

British dramatist Trevor Griffiths (4 April 1935 – 29 March 2024): “I didn’t invent myself. The world invented me”

Paul Bond
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Trevor Griffiths, who died last week aged 88, was one of the outstanding radical dramatists of the last 50 years. This was a difficult period for artists, politically left-wing ones above all. But Griffiths fared better than most both because his works were concretely rooted in major social and political events and processes and because of his encounter with genuine Marxism.

Introducing a November 2008 discussion (“The Writer and Revolution”) with the playwright at the University of Manchester, *World Socialist Web Site* arts editor David Walsh termed Griffiths, “one of the most historically acute writers of our time.” He pointed to Griffiths’ body of work that covered, amongst other things, the Russian, American and French Revolutions, the Italian revolutionary strike wave of 1920, the Spanish Civil War, the first Gulf War, the Labour and Conservative Parties, neo-Nazism, national myths forged around polar exploration and the Trotskyist movement.

(Two video clips from this event can be seen [here](#) and [here](#).)

In Manchester, Walsh called Griffiths a “historical realist”—not merely in his dramatic style, but in his determined quest for the truth of the historical processes at work.

Griffiths had said, “I have to work within the popular imagination which has been shaped by naturalism.” A writer has “to find out the whole map of the ground that we’re dealing with ... to cover the ground enormously thoroughly, so that you really do appropriate it, you own that territory.”

This meant tackling the realities of class existence. The dramatist sought, apart from anything else, to reflect on the conditions of his own political life and experience, most notably in the intervention of the British Trotskyists among a layer of radicalised artists and intellectuals like himself.

His writing covered the conflicts between revolutionary and reformist perspectives, and he was acutely conscious of democratic access to cultural expression. Out of all this, Griffiths attempted to draw wider lessons about the times and their impact. It is to his credit that he continued trying to follow this healthy path throughout his life, even when many of his peers had long since abandoned it.

Griffiths was born in Manchester in 1935, the third child of a Welsh chemical process worker and an Irish Catholic bus conductress. Unlike his brother and sister, he was raised to the age of five by his Catholic grandmother. He attended a Catholic college before studying English language and literature at the University of Manchester (1952-55). On graduation, he did his two years’ national service (conscription).

The future writer went into education, teaching English and games

at an Oldham private school and lecturing in liberal studies at Stockport Technical College. In 1965 he joined the BBC as an education officer, continuing in the role until 1972. By then, his first full-length play, *Occupations* (1971), had been taken on by the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC).

Griffiths later told the WSWS, “I didn’t invent myself. The world invented me. I came out of teaching. I came out of New Left Clubs. ... I had an active back history pushing me forward. So when I got to confronting producers and production units and the BBC and all of that stuff, I didn’t feel that I was on my own. I felt that I was shoulder to shoulder with a hell of a lot of people.” This is not a minor point.

The 1950s had seen revolutionary upheavals against Stalinism in Eastern Europe, triggering a mass exodus from the Communist Party, in Britain and elsewhere. Prostrate before the apparent strength of Stalinism and other bureaucracies, Pabloism (personified by figures like Michel Pablo, Ernest Mandel and Pierre Frank) had emerged out of the Trotskyist movement, calling for the liquidation of any independent revolutionary organisation of the working class into local Stalinist or social democratic parties.

The orthodox Trotskyists of the International Committee of the Fourth International, represented in Britain by The Group, led by Gerry Healy, by contrast, waged a vigorous and active intervention in the crisis of the Stalinists, fighting to win workers breaking to the left. This was a period of intense and widespread political discussion. Among university academics and intellectuals, the New Left emerged as a way of forestalling that leftward movement, which was also reflected within the Labour Party.

A Labour Party member until 1965 (when he resigned in dissatisfaction with Harold Wilson’s government), Griffiths edited the party’s *Northern Voice* paper, but was also chair of the Manchester Left Club, series editor for the Workers’ Northern Publishing Society and an early member of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament.

This political experience, coupled with his educational background, helped equip him with the ability to explore ideas through drama. A one-act play, *The Wages of Thin* (1969), was followed by *Occupations*, set in Turin in 1920. With workers occupying factories across Italy, the play hinges on a clash between Kabak, a Comintern representative, and Antonio Gramsci, advocating shop-floor soviets.

Occupations attracted the attention of the RSC and led to his being commissioned to write *The Party* (1973). The play was modelled on the Friday night discussions in the late 1960s and early 1970s in London, primarily of writers, actors and artists, organised and initially

hosted by producer, writer and director Tony Garnett, who had also left the Labour Party in the mid-1960s. Garnett was holding regular open meetings each week “for anyone who thought of themselves as left.”

Garnett had by then established relations with the British Trotskyists, now known as the Socialist Labour League (SLL). Healy started attending Garnett’s Friday meetings. In 2013, Garnett told the WWS, “Many of the representatives of other tendencies stopped coming. There was no doubt that Healy’s position was far superior to theirs. He was a better and more relentless debater than any of them. ... They just didn’t dare come back.”

The Party portrayed one such meeting, a discussion between a London School of Economics lecturer, based on the Pabloite Robin Blackburn, and a dramatist, based on playwright David Mercer, an SLL supporter. The high point is the devastating rebuttal by the veteran Trotskyist John Tagg, modelled on Healy (and first played by Laurence Olivier), of the Pabloites’ abandonment of the working class: “Finally you learn to enjoy your pain, to need it, so that you have nothing to offer your bourgeois peers but a sort of moral exhaustion. You can’t build socialism on fatigue.” Tagg denounces their compromise: “You enjoy biting the hand that feeds you but you’ll never bite it off.”

(Griffiths read from this important 20-minute speech, one of the best passages he ever produced, during the Manchester event in 2008. See the second clip above.)

The fight for revolutionary ideas in hostile political circumstances, and their practical implications, were central to Griffiths’ work. A 1974 episode (“Absolute Beginners”) of the BBC’s 13-part historical series *Fall of Eagles* examined the emergence of the Bolshevik Party in the 1903 split from Menshevism. Patrick Stewart played Lenin and Michael Kitchen portrayed Trotsky. An episode written for *The Edwardians* was not made because of its portrayal of the 1911 Liverpool transport strike.

Griffiths recognised the attack on such politically informed culture that followed. *The Party* portrayed a period when, he said, “Marxism was commonplace” and discussions of the significance of a revolutionary party could attract regular large theatre audiences.

“This was the society we were building, and that was the society that the Conservatives and Labour had to rip up.” The fate of his own work, he knew, was tied up with that process.

The period during which left-wing ideas could be discussed and presented in the British popular media and on television came to an end in 1997, “and I was the last one to be killed.” That year he wrote and directed *Food for Ravens* for the BBC to mark Welsh labour Party leader Aneurin Bevan’s birth. The BBC initially tried to restrict broadcast to Wales. The national broadcast happened on BBC2, just before midnight. “No trailer, no listing in *Radio Times*. No DVD,” Griffiths complained to the press.

The dramatist later asserted that the task confronting every working class person is the fight for something “less rotten” than what exists now. He portrayed conflict without losing a sympathetic voice. In *Through the Night* (1975), based on his first wife’s experiences, Alison Steadman played a young working class woman who goes into hospital for a routine cancer scan and awakes to find she has had a mastectomy.

Also on television, the popular series *Bill Brand* (1976) centred on a left Labour MP (played by Jack Shepherd, a frequent collaborator, interviewed by the WWS in 2012) confronting the pressures of Westminster.

Bill Brand, Griffiths explained, “was trying to say ... that the traditions of the labour movement were inadequate to take the struggle further, and that we had to discover new traditions or revive even older ones.”

He had begun to see television as a way of reaching beyond just the middle class and politically converted theatre audiences, of achieving the “strategic penetration of the central channel of communication.” This involved not just new scripts, but excellent adaptations like D.H. Lawrence’s *Sons and Lovers* and Chekhov’s *The Cherry Orchard* (both 1981).

He also did extensive work on the script for Warren Beatty’s film about John Reed and Louise Bryant, *Reds* (1981), which Beatty completed. Griffiths wrote many screenplays that were never filmed, as he adamantly opposed their being “diluted.” Griffiths estimated he wrote about 45 percent of *Reds*.

He did not, however, abandon the stage. *Comedians* (1975), about an evening class for aspiring stand-up comics, was a notable triumph, exploring again questions of class, political effectiveness, compromise and betrayal. Nor did he abandon political scrutiny, with early 1990s pieces such as *The Gulf Between Us* (1992), taking the first Gulf War as its backdrop—a decade later he said he was “sickened” by Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair’s intervention in Iraq—and *Thatcher’s Children* (1993). He genuinely enjoyed collaborative writing for the stage with other dramatists.

Griffiths was able to move pieces between stage and screen with some skill, satisfying his constant demand for “impact and penetration.” *Oi for England* (1982), about youth unemployment and far-right skinheads, later transferred successfully from television to theatre.

His last stage play transformed a screenplay written years earlier. Richard Attenborough was unable to get funding for *These Are the Times*, Griffiths’ script about the 18th-century revolutionary Thomas Paine, in part because of its scale. Griffiths always praised Attenborough for not suggesting he start again and cut it down.

Realising the film was not going to be made, Griffiths first published the screenplay, then brought it to the stage as *A New World*. In part, as he told the WWS, he was confronting the political crisis that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union, so “immediately went back to the previous revolution, the French Revolution.”

His continued push, under difficult conditions for a new artistic and political awakening, deserves recognition and praise. So too, should his understanding of the place of the artist in the face of economic pressures: “I’ve never been in the business,” Griffiths said, “I live outside it.” That he was able to achieve all that he did in the face of such pressure is a testament to his insistence on historical perspective and a commitment to socialism, which should be a lesson for all artists.



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