

World Socialist Web Site correspondent Barbara Slaughter speaks at Jim Allen memorial meeting

Our correspondent
16 October 2000

Barbara Slaughter spoke on behalf of the World Socialist Web Site at a recent commemoration of the life and work of the socialist playwright Jim Allen. [See: "Britain: Memorial meeting held for socialist playwright Jim Allen"] The following article contains extracts from her comments to the memorial meeting.

I first met Jim in 1959 when he was working at Bradford pit. He was on the editorial board of *The Miner*, along with fellow Trotskyists Jim Swann and Joe Ryan, and they used to come over to Leeds for political discussions with leading members of the Socialist Labour League about the contents of the paper.[1] I was immediately struck by his intelligence and his honesty. He was a man who didn't suffer fools gladly. His wit was razor sharp. Over the years, I met him from time to time when he came to events organised by the Trotskyist movement. He was always tremendously warm and friendly.

In his life Jim achieved a very great deal. Any artist must be judged by his or her work—the body of work on which posterity will pronounce the final judgement. The scope of Jim's work is immense. On the one hand, he wrote about the contemporary life and struggles of working class men and women: such as *The Lump*, in response to the crisis in the building industry; *Rank and File*, in response to the government's anti-union laws; *The Big Flame*, in response to the Devlin Report on the docks as well as *The Spongers*, *Raining Stones* and many others. On the other hand, he tackled profound historical questions—The First World War and the General Strike in *Days of Hope*; the role of the British State in *Hidden Agenda*; Zionism in the play *Perdition*; the Catholic Church in *A Choice of Evils*; the Spanish Civil War and the role of Stalinism in *Land and Freedom*.

These are all vital issues that we need to address and understand if we are to make sense of the twentieth century, and in order to face the problems of the twenty-first. To have written seriously about any one of them would be noteworthy. I don't know of any other writer who has tackled so many.

What set Jim apart was not just his great feeling for the working class; others also could claim a similar affinity. I think to understand Jim's aspirations and achievements we have to look at his background.

Born in 1926, Jim matured in the immediate post-war period, when the working class was very clear that there was to be no return to the terrible conditions of the 1930s. In an interview I conducted with him, he explained how as a young man he devoured the *Communist Manifesto* and other works by Karl Marx and Frederick Engels.[2] But unlike the majority of socialist-minded youth in that period, he was not attracted to the Communist Party. He told us that he was "always completely anti-Stalinist, long before it became popular... long before

the Khrushchev speech of 1956." [3]

He became a Trotskyist. And thus his sentiments and thoughts about the contemporary world were honed and shaped as he became familiar with the greatest and most noble ideas that had inspired the Russian Revolution, and which were defended by the Fourth International against Stalin's betrayal—the ideas of Vladimir Ilyich Lenin and Leon Trotsky. Moreover, others who can be counted as his closest collaborators and even co-thinkers took a similar path. Together they sought to combine and develop a unified political and artistic vision.

It is important to remember that the 1960s and early 70s, when Jim began his creative work, were a period of rising militancy in the working class all over Europe. There were the 1968 events in France [4]. Fascist regimes were brought down in Spain, Portugal and Greece. In Britain, the national seamen's strike of 1966 had shaken the Wilson Labour government and the early seventies saw a wave of mass strikes and factory sit-ins, culminating in the miners' strike of 1974 that brought down the Heath Conservative government.

All these developments had a radicalising influence on a whole group of young writers, directors, producers and actors, some of whom are in this room today. In 1969, Jim played a very significant role in drawing them into political discussion and close collaboration with the Socialist Labour League and its then leader Gerry Healy.

A Labour government had been elected in 1974, rescuing the British ruling class from a desperate political crisis. Jim's response to these events was to turn to history, and the result was the television drama *Days of Hope*, screened in 1975. It was probably his most ambitious and successful television project. It deals with the events of the First World War, the miners' lockout of 1921 and the General Strike of 1926, through the lives of three young people—Ben, a young army volunteer, Sarah, his sister and her husband Philip. It shows how the events shaped their lives, how Ben and Sarah became revolutionaries and how Philip opted for the safety of the Labour and trade union bureaucracy, becoming a union official and finally a Labour MP.

Days of Hope has many memorable scenes, some of which we will be seeing shortly—the young Irish girl forced to sing rebel song among jeering British soldiers, and their growing sense of shame as she reminds them of their own families; the booby trapping of a soldier by a 10-year old Irish boy and the House of Commons reception for a Russian delegation, into which the miners gate-crashed.

As with much of Jim's work, it met with a storm of opposition. The *Daily Telegraph* criticised the BBC for allowing it to be broadcast and letters in the *Radio Times* described it as "disgusting" and "lamentable tripe". But Jim was undeterred. He continued to write

about what he thought was important, always with the aim of telling the truth to the working class. This is what gave Jim's work its strength and longevity.

In 1977, the BBC broadcast Jim's play *A Choice of Evils*. It exposes the wartime collaboration between the Vatican and the fascists. The *Choice of Evils* referred to in the title is between Catholicism and Stalinism. The principal character, a left-wing catholic priest, refuses both and chooses death rather than betrayal. The play was based on real events.

Like *A Choice of Evil*, Jim's play *Perdition* is based upon historical events that took place in the closing months of the Second World War. Again it deals with a crucial question for the working class—the role of the Zionist leaders in Hungary, who made a pact with the Nazis to send thousands of Hungarian Jews to the concentration camps in order to enable selected individuals to leave the country.

Clearly there was nothing accidental about Jim's choice of subject matter. His last major project, *Land and Freedom*, reveals, perhaps most clearly, this process of selection. One may have disagreements with his uncritical presentation of the POUM in the film.[5] But consider what motivated the work and what it accomplished. It deals with the betrayal of the Spanish Revolution by the Communist Party and the Third International under Stalin, and it made a tremendous impact, especially in Spain where knowledge of the events has been lost.

Jim explained to us why he took up the theme. "Initially, the reason why I wrote the film was because Ken and I had been discussing, with the fall of Stalinism, with the coming down of the Berlin Wall and the West saying, 'That's it. Communism doesn't work. It's finished!' And the likes of Tony Blair and company jumping on the bandwagon. 'Socialism has failed. Go back to your factories, your dole queues and forget it. It's the free market that works.'

"So we wanted to do something that would show that communism and socialism never existed in the Soviet Union, that Stalin was a monster, etc. We were looking for subjects that could project this and I came across this pamphlet put out by the International Brigades Committee in Manchester and I thought, 'This is it'." [6]

Together with Ken Loach he produced a film— *Land and Freedom* —which not only educates the working class but which is also deeply moving and conveys the idea that things could have been different, and perhaps one day will be.

It is truly remarkable that Jim Allen maintained such a high level of commitment on fundamental political questions throughout his life. His abiding hatred of Stalinism, his commitment to the working class and his deep feeling for their problems is expressed in all his writing. He worked in conditions of isolation, apart from a very few close collaborators. He knew that he was constantly under threat from the right-wing press and leading figures in the establishment, and perhaps most of all from those nominally on the left who were unhappy about his exposures of the trade union and Labour bureaucracy.

During the 1980s and early '90s the market appeared to be all-powerful. With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the Labour Party's lurch to the right, millions of workers were shocked and confused. Everyone was told, "Socialism is dead". The majority of films glorified the so-called "good life" of individualism, greed and violence. A serious political film like *Land and Freedom* would always be exceptional. At that time it was even more so.

There will, no doubt, be an attempt in some circles to portray Jim as a man who wrote only about the social problems facing working people and forget his other historical works. But any future

assessment would have to consider all his works including those not performed or published.

Now we are at the dawn of a new century, the triumphalism of 1991 looks hollow to millions of people. There are some signs of a cultural shift, of a renewal of critical filmmaking and a growing audience for it. Amongst this new artistic layer, writers such as Jim and directors like Ken Loach are seen as a source of inspiration—hopefully, not to be copied but understood, and in the run of things, transcended.

The *World Socialist Web Site* pays great attention to artists such as Jim. We share his view that the artistic comprehension of the world is as vital to socialist consciousness as political understanding.

I would like to conclude by reading a line from our pamphlet *The Aesthetic Component of Socialism*. It says the following: "To become whole, human beings require the truth about the world, and about themselves, that art offers." This conception very much lies at the centre of the *World Socialist Web Site's* endeavours to develop socialist consciousness in an all-sided way.

Notes:

1. The Socialist Labour League was the British section of the Trotskyist movement, the Fourth International, in the 1960s.

2. Bringing the lessons home: An interview with Jim Allen conducted in 1995

<http://www.wsws.org/articles/1999/aug1999/alle-a11.shtml>

3. In 1956, Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev delivered a secret speech to the Communist Party of the Soviet Union admitting some of Stalin's crimes.

4. In May-June 1968 France was rocked by a mass strike movement; President de Gaulle fled the country.

5. POUM—the Spanish acronym for the Workers Party of Marxist Unification, many of whose members were murdered by Stalin's henchmen during the Spanish Civil War.

6. International Brigades, the volunteer forces that fought on the Republican side in the Spanish Civil War.

See Also:

Jim Allen: A lifetime's commitment to historical truth
[11 August 1999]

Bringing the lessons home: An interview with Jim Allen conducted in 1995

[11 August 1999]

An indictment of fascism and Zionism: A fitting tribute to a man of principle

Perdition by Jim Allen premiered at the Gate Theatre, London
[13 July 1999]

Ken Loach's *Land and Freedom*: The Spanish revolution betrayed
[23 October 1995]

The Aesthetic Component of Socialism: A lecture by David Walsh



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact