

New Zealand documentary *Six Angry Women* defends 1984 vigilante attack

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Six Angry Women, a documentary written and directed by Megan Jones, recently aired on TVNZ, the state-owned broadcaster, and was added to its streaming website.

The 90-minute film is a deeply unpleasant experience. Based on the reactionary premises of feminist identity politics, it sets out to justify a vicious assault that occurred in Auckland in February 1984 and generated a storm of controversy. Six women, wearing masks, kidnapped and attacked Mervyn Thompson, a prominent playwright and University of Auckland drama lecturer, in retaliation over unsubstantiated accusations of rape.

Thompson's attackers ambushed him in his car and drove him to a park. He was blindfolded, stripped to his underwear, punched, kicked, tied to a tree and threatened with castration. Writer Stephanie Johnson, who saw Thompson the next day, recalled in 2016: "Mervyn was bruised, ashen, traumatised, glazed with sweat [and]... could hardly walk because his assailants had kicked him repeatedly in the balls. He showed us the letters R, A, and a partly formed P, from where they had tried to brand the word 'rapist' into his arm with a burning cigarette."

The assault was cut short when a father and son who lived nearby heard Thompson's screams and drove to the park, scaring off the assailants. Eyewitness Adrian Hita, who was 13 at the time, says in the documentary: "It looked like a scene out of a horror movie." Thompson was "shaking and sobbing," saying he thought he would be killed.

Police investigated, but none of the women responsible for the attack was ever identified.

In a *Listener* magazine article, writer and director Jones calls the incident "outrageous" and "a feminist political terrorist attack." She goes on, however, to relativise the crime, calling it "a morally complex story" that belongs "at the apex of a decade of feminist activism and gender politics... [and] which drove huge social change."

Six Angry Women includes interviews with a few of Thompson's supporters and quotes some of the playwright's own words in his defence. In the end, however, the documentary sides with the "angry women" who violently assaulted him.

Jones, as narrator, says: "Mervyn claims he's the innocent victim of a misguided political action, but it's hard to believe he would be the target if there's no truth to the allegations." Later she says: "To assume guilt in a person who's never convicted of a crime is a dangerous thing. Mervyn Thompson protested his innocence, right up until his death from cancer in 1992. But there were good reasons to believe Mervyn Thompson was sexually violent."

What "good reasons"? Thompson was never charged with rape. Jones interviewed an unidentified former student of Thompson's, referred to as Jenny, who says that he raped her in December 1983. Police spoke to Jenny while investigating the attack on Thompson, but she did not make a formal complaint. Thompson claimed that they had consensual sex.

The documentary also mentions allegations that Thompson behaved inappropriately towards other students, and that he was violent towards

another woman. One former student says Thompson once asked her to massage his neck. The other allegations are anonymous and none led to any charges.

Thompson is also described as a "womaniser" and "philanderer," who married twice and had a tumultuous affair with a married woman—which has no relevance to the rape claim, but helps to demonise him. One does not have to approve of Thompson's behaviour in order to defend his basic rights not to be slandered and physically attacked.

Six Angry Women adopts the anti-democratic position of the #MeToo campaign that an accusation must be treated as guilt, regardless of the lack of evidence or due process. It ends with comments by an unidentified speaker endorsing the vigilante attack: "It was a political action by women for women... Is violence the answer? For women to get some cut-through at that moment, it was."

The feminist writer Sandi Hall concurs: "[The attack] sparked a conversation in the community, it made things leap forward in terms of examining sexual violence and rape, and that's a very good thing." Hall also declares in the film: "If I'd been asked to join in, I would have."

There are many similarly repugnant comments, which mostly go unchallenged. The documentary provides a revealing picture of the toxic culture in New Zealand campuses and middle-class radical circles in the 1980s, which were dominated by identity politics based on race, gender and sexuality.

Louise Rafkin, editor of the student magazine *Craccum* in 1983, praises the slogan "All men are rapists," as "brilliant... because that's just how women experience the world." Lee Lee Heath, then a law student, helped put up hundreds of posters around university smearing Thompson as a rapist after he was assaulted. She candidly admits: "I did not have evidence that he did in fact rape... [but] I chose to believe this woman."

Chris Atmore, from Women Against Pornography, is shown defending the assault in a TV interview at the time, saying: "The chances of convicting a white middle-class rapist are fairly remote, and I think in that case women have to use the channels that are available to them."

A few people speak in defence of Thompson. The playwright Renée, who collaborated with him, criticises her co-workers at the influential feminist magazine *Broadsheet* for being "ecstatic" about the assault.

Vicki Walker, one of Thompson's students, denounces the "vigilante feeling at the university." She says: "They were waiting for someone. If it wasn't Mervyn it would have been someone else... I don't think it mattered who it was, as long as it was a white middle-class male, to make their point."

Walker bluntly states: "What they did to Mervyn was violent, was horrible, was disgusting... to kidnap someone, to bash someone... They're criminals and they should pay."

The documentary makes no mention of the principled stand taken by 24 of Thompson's students, all women, including the aforementioned Stephanie Johnson. In a letter published in *Craccum* on April 10, 1984, they said: "[The attackers] continue to hide behind anonymity and vague

accusations. We all share a revulsion for violence of any type to anybody. We also know that vigilante groups have made some tragic mistakes in the past.”

The letter praised Thompson’s work as a teacher, saying he was “open to discussion on any subject, often to the point of making himself vulnerable. We respected his ability to form a cohesive group from a class of very diverse individuals. We also respected his concern for social justice, which is reflected in his written work.”

Thompson was widely regarded as one of New Zealand’s most significant playwrights and directors. Born on the West Coast of the South Island in a working-class family, he first worked as a coal miner before eventually going to university. In 1971, he co-founded Christchurch’s Court Theatre, the city’s first venue for professional performances.

Many of Thompson’s plays deal with major historical experiences of the New Zealand working class. They include an adaptation of the novel *Children of the Poor*, the autobiographical *Coaltown Blues, Songs to Uncle Scrim*, about the Great Depression, and *O! Temperance*, about the women’s suffrage movement.

Thompson’s career and his personal life were severely impacted by the assault. His plays were boycotted, cancelled and picketed by feminist groups.

Significantly, sections of the trade union bureaucracy joined in the onslaught. In Wellington, the women’s sub-committee of the Trades Council and the Unemployed Workers Union joined Women Against Pornography and others to pressure actors to cancel a production of *Songs to Uncle Scrim*. The Actors’ Equity union leader Susan Ord also made statements attacking Thompson. [1]

Another so-called leftist who viciously demonised Thompson was Vivienne Porzsolt, who was associated with the Maoist Workers Communist League (WCL), and now writes for the pseudo-left *Green Left Weekly* in Australia. She accused Thompson of “exaggeration... of the danger he faced,” driven by “his fear and hatred of women who on this one occasion are stronger than he.” She declared that his abduction and beating had to be seen “in the context of a male-dominated society,” in which he had power as an academic and “through his simple existence as a man.” [2]

The assault on Thompson and the censorship of his work reflected the right-wing degeneration of New Zealand’s middle-class “lefts” grouped around the Labour Party and the unions. In 1984, Labour became the government, led by Prime Minister David Lange, and initiated an historic attack on the working class. The government and big business, with the crucial assistance of the union bureaucracy, responded to the globalisation of production by privatising and restructuring entire industries, with tens of thousands of lay-offs in forestry, railways, manufacturing, meat processing and mining, to name just a few.

While this was happening, Maori nationalism and feminism became increasingly fashionable among the middle classes. As Thompson noted in his 1991 memoir *Singing the Blues*, this was accompanied by the insistence that class “is merely a sub-species of race and gender. White males are oppressors whatever class they come from. So unless you’re a woman or black, your experience doesn’t rate.” [3]

The anti-Marxist WCL exemplified this shift. It decided in January 1990 to change its name to “Left Currents” because it now “rejected the view ... that the class struggle had primacy over those for Maori self-determination and women’s liberation.” [4] Left Currents and several former members of the Pabloite Socialist Action League (SAL)—along with feminist, environmentalist and Maori nationalist groups—joined the New Labour Party, an openly capitalist party founded as a splinter from Labour in 1989. Former SAL member Keith Locke, made clear: “We aren’t a party of any certain sector or class, but a party of policies that anyone can support.” [5]

Meanwhile, Thompson writes, “the real division in the country—that

which has always existed between the haves and the have-nots—was allowed to widen into an unbridgeable chasm. While everyone else was engaged in hostilities across the barricades of race and gender—and in rending their opponents limb from limb—the new technocrats went on quietly destroying the lives and hopes of entire generations of New Zealanders. And did so almost unopposed.” [6]

Six Angry Women says nothing about the Lange government’s social assaults, from which the working class never recovered. The film depicts the 1980s as the start of great progressive advances for middle-class women, helped along by the attack on Thompson. Many of the feminists interviewed by Jones have had successful careers in academia, the media, and the legal profession.

It is not accidental that the state-funded documentary appears during another unprecedented economic crisis, triggered by the coronavirus pandemic, and an onslaught against workers’ living standards. Jacinda Ardern’s Labour government is funnelling tens of billions of dollars to the rich, while businesses are laying off thousands of workers and the cost of living spirals out of control.

To divert the attention of sections of the middle class and young people, various forms of identity politics based on gender, sexuality and race are being promoted internationally. The aim is to deny the centrality of class divisions and prevent a unified fight by the working class against capitalism. At the same time, the right-wing feminists’ promotion of vigilantism and attacks on the presumption of innocence are paving the way for an intensification of the state assaults on the basic democratic rights of all working people.

References:

- [1] *Singing the Blues*, Blacktown Press, 17, 35
- [2] *Broadsheet*, June 1984, 12
- [3] *Singing the Blues*, 20
- [4] “Liquidationism destroys the Workers’ Communist League,” *International Review, Internal Bulletin of the Revolutionary Communist League of Britain*, Summer 1990
- [5] *People’s Voice*, 9 September 1991
- [6] *Singing the Blues*, 68



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