

Britain: Memorial meeting held for socialist playwright Jim Allen

Our correspondent
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A celebration of the life and work of the socialist playwright and scriptwriter Jim Allen was held in Manchester on October 6. The meeting coincided with what would have been his seventy-fourth birthday.

Allen, who died on June 24, 1999, was a lifelong socialist who wrote for television, the cinema and theatre. He chose as his themes some of the most crucial experiences of the working class during the twentieth century: the First World War; the 1926 British General Strike, Italian fascism and the Catholic Church, Zionist collaboration with the Nazis during the Second World War, and many others. His final script was for the film *Land and Freedom*, which exposed the treacherous role of the Stalinists in betraying the Spanish Civil War.

The venue was packed with people who admired Allen's work. Most were from Manchester and the surrounding area, but some had travelled from Scotland and Wales. Clips were shown from his film and television work, including *The Big Flame*, *Days of Hope*, *United Kingdom*, *Hidden Agenda* and *Land and Freedom*, as well as television interviews with Allen. Actors who took part in the production of *Perdition* at the Gate Theatre in London last year performed extracts from his play.

The meeting attracted actors, theatre directors and producers from the world of film and television who had worked with Allen and been influenced by him. Their testimony was an eloquent expression of the admiration and respect they held not only for his work, but also for his lifelong and unswerving commitment to socialist ideals. Barbara Slaughter, who first met Jim Allen in 1959, spoke for the *World Socialist Web Site* at the memorial. [See: World Socialist Web Site correspondent Barbara Slaughter speaks at Jim Allen memorial meeting".]

In a commemorative booklet (*see below*) produced by friends and family, film producer Ken Loach who worked with Allen over many years, explained that in the late

seventies and eighties Allen had great difficulty in getting his work performed: "They were hard times. A script about Ireland was rejected by Channel 4 [television] as being too like a Peckinpah movie. Even the British Film Institute turned him down because 'people don't talk like this any more'. This from a bunch of arty bureaucrats who would need a translator if they travelled north of Euston.

"At its best, Jim Allen's writing had a visceral power unmatched by his contemporaries. He caught the rhythms, the vivid use of imagery, the jokes and phrasing of everyday speech. He could turn a political argument into a full-blooded, passionate struggle. He had a great sense of humour and would write scenes of visual power and wit."

Film producer Kenith Trodd, who also worked with Allen, told the meeting, "One of the important things to say about Jim in that era [the 1960s], working in TV... if you came from a working class background as I did—and you'd been through the sieve and sluice of university education—Jim was the only person you ever met who was in contact with original reality.

"Denis Potter wrote about his own background, but I'm afraid Denis was as academically lobotomised as the rest of us. But Jim wasn't. He was the real thing. I can't overestimate how important it was for him to be a presence, not just for his contribution to the work, but for his influence upon us. It was very, very important.

"Jim's television play *United Kingdom* was shown in 1981, just at the beginning of the Thatcher era. It was really the last left-wing epic, before the period where most TV drama has to either have the commerciality of movie, the softness of a 'soap' or the pedigree of a great novel. It is the story of a group of councillors who take on the running of their town. Just before the [police] Special Patrol Group closes in, a character says, 'They say the pen is mightier than the sword. Swords come in handy sometimes. They always come with swords.'

"I mention this to say that in the end, Jim was not about

the medium, he was about the message. He didn't care about the profession. He didn't care about a career. He tried to make something happen and I think he was still planning a revolutionary saga on his deathbed. We should honour him and we should go on honouring him.”

Mike Mansfield explained how Allen's television play *Days of Hope* gave him inspiration, when as a young lawyer he was fighting cases that no one else wanted to fight.

Mansfield said the past few weeks had shown that Jim had been absolutely right about the extent of collusion in Northern Ireland between the security forces and the paramilitary organisations, as he had portrayed it in his play *Hidden Agenda*.

Turning to Allen's play *Perdition*, he said, what would and should be remembered about the play “because what he was saying is applicable now—young Palestinians are dying every single day. One of the points that Ruth, the main character in *Perdition* makes is precisely that: The Israelis may want a homeland, but it should not be at the expense of the Palestinians. It was nationalism and racism that Jim was fighting against in the play.

Perhaps the most moving of the examples of Allen's work given on the day were the extracts from *Perdition*. The play speaks powerfully of his courage and unwillingness to compromise and his desire to throw light on the events of the past.

Elliott Levey, who directed last year's production at the Gate Theatre in London, introduced extracts from *Perdition*. He told the audience that he felt it was an honour to have the opportunity to direct the play. “All sorts of criticisms were hurled at Jim for *Perdition*. One of the most ridiculous last year was that the play was out of date. Jim wrote it at quite a specific time I think—after the 1982 invasion of the Lebanon by Israel, around the time of the *Intafada*, the massive Palestinian uprising, which I think led almost directly to the Oslo Peace Accord.

“To say it was out of date implied that there was no place for Jim's critique of Zionism. But watching events in the streets of Jerusalem this week proves the opposite. So many people have strong feelings about this play, even though they've never seen it—few people have. As you know, the production in 1987 was cancelled.

“It's a play about the collaboration between Jewish leaders and Adolph Eichman. It's a play about Nazi-Zionist collusion, which is a subject not likely to go unnoticed. For me, the most shocking criticism and the most upsetting attack was that the play, as a play, was no good.

It was outrageous that two right-wing historians, with no previous dramaturgical credentials, had the authority to damn this play as a piece of drama.

“Anyway it doesn't matter, because we proved them wrong. Jim's play is not only balanced, fair-minded, insightful, profoundly humanist and definitely anti-racist. It's also a bloody good yarn.”

Allen's children paid tribute to their father and to the enormous contribution made to his achievements by the unflinching support of Clare, their mother.

Others giving testimony to Jim Allen's influence on their own work included the playwright Jimmy McGovern and documentary filmmaker Evette Vanson.

The booklet *Jim Allen—The Lust For Life* can be ordered from margaret@homemannings.freemove.co.uk (cost £5.50 including postage and packing).

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



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