

Valley of the Shadow: A drama about art, society and revolution

Vicky Short, Antoine Lerougetel
11 July 2012

Written and directed by Jack Shepherd, performed by The Players Collective at the All Saints Centre in Lewes, England.

The Players Collective in Lewes is composed of amateur and professional actors and is a major venue for Jack Shepherd's creative work. He is a well-known television actor, playwright and theatre producer (see accompanying interview).

Valley of the Shadow is set at the time of the First World War in the village hall of a small Yorkshire village. The first act, in the lead-up to the war, focuses on a group of artists discussing aesthetic trends. Behind them on the stage, the landowner's daughter Patricia (Julia Assling), an aspiring patron of the arts, issues orders to a young agricultural labourer, Tom (James Firth-Haydon), and her pretty young maid, Amy (Sascha Harman), as they set up the hall for a folk dance.

Assling lends Patricia the shrill, near-hysterical edge of those who, incompetent in dealing with practical tasks, can only issue impatient and inept orders, sending Amy scurrying hither and thither. Tom's body language, while unhurriedly setting up the wiring for the event, suggests his intrinsic superiority over his social "better".

The artists and intellectuals, at the front of the stage, discuss modern art oblivious to the urgent preparations, but do notice Amy's charms. Patricia's brother Henry (Lewis Reid) glorifies futurism, the worship of speed and technology and welcomes a war that will "purge" society—very much in line with many of the Italian futurists who went over to fascism.

One of the group, Max, a composer, is collecting rural folk music in order to incorporate it into his classical compositions. He eventually wins Amy over with his admiration for folk culture and ends up stealing her away from the narrowness and oppression of the village.

Shepherd here is pitting folk culture against "modernity". Benjamin, a shrewd old worker, has been brought from the workhouse by the gentry to play the fiddle at the dance. He has to keep his instrument hidden. "They don't take kindly there to you having property", he explains. He accompanies Tom in a folk song.

When the audience comes back into the hall after the interval, there is a complete change of atmosphere. It is 1917, at the height of the war. We can sense its brutality. The village hall is now in use as a recreation centre for wounded soldiers. Henry is a wheelchair-bound, shell-shocked wreck, and Tom is heavily bandaged and in considerable pain. We see Patricia getting her hands dirty cleaning and catering to the needs of the wounded.

The play ends with the wounded Tom saying that only the wealthy have won anything out of the war and that people like him do not exist for the elite, they are transparent. He accuses the upper class intellectuals of stealing folk art and music from the people and making it inaccessible to them.

The themes of social injustice are brought out in Shepherd's writing and staging. The relations between the gentry, workers and servants, and intelligentsia emerge from the simultaneous but distinct activities of these social layers on the bare stage. This is a genuine accomplishment.

However, overall, the picture drawn here strikes one as far too mild. The human destruction of the war provokes disgust, but the piece suffers seriously from Shepherd's avoidance of big and complex issues, including the state of British and European society, which hurled masses of humanity into the slaughter to defend their interests. Shepherd too avoids the seminal event of the modern age, brought about in part by the imperialist war, the first workers' revolution in Russia—or at least its impact, even in a remote village. These are large omissions, and difficult to justify. And they have dramatic consequences in terms of the impact the piece has on an audience.

Shepherd's interest in history, politics and social movements is commendable and intriguing.

His plays—although less so, in our view, in the case of *Valley of the Shadow*—are staged with urgency and considerable tautness. Anguished discussions take place about revolution, art and society between revolutionaries and artists, and about the often-intractable dilemmas that wrack them. The strength of Shepherd's theatre is his ability to stage these debates convincingly, artistically, to show how they formed part of the living flesh of these people. A sexual tension pervades his plays, which lends electricity to many scenes.

He is at once witty, ironical, sharply provocative and also able to express great human tenderness and empathy.

In Shepherd's play *In Lambeth* (1989), for example, an argument takes place between the poet and painter William Blake and Thomas Paine, a political thinker and participant in the American and French Revolutions. Blake embraces the visionary role of the artist in the fight for social justice, but cannot accept the revolutionary violence needed to overcome the violence of the oppressors.

Through a Cloud (2004) has the blind poet John Milton, ideologist of the English Revolution (1640-1660), lashing the ill and aging Oliver Cromwell, its political and military leader, for his pragmatism, his compromising of the egalitarian aspirations of the revolution and his assumption of dictatorial powers in order to crush dissent. A wronged and maddened wood carver haunts Cromwell for the devastation wrought on religious and folk art by his New Model Army.

Shepherd's new play, *Against the Tide*, yet to be published, develops these issues. It treats the life and times of William Morris (1834-1896), and is perhaps closer and more directly relevant to our times. A poet, artist-artisan and founder of the English socialist movement, Morris debates the poet Algernon Swinburne over the social utility of art to which he (Morris) was strongly committed, as is Shepherd.

Towards the end of the play, Morris embraces the anarchistic millenarian myth that one great spontaneous popular action will end capitalism. He argues against the insistence of the Marxist workers' leader Henry Hyndman on the need for a disciplined Bolshevik-style party. The issues are crucial today.

Hyndman describes the contemporary situation, "Firstly an economic crisis and then a political crisis...right across Europe! Which, need I remind you, can only result in the laying off of workers...strikes...lock outs.....riots...followed by violent reprisals...and the cast iron certainty of armed insurrection. It's bloody inevitable man."

To Morris's "You can't cudgel people into thinking the same thing", Hyndman angrily ripostes, "You need commitment, structure, organisation, and above all order in the ranks, so that when an order is given there's a good chance of it being carried out. The anarchist dream is a beautiful one, I grant you, but the reality is...squalid....ugly...chaotic and above all dangerous."

Morris, unable to refute Hyndman, goes into a catatonic state. The political paralysis of Morris, so powerfully evoked by Shepherd, has a profound resonance today.

Shepherd admits that he shares Morris's perplexity. It is clear that a major theme of his political plays is the fear that the masses in revolt will inevitably be disenfranchised by revolutionary leaders who impose their own vision and ignore the people's

wishes and needs.

This conclusion, essentially a liberal and moralising one, is a real handicap. It is based, in our view, on a wrongheaded interpretation of the difficulties of the twentieth century, including the fate of the Russian Revolution, and the writer's own direct experience, in and around the Socialist Labour League (SLL) and Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP) in the 1960s and 1970s.

The approach to modern art expressed in *Valley of the Shadow* is also problematic. Shepherd leaves out the fact that the Russian futurists, under some of the same influences as their Italian counterparts, rallied to the Russian Revolution in considerable numbers. They recognised that the social ownership of modern technology in a socialist society would improve the material and cultural conditions of the mass of humanity. The Russian revolution gave immense impetus to art before being crushed by the brutal, conservative, nationalist bureaucracy led by Joseph Stalin.

The cubist experiment of Pablo Picasso, Georges Braque and Juan Gris, already well under way before the war and influential among the Russian artistic avant-garde, had very little to do with the morbid sentiments expressed by the group of artists in *Valley of the Shadow*.

Cubist art created the means in painting and sculpture of expressing movement, of penetrating the surface of reality. It draws the viewer's eye to the many facets of the object and suggests different levels of its existence and a dynamic complexity. Cubism helped provide the resources for the early Soviet artists to express their revolutionary optimism.

Shepherd obviously opposes oppression and violence and social cruelty. The persistence and sincerity of his convictions are not in question. That his protagonists (and presumably he) see socialism as a utopian dream whose practitioners probably produce more devastation than they do good, however, creates considerable artistic and intellectual difficulties. In the end, the plays pose problems that they cannot solve, or perhaps more to the point, since we are not demanding worked-out answers from the artists, more exhaustively explore.

We hope that in subsequent plays Jack Shepherd will continue to deepen the discussion and provoke thought on these crucial issues in the lively, socially evocative theatre he has developed.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact