Hattersley. But instinctively I want to know what they have endured to deserve such an adjective. Britain, of course, is not a socialist country and anybody who defies a government like Mrs. Thatcher's runs a risk, as the miners and the Militant councillors in Liverpool have found to their cost. Unemployment is another form of bad treatment and writers are always unemployed, unemployable or, like Trevor Griffiths, overworked ; but for me it doesn't rate as persecution. Before Mrs Thatcher, Labour governments were in power for much of the 1960s and '70s, and while I am sure that Trevor Griffiths did not like Harold Wilson anymore than I did, at least under his government stage censorship was abolished, grants were greatly increased to the arts and an infrastructure was left behind of civil servants working through the local authorities who were, and are, generally sympathetic to the left.

In the narrower world of British theatre, left-wing dramatists have not had to battle to make their voices heard against a background of hostility and neglect. On the contrary they have been favoured. If you look through the lists of those who choose plays for our subsidised theatres (where most new plays get put on), they are

full to the brim with left-wingers - on the level of the RSC, with Colin Chambers, David Edgar and Barry Kyle on its New Plays Committee, and at the National Theatre with David Hare and Peter Gill, down to the little Bush Theatre, with Simon Stokes, Bash Born and Dusty Hughes in attendance. Simon Stokes once almost apologised to me, when I was Chairman of the Bush, for choosing a play which he regarded as a bit right-wing, Jonathan Gem's *The Tax Exile*. There is no Challenor among them, although there may be one or two examples of Challenor's opposite number, someone who doesn't care whether the joke is funny provided that the message is right.

The only subsidised, 'new plays' theatre in London which could be regarded as politically neutral is Hampstead Theatre Club ; and if we go back twenty years, the situation is not substantially different, with Kenneth Tynan at the National Theatre, Ronald Bryden at the RSC and Bill Gaskill at the Royal Court. We have to go back another ten years, to the mid-1950s, before we find that the major 'new plays' management in London is one which can firmly be dubbed 'right-wing', H.M. Tennent Ltd., that ancient pillar of the theatrical establishment which incidentally had two formidable old dogs, Joan Littlewood and George Devine, doing to it what most dogs do to most pillars. The commercial managements during this period were not, of course, biased to the left. One has proved remarkably perceptive over the years, Michael Codron, who put on the first plays of Harold Pinter, Peter Shaffer, Alan Ayckbourn, Joe Orton, Michael Frayn and Simon Gray, our agnostic or right-wing contingent ; and at least three of these writers would probably not have been staged without his help. But Codron produces fewer new plays on average every year than the Bush Theatre, although he collaborates in West End transfers from the subsidised sector.

Left-wing dramatists, in short, have had better opportunities to get their plays on than their right-wing counterparts, or than agnostics, middle-of-the-roaders, heretics and other deviants. And they have been helped in other ways. And they have been helped in other ways. I have mentioned the left-inclined local bureaucracies which we have inherited from the Labour years, and by this I mean that if you live in a Labour ward (but not a Tory or Liberal one) of a Labour borough, you usually get your rubbish moved more quickly, and derive greater benefit from other social services as well ; and sometimes this preferential treatment continues even when the council changes political hands, for the civil servants stay. This positive discrimination has its good side, for the Labour wards are usually the poorer ones, and more in need, but it can also amount to something suspiciously similar to what the Russians call 'blat', favours to friends. This is one reason why Mrs Thatcher is now trying to break up the power of the local authorities, abolishing the Metropolitan Authorities, rate-capping the boroughs. It is not a cost-cutting exercise, but a political one. In her view, all civil servants should be neutral and simply serve the incoming administrations - and to curb one abuse, as she sees it, she is prepared to risk a much greater one, that of destroying the independence of the local authorities altogether.

Left-inclined arts organisations have tended to benefit from this British 'blat'. When the Metropolitan Authorities are abolished, the government has promised to make up the short-fall in funding to the arts caused by the loss of their patronage. It won't exactly do so, but in any case, nobody believes that the additional money, which will be given to the Arts Council now led by two Tories, William Rees-Mogg

and Luke Rittner, will then be handed over to the same companies as were sponsored through, for example, a Greater London Council led by Ken Livingstone and with Peter Pitt and the Labour MP, Tony Banks, on its Arts Committee. The 'blat', if 'blat' it is, will go in a different direction.

I do not want to prolong this parochial travelogue much further before arriving at my destination, which is to explain why I do not think that the left has taken advantage of its recent luck and may in the long run bitterly regret its lost opportunities. But before doing so, I would like to pour some cold water on the idea that the 'events' of 1968 'politicised' an entire generation of young writers and that the rise of left-wing drama was caused by a spontaneous whelling up of political outrage. 1968, it is true, concentrated our minds wonderfully. But there have been other events in our history of equal importance which did not leave their marks on our theatre - and we were not exactly un-political in 1956 either, nor in the 1930s, when Joan Littlewood and Ewan McColl were battling around the suburbs of Manchester in an old van and the Unity Theatre was staging plays by Brecht, Toller and Mayakovsky in their tatty hall in Islington.

What had changed were the circumstances through which political feelings could be expressed. We no longer had to submit plays to the Lord Chamberlain and if the Royal Court wanted to put on plays like Frank Wedekind's *Spring's Awakening* or Edward Bond's *Saved*, it was not subject to harassment from the police who wanted to find out, by purchasing a pint of lager, whether or not it could be legally defined as a club theatre, where the Lord Chamberlain's writ did not run. The growth in subsidies meant that grant-aided managements could cut their seat prices to enable less well-off people to come to the theatre and that they were in any case not so dependent on box-office income and could afford to take more risks. And more companies received grants. In 1968/69, the Arts Council established its 'New Activities' Committee, which helped a lot of fringe and alternative theatre companies not with big sums of money but with small ones that nevertheless made all the difference.

For the next six or seven years, these groups provided an excellent springboard from which new dramatists could leap into the mainstream subsidised theatres, Trevor Griffiths from the little Stables Theatre Club in Manchester to the Royal Shakespeare Company in one easy bound, Stephen Poliakoff from the Bush to the National. I can vividly remember the early days of Portable Theatre, founded by David Hare among others, which seemed to be performing to friends in my sitting room one month - and running Nottingham Playhouse, the Royal Court and bits of the National Theatre a few months later. The rate of advancement for left-wing writers in particular was very rapid ; and the two national companies seemed to scoop them up with a shrimping net, as if to prove that despite the growing gap between their resources and those of every other theatre in the country, their hearts were really on the side of the workers.

Some writers stood out against this absorption, or if you prefer it 'strategic penetration', into the British theatrical establishment, John Arden and John McGrath among them ; but most agreed with David Hare and Trevor Griffiths that it was a kind of reverse elitism to choose to perform plays to audiences of a couple of hundred or so in small halls around the country, when you could preach to a thousand or more a night at the National Theatre - or millions on television. Nor did

Hare, Brenton, Bond and others neglect the small theatres when they had time and could afford not to do so. The National Theatre's smallscale touring version of Trevor Griffiths's *The Party*, directed by Hare, was generally recognised to be more effective than its lush première production at the Old Vic. The debate about the propriety of this choice for left-wing writers between large and small continued for much of the 1970s, but bearing in mind a longer span of British theatrical history which has not been sympathetic to the left, how lucky these writers were to have the alternative.

But luck can be double edged. The suddenly favourable climate for left-wing writers led to many hothouse blossoms, exotic to look at, but shallowly rooted. I exempt the plays of Trevor Griffiths, which are usually sustained by a healthy dialectic and a dour Northern naturalism ; but his good sense was in danger of being overrun by others who were politically immature and technically facile. Self-styled commitment was part of the curriculum vitae of these young writers ; and to be called 'committed' by a magazine like *Time Out* in the old days or *City Limits* today was like a *Good Housekeeping* seal of approval. There is still no more characteristic sound on a quiet Autumn evening on the South Bank than to hear writers like Nigel Williams stamping their feet and shouting, 'Fuck the bosses !' It's like being under the flightpath to Heathrow ... zoom, fuck, and another new play collides into the Cottesloe.

This led writers to believe that theatrical craftsmanship simply means finding the right package in which you can sell your message, and also that it was no longer possible to conduct a political debate in anything other than socialist terms, and that even to acknowledge other points of view except sardonically or scornfully amounted to a betrayal of the cause. Monetarism, for example, which provided the kind of intellectual mainspring to Mrs Thatcher's rise to power was barely mentioned in the theatre. 'How can you write a play about monetarism ?' one playwright asked me ; and the answer of course was that he had to find a way if he wanted to take part in the actual political debates which were happening in Britain at the time. It is all very well for Trevor Griffiths to state, as he once did for *Theatre Quarterly* that 'morally, capitalism was exhausted fifty to hundred years ago, certainly fifty', but he has to convince his audiences that this is so, and (although he may hate the word) subtly, not didactically, for like the Californian light bulb, the world has really got to *want* to change.

Part of this subtlety involves not telling the audience too far in advance what you believe, for then they stop listening. When writers label themselves 'committed', they throw away many theatrical techniques of suspense and discovery. To begin with, they are most likely to attract audiences who feel equally committed, thus neglecting the chance of convincing those who are uncommitted. But in any case, and despite what Brecht said, the urge to know what will happen next and what conclusions, morally and otherwise, will be drawn, is a powerful motive for listening attentively in the theatre. This is why the thoughtful, searching and to some extent open ended arguments that Griffiths presented in *Occupations* and *Comedians* were more theatrically effective for me than the discussions of *The Party*, conducted by socialists for socialists, wondering where they had gone wrong. It was like an autopsy.

There have been other autopsy plays of the left, David Edgar's *Maydays* among them, and they seemed to crop up with greater frequency in the late 1970s

and early 1980s as the Labour Party slumped in the polls and their party conferences grew more bitter, divided and wild. If writers like Trevors Griffiths had not told us otherwise, we could have been witnessing the husk of socialism, not capitalism. And those plays which were less introverted, such as David Edgar's *Destiny*, produced in 1976, which described the rise of a new fascist party in Britain and was, according to Catherine Itzin, 'an event regarded by many as the one emphatic vindication of the political theatre movement', seemed to hark back to the days of the League of Empire Loyalists in the 1950s and the rise of the National Front in the 1960s, making no mention of its subsequent decline. It failed to get to grips with the new brand of rightwingism in the Tory Party, which has afflicted us since. It was simply out of date.

And there was another area of decline, in the theatre itself. Despite the fact that the National Theatre and the RSC moved into plush new premises, despite the fact that grants rose to the theatre from about £1/2 million in 1964 to more than £50 million today, the theatre has declined by almost any criterion we choose to name : in the number of new productions, in the size of audiences and, although this is harder to measure, its 'clout', its power to seize centrestage in our social discussions. The story of this decline has been well researched and documented in John Pick's *The Theatre Industry*, and I do not think that his overall conclusions can be challenged. Among the failures has been the inability to reach new proletarian audiences and the young. The class and age composition of audiences has remained much the same since the days before the war, with this exception, that we have lost the music halls.

There are many reasons for this decline, the spread of television among them, and, of course, you can also say that more people are in touch with more drama productions than ever before, through radio and television. But the choice of these plays rests in very few hands, and the kind of bubbling up of new ideas and fresh theatrical approaches which we briefly saw at the end of the 1960s is inherently impossible in television today ... and we have tragically lost it in the theatre. In one grimy Christmas not so long ago, 1980 perhaps, 32 small companies lost their grants in a costcutting exercise, from which, as it happened, the increasingly expensive National Theatre benefitted.

This left the major subsidised companies in an exposed position, having to generate its own fringe in order to discover those talents which will keep them alive in the future. And I do not envy those established left-wing writers who can command a place on their stages. As I see it, their position is full of awkward moral dilemmas. They have lived, even thrived, on, as it were, licenses granted by governments such as Harold Wilson's and confirmed, or at least not revoked, by governments such as Mrs Thatcher's. Ultimately, they depend on the good will of the state, protected a little by the 'arm's length' principle, which is supposed to detach governments from the Arts Council ... and the Arts Council from its clients. But that too is a kind of state license, which can be revoked in the event of a real threat to the system.

There may have been such an example last year, when Peter Hall commissioned a play putting forward the miners' case in the miners' strike, but decided not to go ahead with a production on the grounds that it was too onesided. I have not seen or read this play, which may have been very bad, but perhaps it was also too politically sensitive. In that case, the National Theatre's reputation for putting on left wing plays by Hare, Bond, Brenton and others would be nothing more than a disguise

for the true state of affairs, which would be that the National Theatre pulls those punches which are likely to cause real political damage. The cause of left-wing drama would have been lost overnight.

And it may already have been lost. Howard Brenton used to talk about 'disrupting the spectacle', a phrase borrowed from the French Situationists who described Western democracies as being sustained by a façade of false choices which conceals the realities of capitalistic power and the lack of genuine choice. Their point seems to me precisely illustrated by the presence on our major subsidised stages of plays which sound very revolutionary, and shock the bourgeoisie, and startle the horses, but never hit any precise political target. Brenton's *The Romans in Britain* would be a case in point. I do not know anybody who knows the history of Ireland who is much impressed by his analogy between the Roman conquest of Britain and the presence of British troops in Ulster. Arden and D'Arcy's *The Ballygombeen Bequest* was much nearer the mark. But in any case what caused the furore was the sight of Roman soldiers buggering three naked Celts, who, on the night I went, did not seem to be averse to the prospect. By inflaming the nerve of British sexual puritanism, Brenton effectively nullified whatever message his play may have had. The political point which he actually made was to prove how broadminded, radical but tolerant the British theatre establishment is, a sentiment enhanced rather than weakened by the outrage of minor Tory leaders like Horace Cutler and the court case by Mary Whitehouse which was subsequently withdrawn. I do not doubt Brenton's motives, only his sophistication. Far from disrupting the spectacle, he was helping to sustain it.

This is the dilemma faced by all radical writers every where, how to avoid being used by the establishment. It is not essentially different in Moscow, Vienna or London, although I am bound to add that London still provides a more tolerant climate. You may seem to be more free, if you are not asking for money from the state, but money usually has to come from somewhere, and it rarely comes without strings. The best protection for a dramatist is when there is a ground swell of popular support for his or her work, so that it becomes embarrassing for governments to interfere and financially shortsighted for commercial managements to ignore. This happy state of affairs has been achieved by very few left-wing writers in Britain. And I sometimes even wonder whether they have chosen the right medium. The theatre is not a good place for instruction or handing on messages, for one reason, that everybody knows that it is not 'real life'. Every stage production is enclosed by the inverted commas, 'Let's pretend'. This makes it a good medium for myth, by which I mean not something which is necessarily untrue but which does not have to carry factual conviction to make its mark. A myth is like sliding another programme into our mental computers. It helps us to contemplate reality from a different set of assumptions which we may, or may not, wish to retain after we have left the theatre. Its effect is to leave our minds more flexible, more ready to contemplate alternatives which may lead to genuinely radical results but in that sense less committed.

This is why I accept Tagg's remark on its most literal level, not the one he meant. Commitment is a problem for intellectuals who write for the theatre, not because they haven't got any, but because they proclaim it too easily and think that it is enough.

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