He saw what he could do

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Trevor Griffiths

A NEW WORLD
A Life of Thomas Paine
Globe Theatre

Writers' lives are notoriously difficult to dramatize: there's all that sitting around writing. But with Thomas Paine – a writer who took a direct part in two revolutions, was almost guillotined in one, and spent several years travelling Europe in an attempt to raise funds for the single-span iron bridge he had apparently invented in his spare time – the playwright is at an advantage. In Trevor Griffiths's *A New World*, a three-hour, cast-of-dozens, part-musical part-spectacular, Paine is always on the move. As Paine, John Light seems only to take off his satchel when he takes off his shirt. Even *Common Sense* is written with the bag still at his shoulder.

Light gives an impressive rendition of Griffiths's radical: passionate, energetic, youthful even when greyed up ("you still have the body of a boy", his future lover remarks untruthfully of a man built along the lines of a middleweight boxer), and resolute. Whether Thomas Paine was actually like that may be beside the point; it seems very unlikely that Richard III was like *that*. As Benjamin Franklin, who good-naturedly narrates the world-history lesson that the play often threatens to become, remarks: "Never mind the facts. Just give me the truth". (That, by the way, is one of Griffiths's few post-modern touches: Franklin explains ahistorically that the line is taken from Marx: "Groucho, the people's Marx".) Certainly this Paine is less complicated, more straightforwardly heroic than he has sometimes been painted (not least by contemporaries). The information that this project started as a screenplay for Richard Attenborough (and is still advertised as being by Griffiths "in association with" his Lordship) reminds one that Attenborough's Gandhi was not a creation of much light and shade either.

If real people have more flaws than such lionizations allow for, it is still worth conceding that men and women of principle do exist – or, at least, did. Paine was one of them, and it is to the play's credit that it shows how he refused to bend these principles to the prevailing wind. He warns Thomas Jefferson that a country founded on slavery cannot be free. Jamie Parker's Jefferson sagely agrees with him, but implies that he was outvoted on the issue when it came to declaring independence. Here is a moment when Griffiths's black-and-white view fails to allow for a fairly obvious historical irony – that Jefferson was a slaveholder who (probably) fathered children by one of his slaves. Paine's own relationship with a black "house-boy", Will, might seem anachronistically one of mutual respect, were it not for the fact that so much of what Paine stood up for – including a version of the welfare state – also anticipated fashion by decades, if not centuries.

The unusual balance of power between Paine and Will is demonstrated by an effective device: when Will is ordered to take a wheelbarrow through Philadelphia, Paine wheels him in it instead, so Will can sit back and practise his reading – of Paine's work, of course. Dominic Dromgoole's direction complements Griffiths's vision by packing as much as possible into such moments. In fact, most of the touches of wit seem to originate with the director rather than the playwright. The Globe's groundlings are willingly shifted around by the citizens of Philadelphia or Paris moving among them. When a corpse is tossed off a ship, the revelation that the bundle is empty just as it is about to land on our heads turns a poignant moment into a miniature *coup de théâtre*. The script's nods to the venue in which it is staged seem wooden by comparison. "What's that?", Thomas asks when Danton quotes *Measure for Measure*. "Not bad", he remarks on being told. A repeated line that sounds more twenty-first century, in a script that mostly avoids antique dialogue – "I'll see what I can do" – may be an inadvertent nod to Isabella's moment of plain-speaking from the same play.

The wider difficulties with the play are those of the genre. This work is specifically advertised as a "Life" of Thomas Paine. It is not that, thank goodness, as it begins only when the thirty-seven-year-old Paine sets sail for America. But even in attempting to cover the two greatest episodes in Paine's life – which also happen to be two of the most momentous episodes in world history, the American and French Revolutions – Griffiths is forced to confront the twin obstacles to dramatized biography: editing and contingency.

The first means deciding what to leave out. Even three hours allows little time to go into detail. Aided by Dromgoole, and the device of Keith Bartlett's benign narrator Franklin, Griffiths does his best to cover the ground, which means not only showing Paine's authorship of *Common Sense*, *The Crisis Papers*, *Rights of Man* and *The Age of Reason*, but also the circumstances in which they emerged. Anyone paying close attention would come away from the play with a decent idea of what went on in the two Revolutions, though perhaps not why. And Griffiths's past as teacher and further education officer seems to catch up with him when a character clinging to a wooden scaffold is forced to give repeated exposition of who and what various speakers stand for.

As for contingency, by which I mean giving the impression that the course of events was not inevitable, this is less convincingly dealt with. We see Paine almost die of fever on board the ship to America, yet there is never a sense that his unlikely rise to the position of bestselling author of the age might not have turned out that way. But *A New World* is not that sort of history lesson. It is meant to inspire emotion more than intellect. While that may not seem appropriate for a play about a man of such unyielding intellectual astringency, it is certainly true to his alter ego, old "Common Sense", who knew that "time makes more converts than reason".