

Theatre Plays One & Two
by Trevor Griffiths

By Ray Brown

Twenty odd years ago, fuelled by whacky tobacco, I climbed a Welsh hillside to a small cabin. The valley was home to sheep and drifting columns of heavy rain. I wrapped myself in a quilt, sat in a deckchair and read Uncle Vanya. I'd read it and other plays before, but never like this. The play opened up, paced itself, revealed a production and hinted at another hundred. Since that wet Wednesday afternoon I've been sold on play scripts. I'd rather read a script than a novel any day. Staging your own production, in your head takes a lot of beating (exquisite sets, perfect lighting and actors, dead and alive, queuing up for a part!)

Some playwrights give us good scripts; some give us scripts that read well. A few give us both. As anyone who read his recently published screenplay, [*These Are The Times*](#), will eagerly testify – Trevor Griffiths gives us both. Thanks then to Spokesman for following up their publication of ***These Are The Times*** with an elegantly produced two-volume collection of Griffiths theatre plays from 1969 to 2006. Fifteen plays that have provided great roles for many of our best actors, from Olivier to Spacey to name but a couple of Old Vic habitués.

Here together for the first time are the celebrated works: *Comedians*, *Occupations*, *The Party* and so on. Here also the magnificent later works *Piano*, for example, based on Unfinished Piece for a Mechanical Piano, a film based on the works of Chekhov by Abashyan and Mikhalkov. And the savage bite of plays criminally neglected and even despised by the cultural turncoats of the last two decades – *The Gulf Between Us*, *Thatcher's Children*, *Who Shall Be Happy*. Volume II ends with *Camel Station*, a brief, eloquent, howl of despair at the slaughter of innocence and the perversion of energy and idealism that is our bequest to the young of the world.

Read these plays for education, entertainment, intellectual or emotional excitement. Read them to poke dying embers of idealism into flame. Read them for whatever reason, you will be gratified.

And there is more, the two also read as a track through an artists working days. They speak of Griffiths' understanding of and facility with the stage. And they allow us to appreciate his development as an artist, intellectual. There are only two scripts here that are new to me. The first two. They are, without doubt, texts that many playwrights would have quietly dropped from their collected works.

The first, *The Wages Of Thin*, had a three night run at The Stable Theatre Club, Manchester in 1969. It shows a mimetic ability – Griffiths drives Pinter's tram well enough, but no question, it's Pinter's tram. Then we have *Sam Sam*, scenes from the lives of working class brothers – one stays home, the other powers through the education system. A familiar story of the day (less frequent under Blair than in the days of Churchill and Macmillan!). *Sam Sam* has a first act which draws on a host of literary works; the second act is pure Osborne.

Nothing in these first two plays prepares the reader for the third play: *Occupations*. In one quantum leap and a cry in his own voice, our hero is up and away. Having read the first two plays, I decided to just dip into *Occupations* and found myself some time later rising to applaud with an imaginary audience.

Occupations is a dazzling portrait of the Italian activist and theoretician Gramsci at the time of the occupation of the Fiat factory. We are plunged into the turmoil of the head and heart of revolution, a topic that will engage Griffiths overtly or covertly for the years to come. First produced at The Stables in 1970, it was recognised as a work of signal importance and produced by the RSC a year later.

For a few years the plays follow a gentle incline. Here are the distinctive, driven texts that in the hands of a lesser writer would be overly didactic. Plays that can leave an impression of heaviness (though revisiting reading them now, there is a surprising show of light and humour to be found in them). Mid Seventies, comes an undisputed masterwork, *Comedians*: the best play of the decade, according to Richard Eyre. *Comedians* appears to release something in the writer. The later plays are still cleanly chiselled and deeply moral and intelligent, but they are also, well, playful! Here is a playwright who can do the stuff, seeing exactly what more he can do and where it can take him. It is hard to read his version of *The Cherry Orchard* without sensing Chekhov smashing out of his grave and tap dancing his delight! It is as if Griffiths' intensity of pity and despair finds a counter balance. Humour is the Mae West that allows him to float. Even the dark *Who Shall Be Happy*, which recounts the last days of Danton, has the gallows humour of an innocent jailor playing 'Last Words' with the condemned prisoner. And, as if to ram home the point, the sparse, elegiac *Camel Station* is based on and around one joke – which serves to intensify the heartbreak.

Be in no doubt, Spokesman have graced our culture with this two-volume collection. Let's hope that they now publish the collected TV plays (Eyre, again: 'His TV plays were the best of the time, not excluding Potter.') As the film scripts, what a gold mine, not only *Reds* and *Food For Ravens* (disgracefully hidden away by the BBC) but also, not surprisingly, there are other works like [These Are The Times](#) that await significant investment and a Californian Enlightenment.

And when the whole lot are available to the public (for someday they will be) pulsing beneath each script will be Gramsci's words: 'It is a revolutionary duty to tell the truth.'

Considering the breadth and quality of his work, it is surely a dedication to, or entrapment by Gramsci's rubric that has saved Griffiths the bother of telling the establishment exactly where they can stuff the knighthood!

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Also available:

The first ever full-length monograph on Trevor Griffiths is now available from

[Manchester University Press](#).

Written by John Tulloch, a highly respected professor of media and television, it includes full annotation and bibliography/filmography, making it essential reading for anyone interested in television drama and television history.