

Theatre

Trevor Griffiths has always been a playwright of sharp political reflexes, commenting directly on changing social conditions and questions of power as they arise. His first full-length play, *Occupations* (1970), examined the ideological failings of 1968 by analogy with Gramsci's "strategically similar struggles" in Turin in 1920. *The Party* (1973) portrayed that same zenith of the Left as it appeared from within the political inertia of contemporary England. *Comedians* (1975) showed the Left's interests moving towards issues of race and gender as well as class. Other works have, variously, tackled the National Front's exploitation of disillusioned youth, in *Oi for England* (1982), and the wars of the Middle East in *The Gulf Between Us* (1992) and *Camel Station* (2006).

One of Griffiths's recurrent concerns is with balancing the ethical with the pragmatic – adjusting what *The Party* calls "the correct line to organise and lead" with the possibility that this "correctness" may be complicit with the coercive powers it seeks to overthrow. Interests in this erosive encounter of principles with political realities have equipped Griffiths as an alert adapter of *The Cherry Orchard* (1977), and of the Chekhov-based *Piano* (1990). In each, the destruction of ideals by quotidian banalities is shown less as a matter of indulgent regret than as a consequence of class conflict and economic change. Like many recent playwrights, he also gains from Harold Pinter's example of dialogue cracking with the micro-implications of dominance and subservience. A mildly politicized reworking of *The Dumb Waiter* (*The wages of Thin*, 1969) emphasizes Griffiths's early interest in this idiom. Later plays in these volumes show how successfully he adapted it, along with the monosyllabic dialogue of Edward Bond, to record the general cacophonies of domestic life.

There are plays, here, whose anatomy of English society, class relations, or political circumstances, is specific enough to make them seem dated, and hard to revive. *The Party*, so 1968-centred, may be one of these. But as theatre companies regularly discover, *Occupations* and *Comedians* can still

stir audiences as strongly as when they were both first produced, and there are other plays in these volumes – the Chekhov material especially – which offer similar opportunities for revival.

RANDALL STEVENSON, TLS, 21 March 2008