

Episodes from the class struggle in Britain

Just Before the Rain and Coal Not Dole

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In the past months two plays—*Coal Not Dole*, on the 1984-1985 British miners strike, and *Just Before The Rain*, on the Oldham riots of 2001—have been touring theatres in Britain.

Both are written and performed by young people in their late teens and early twenties. Both received rave reviews when they were first performed. Both utilise a musical/documentary style to convey the turmoil of these important political events.

In *Just Before the Rain*, the tensions in the Oldham area of northwest England and the subsequent disturbances are examined from the standpoint of five young Bengali characters—three male and two female.

The play begins with a mélange of words and phrases contributed by each character towards an inquiry into an “Anglo-Asian identity.” Among the rhetorical phrases heard is “Black and white don’t mix.” Next we hear the mostly conservative and parochial voices of the Asian community elders.

The theatre piece re-enacts the riots against a background of news commentary that details how 250 fascists rampaged through mainly Asian areas, smashing windows and attacking people along the way—as well as how police defended the neo-fascist National Front from hostile crowds and how TV crews paid young children £5 to shout racist abuse for the cameras.

Out of a population of 219,000, around 24,600 of Oldham’s inhabitants originate from the Indian subcontinent (14,000 Pakistani, 9,000 Bangladeshi, 1,600 Indian). Oldham contains areas of severe social deprivation, including the third poorest parliamentary ward in the UK. Youth unemployment is very high and amongst Asian youth stands around 40 percent.

In the months leading up to the disturbances, there had been increased political activity in the area by the neo-Nazi British National Party (BNP), which sought to channel the bitter resentment felt in the area towards the mainstream political parties in a racist direction. The ground had already been well prepared for the fascists by the Labour government and the media’s witch-hunting of asylum seekers—especially unsubstantiated claims that so-called “economic migrants” were being given preferential treatment in securing public housing and health care and were responsible for an increase in criminal activity.

The Oldham riots, which also spread to the neighbouring northern towns of Burnley and Bradford during May-June 2001, were the worst such occurrences in Britain for 20 years. Hundreds of Asian and white youth took to the streets in pitched battles against the police. An official report appeared some five months

later, absolving the government and the local authorities of all blame.

The widely reported beating of a 75-year-old war veteran by three Asian youth and an attack on a pregnant Asian woman may have provided the spark for the riot, but it was underlying social tensions for which the government was ultimately responsible that led to the street fighting.

In a dance sequence to techno-bangra music (fast dance and Punjabi folk), the actors introduce all the main participants and evoke images of police charging, street fighting and Nazi salutes.

In the aftermath of the riots, the Asian youth recollect their experiences. A description of how someone made a petrol bomb using a milk bottle, “I loved setting that rag on fire.” The racist adage, “There ain’t no black in the Union Jack!” And the whispered repetition of the ominous, ironic “To England with love.”

Just Before the Rain has many strengths. It points out the divide-and-rule policies of the police, the local Labour council and various politicians. Complicity between the police and the fascist activists is also portrayed. One of the actors plays an Asian man who initially feels that the police are merely upholding the law. But as he watches police officers protecting the neo-Nazis from the angry crowds, his views begin to change.

Unlike previous offerings on a similar theme, the play shows how when confronted with extremes some of the young people begin to carefully think through and examine their experiences. It seeks to draw out the contradictions that young people from the Indian subcontinent face: between “tradition” and what is expected of them by their elders, on the one hand, and the realities of young third-generation Asians growing up in Britain, on the other.

The attempt to replicate the “gangster culture” associated with US rap music by some of the Asian youth is tackled by one of the male characters. He explains how he has to act cool and look tough as a means of survival and appeals for understanding. What comes across, despite the tough talk, is a very young and vulnerable individual.

Towards the end of the play, through a series of monologues, the council leaders, community elders and police hint at their desire to carry on as if everything is fine. However, it is left for the audience to draw its own conclusions.

A number of issues are thrown in without much thought; references to September 11, 2001, in New York and a US president elected to obtain “cheap petrol” from the Middle East

seem hurried and forced.

The play ends on an optimistic note with one of the characters building a small tower out of the bricks left over from the riot—in the background, a song urges everyone to unite and build a better world. One of the play's chief merits is that it does not retreat into the type of identity politics generally pushed by so many Asian and black commentators and artists.

Just Before The Rain was devised by the cast and based on their own experiences. It was originally a 20-minute show performed at Manchester's Contact Theatre, where the response was so enthusiastic that it was developed into a professional production under the supervision of director Iain Bloomfield.

Coal Not Dole is weaker in many respects. It deals with the most significant industrial dispute experienced by the British working class in the last two decades, yet the programme accompanying the show claims that it is not political.

This is just not possible, and in truth the play's politics are a despondent acceptance of the claim made by the Blair Labour government and others that the miners' strike was the last hurrah for the class struggle and showed the futility of opposing the capitalist profit system.

Whilst conveying the daily grind of a group of miners digging for coal and the relationships between them, their partners and families, discussions are held between the men about the conditions of work and the impending strike due to the closure of a number of pits.

In the textile factory where the women work, they talk about the lack of respect they receive from their partners and husbands. Both groups separately discuss the boredom and dreariness of their lives and decide to have a night out on the town—predictably ending up in the same place.

Following the pit closure programme announced by the Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher, with the prospect of the loss of 70,000 jobs, agonising discussions take place between the men about the rights and wrongs of taking strike action without a ballot.

The women decide they will concentrate their efforts on supporting the strike, including the setting up of kitchens to help feed the strikers.

To the tune of John Lennon's "Working Class hero," a frank and heated discussion takes place in the pub about the scabbing activities in the Nottinghamshire area and the brutality of the police. Conflicts and doubts emerge. A young miner with only a minimal commitment to the strike is reminded of the death of a miner of the same age—David Jones—while he was picketing that very morning.

Whilst the play does bring out the differences that emerged between workers and their families, the emphasis is on how hopeless it all was. Is this the fault of the playwright or the subject matter? A little of both, one must say.

James Graham was 20 years old when he wrote the play and based it on interviews carried out in the Nottinghamshire area. This method of research has its drawbacks. The result depends, in the first place, on whom one speaks to. Moreover, such a method may not clarify the underlying causes or contradictions of a conflict, which are not fully understood by the participants

themselves.

For example, Nottingham was the only mining area in Britain whose leadership opposed the strike by insisting that a ballot must be held before mounting opposition to pit closures. The ballot call was not based on some abstract commitment to democracy, but was an excuse for the Notts miners to scab on the strike. It eventually led to the setting up of the strikebreaking Union of Democratic Mineworkers (UDM).

Graham was barely two years old when the strike took place and just 15 years old when Tony Blair came to power; and, in the absence of a serious effort to examine the issues posed, his play is permeated by the prevailing outlook of the day.

There are still positive things here. The play brings out the tensions produced throughout the yearlong dispute, as in the relationship between a younger couple where the husband is skeptical towards the strike and his wife has become politicised. It also touches on the division within families where some returned to work. A very clear empathy emerges with those families torn apart by the strike, but one that is uncritical of the scabbing and fails to understand the depth of the hostility that thousands of miners and their families had to endure from the government and the state.

The most moving scenes are depicted as monologues by the older workers Flora and Bernie, reflecting upon their lives and the demoralisation felt at the end of the strike.

The penultimate scene is set in the sewing factory. Flora states, "I have sat at this machine most of my life and will probably die here. Passing time between life and death. But what for? I thought I could make a difference. Why do we bother?" Her husband in the final scene ends the play by stating, "How can a man dig all his life and get nowhere?"

The 1984-85 miners strike in fact did not reveal the futility of the class struggle but rather the impotence of the perspective based on trade unionism—the belief that militant strike action by itself was enough. Under the leadership of Arthur Scargill, the National Union of Mineworkers refused to politically challenge the isolation of the strike by the Trades Union Congress and the Labour Party, which were both opposed to any political struggle against the Thatcher government. It was this refusal to mobilise the miners and broader layers of workers in a political struggle against the Tory government and its defenders in the labour movement that led the strike to defeat. Without understanding this, it is little wonder that the play's author ends up bemoaning the futility of struggle per se.

Despite these criticisms, the fact that two plays are produced on themes relating to the class struggle indicates a certain political awakening among young people and represents a welcome change from the usually introverted productions that have come to dominate modern theatre.



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