

Trevor Griffiths and David Walsh discuss “The Writer and Revolution”

Our reporter
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The University of Manchester was the venue for a unique discussion Wednesday on the relationship between the writer and revolution. Acclaimed playwright Trevor Griffiths was in conversation with David Walsh, the arts editor of the *World Socialist Web Site*.

Griffiths has been writing for the theatre, television and cinema since the late 1960s. His work has been seen throughout the world and he has won numerous awards, including for his film *Reds*, written with Warren Beatty, for which he received the WGA Best Screenplay Award and an Oscar nomination.

Focusing on Griffiths' career, spanning almost half a century, the two explored the complex interaction between art and society. In particular, given Griffiths' wide-ranging body of work, it was possible to examine the impact of key historical moments on both the artist and in the development of social revolution.

David Walsh, in Britain for a series of talks on 'Art and Socialism,' introduced Griffiths. He stressed that the discussion reflected the coming together of a number of social and cultural processes. The descent of world capitalism into a historic economic crisis had dealt a shattering blow to the hegemony enjoyed by the ideologues of the free market and its stifling effect on artistic creation, Walsh explained.

This development threw into sharp relief the significance of Griffiths' own work. Walsh described the playwright as 'one of the most historically acute writers of our time.'

This was true in several senses, he continued. Griffiths 'has treated a remarkable number of critical historical moments: the American Revolution, the French Revolution, pre-revolutionary Russia, the formation of the Bolshevik Party, the rise of Stalinism, the Italian revolutionary strike wave of 1920, the Spanish Civil War, the transport workers strike of 1911 in this country, the Labour Party from various sides, the Conservative Party,

the experience of Thatcherism, neo-Nazism, the Gulf War, and our own party in Britain at an earlier stage of development,' Walsh said.

He had dealt with other questions as well, 'about more intimate matters, family, husbands and wives, the consequences of illness, the death of love and relationships,' grappling with human emotion and behavior, Walsh explained.

What is common to all his works is that they are all 'informed by a historical approach,' he stressed.

Griffiths spoke extensively on the life of Thomas Paine, the subject of his screenplay 'These are the Times,' which follows Paine from obscurity in England, to the American War of Independence, to Revolutionary France. He discussed what had attracted him to Paine as a historical figure, his connection to the Enlightenment and described the difficulties he faced in realizing this project as well as several others since the 1980s.

Griffiths pointed out to a predominantly youthful audience how the fate of his work was bound up with the decline of the revolutionary fervor and socialist views associated with the 1960s and stretching into the early 1970s.

Discussing his play 'The Party,' a fictionalized account of discussions between several artists and a number of left figures, he noted that this was put on in 1973 at the National Theatre in London, directed by Kenneth Tynan and starred Sir Laurence Olivier in the leading role based on Trotskyist leader Gerry Healy.

He read a number of quotes from the accompanying programme to paint a picture of a society in which 'Marxism was commonplace,' that a play featuring a 22-minute speech outlining the significance of a revolutionary party could attract audiences of 900 people over a number of weeks.

'This was the society we were building,' Griffiths said, 'and that was the society that the Conservatives and

Labour had to rip up.'

He explained how the 1970s had witnessed a sustained attempt to destroy the radical and socialist traditions associated with this period—a 'kulturkampf' waged first by the Conservatives under Margaret Thatcher, and then deepened and extended under Tony Blair's Labour government.

Two of the most effective moments in the discussion were when Griffiths read John Tagg's (Healy's) speech from 'The Party' and his closing the meeting with the final scenes of 'These are the Times.' Griffiths also showed a clip from his last television play 'Food for Ravens,' dealing with the last days of Aneurin Bevan, the Labour leader credited with founding Britain's National Health Service. In it, Bevan speaks movingly of not allowing the rich fruits of culture to be the exclusive preserve of the 'toffs' and to recognize them as the birthright of humanity.

Griffiths said that the next period could be the dawn of a new artistic and political awakening. For this, certain basic truths had to be understood, he said: 'Namely, who creates the wealth, and who spends it.'

Walsh stressed that there was a social impulse for the renunciation of their previous left views by many of Griffiths' contemporaries. He insisted that Griffiths' ability to resist these pressures was rooted in his own historical approach and a sense of historical perspective this provided.

This underlined the necessity for writers and artists today to familiarize themselves with history, in particular the multifaceted struggle to develop socialist consciousness amongst broad layers of society. The *World Socialist Web Site* places particular emphasis on the need to raise the cultural level of the working class, to develop sensitivity, a sense of solidarity and an empathy with others as a precondition for such a development, Walsh said.

Numerous questions were asked by members of the audience on these themes and the contributions of both speakers were warmly applauded.



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