

Interview with
MELVYN BRAGG
 Michelene Wandor

Melvyn Bragg is the editor and presenter of London Weekend Television's *South Bank Show* which, this season, includes appraisals of such varied cultural figures as Alberto Moravia, Catherine Cookson, Alan Bleasdale and Paul McCartney. Bragg is also a prolific novelist. Here he talks to Michelene Wandor.

Do you find it easy to combine working in television with writing novels?

Well, I do use an awful lot of my energies, commitments and skills here on the *South Bank Show*. I have to think fast, engage in internal and external politics, take real risks. On the other hand, I can feel after a few hours of writing something that this is the best time I've spent in the last two days. What worries me about the relationship between the two is that having a job that's quite hectic in television — that's a way to batten down other things that might have festered or yeasted or leavened in your mind. There isn't time in this job for that personal pace and slow pursuit of the things that you are thinking about that you get when you have more solitude. I don't know how to solve that. I'm a bit embarrassed to talk personally — but any writer sooner or later needs time not just time to write, but the sort of time where you can actually digest what's happening, work things out.

Do you write poetry?

Yes, but for the waste paper basket, that sort of poetry.

Can we move on to the relationship between art and politics. You were chairman of the Literature Panel of the Arts Council for three years. What do you think were the most important things you did there?

A range of things: helping to put up the money for writers' bursaries, helping to set up more schemes for writers in residence, maintaining the schemes of sending writers out on tour to speak and read. I was aware that there were one or two big problems looming, particularly around community arts. There were quite a few requests

coming in from community arts groups who were producing magazines, and our guys would look at them and say that this writing isn't worth supporting, it isn't published first novel standard so we're not going to give it a grant. A lot of people felt that there was a very serious line to be drawn between professional and non-professional bodies, and that the Arts Council only existed to give money to professional people in the arts and it had its work cut out to do that properly. My personal sympathies were with the community arts groups, but there was not the slightest chance that the Panel or the Council itself would really go along with that.

What do you think about the Government's latest proposal to grant-aid the big four national theatre and opera companies directly, instead of handing all arts subsidy to the Arts Council?

That's disaster. I mean, not as big a disaster as dismantling the metropolitan boroughs: if that happens, it's going to be disastrous for the arts. But the hiving off of these big companies would be very wounding indeed. The big companies such as the National Theatre, and the Royal Opera House would then be directly government controlled, and that would be very dangerous. Whatever you think of the Arts Council, it is still a distancing body, and has some independence from direct government control. If this changed, then it would totally weaken the Arts Council, because it's the big companies that give it its strength; those companies, the big four, would get on famously and the rest would wither away as fast as anything.

What do you think needs to be done?

I advocate closing down the National Theatre or the RSC tomorrow. Literally. I think Peter Hall or Trevor Nunn should shut down one of those big places to show that the arts can't continue to manage hand to mouth. They wouldn't like that, Mrs Thatcher wouldn't like it to be made known in public that they can't even run a National Theatre, it would expose the



minginess of our grants. If they've got any guts, that's what they should do. I think the unions should join in. I really am serious; you might think it's a bit of a wild idea, but it's not that wild. They should do it when a head of state is arriving; she can't bear that — she doesn't want to be humiliated.

How do you feel about the cuts that have already been made to arts subsidy?

They're whittling away at the work that's gone on to build up the arts over the last 20 years; it isn't as if we've got enough repertory theatres or cinemas, or arts centres, but what there is now considered a superabundance that can be chiselled away. In the 60s and 70s, with real need and a leap in Arts Council money, certain advances were made. That will all go.

In an ideal world, how would you like to see the arts subsidised?

Well, starting from the Arts Council's own figures, the structures they support need to be kept intact — that's 1200 clients, who will need about £120-130 million next year. I think they should then embark on a sort of capital investment policy — and this is just cloud-cuckoo land in figures — of, say 50 or 100 million to build more theatres, arts centres, etc. It's all there, waiting to be done. The last 20 years have shown that any

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investment in the arts has been rewarded very handsomely. You've given people jobs, you've got your money back in direct and indirect ways, you've given lustre to a lot of very lack-lustre inner city areas.

Do you think this hostility to the arts is a conscious part of current policies?

No. I think they're philistine to the bone. At some unconscious level they might associate community arts, theatre, the young British cinema as somehow left and therefore dangerous, but I think it's really much simpler than that, I really do. I think there's a sense that somehow the RSC and the National and the Opera are a *Good Thing*, and we have our great actors and we have Shakespeare, so just give them the money to struggle on. I don't think this applies to every individual in the Conservative Party — it doesn't apply to the new Arts Minister, Lord Gowrie, — but I don't know what his strength is going to be.

You've been involved with an organisation called 'Arts for Labour'. Can you say something about that?

Well, it came about when I was shoved on a platform to explain the Labour policies on the arts to the press, during the last election. I haven't yet been particularly active in that campaign as such. But I've always been active in the Labour Party. I've been a card-carrying member for as long as I can remember. My father comes out of that generation in West Cumberland, where there were only Tories and Liberals, and you voted Liberal, believe it or not. The Labour Party in Wigton, where I grew up, started just after the Second World War; the early meetings were in our pub kitchen. I think Arts for Labour is probably a good thing as a support unit for a particular

occasion, such as a general election. I don't really know how a group of solitaires and variously busy people engaging in disparate areas of the arts could be very effective, except for once in a while.

Would it be better if it had some kind of structured, organisational link with the Labour Party?

I joined the Fabian Society a few months ago — and it's trying to rejuvenate itself in order to do just that. Within something like the Fabian Society people can discuss a range of subjects, from economics to the arts, because one's got to have very direct access to the slots — slots being seats in Parliament and on councils.

What in particular do you feel you can contribute to the Fabian Society?

I joined because Philip Whitehead, who's a friend of mine and who was an MP till the last election, outlined what they intend to do over the next two or three years, and they're trying to do something positive about the arts and television, which I know something about.

Is this connected with your criticisms of cable television?

Whatever you think about public service television, nevertheless it has a lot to offer the general public. Cable television is going to undercut that without any question, and it seems to me that for the Labour Party not to have a policy to prevent this happening is ludicrous. Badly as they might feel they are treated on television, they are given a straight staircase to decency, compared to the broken ladder that the press offers them. They should fight to preserve the public service aspect of

television. I think cable's being rushed in for spurious reasons.

In what ways will cable undercut public service broadcasting?

If cable television comes in — if London cables up, or even half cables up, and if they're allowed to take advertising and compete with ITV for advertising — then the quality of the programmes is going to suffer. The only thing that cable stations will be able to afford to do is put on American pap, that's a fact, nothing else is as cheap, there's nothing else you can buy for a thousand pounds an hour — except American TV serials in their fourth or fifth run. You'll get two or more million people watching, and as soon as there's that sort of audience, the advertisers can force our prices down (ITV, that is) and that breaking of the monopoly and erosion of the audience will affect public service broadcasting. Programmes like the *South Bank Show*, *Weekend World*, *Horizon* whatever you think of them, are watched by a large number of people from all sorts of backgrounds, and the appreciation index is very high indeed for them.

What could the Labour Party do to protect public service broadcasting?

They could do it very simply. At the committee stage they could decide that the BBC should have the monopoly of the licence fee, that ITV shall have the monopoly on advertising, and that cable should have the monopoly of subscription, so that you pay for your cable service. That would retain ITV's power base, which is its money. The paradox is that ITV can only put out public service broadcasting because it's rich. If ITV wasn't rich, then it wouldn't be worth controlling; in fact it has

Boys from the Blackstuff


A new BFI Dossier *Boys from the Blackstuff* analyses the series that showed the degradation and despair imposed by unemployment in the Britain of the 80s. It is published to coincide with a day event at the National Film Theatre on 21st January 1984 at which the complete series will be shown. The dossier is available @ £3.00 from Publications Dept. BFI 81 Dean Street London W1V 6AA.

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the IBA controlling it very much more than you might think; it makes ITV do programmes which lose it money — things like *The London Programme*, *Black on Black*, arts programmes, and it can do that because ITV is rich. If cable created a competition for advertising, then ITV would become poorer, and then the IBA couldn't stand in the way of letting a poorer system fight its way out of trouble, and if ITV went down-market, the BBC would also go down-market.

What about the argument that cable television will create opportunities for the community to make its own programmes?

Well, I do think that there is an interesting argument there. Not all the arguments are on my side. I can see the community arts thing in terms of publication on the screen, but whether they should have more space on network television is another matter. You've got to be quite careful about access to network slots. Oddly enough I think the far Left and the Right are joined about cable television, they both say whoopee, let's get our hands on it all. In a way the far Left is right to welcome cable, because it

could give resources to people to make their own local programmes. In an ideal world cable would deliver that. I don't think the cable world is going to be ideal. It will be brutal and they won't have a hope in hell. I get back to the old Labour Party argument, where what you've got is not so much a consensus, but solid achievements, and you have to understand that these have been arrived at through things like monopolies and licence fees, and if you chop these, the solid achievements will go and are you sure you can replace them?

Do you hold a Reithian view of the importance of public service broadcasting?

Yes, I do. I absolutely believe it totally or I'd get out tomorrow. The whole glory of radio and television is that it cuts through so many barriers, geographical, financial, psychological and educational. You're in your own room, you've never been to an opera, you can't afford it, you're embarrassed to go, you don't know anything about it, and you can get it all by turning on and giving it a go. With the *South Bank Show*, for example, a very small percentage of our audience are loyal *South Bank Show*

viewers. Another slightly bigger audience likes to watch specialist films about painters or film-makers — they come and go. But the biggest section is people whose evening's entertainment and information is watching television. I'm making a programme about Peter Brook's production of *Carmen*, and I want that to be a) true to Peter Brook's intention, b) make people who know something about opera really think, and c) reach out to people who know very little. I totally believe that. I can't see any other point in working in this medium otherwise.

You've just had another novel published — Love and Glory; do you think you might leave television to concentrate on writing?

I'd never leave television entirely because I like it too much. In that seven years when I had a fairly solitary life, I found I just became too depressed. There is no doubt that in a few years' time I'll pull out to a greater or lesser extent, but I'd never leave broadcasting; I like working with people and this is the job that I know how to do.

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