

Phantom Child

The film *Track29*, the Nick Roeg Dennis Potter collaboration, has just been released. W Stephen Gilbert assesses the work of Potter one of our most versatile and intriguing writers

The opening of the movie *Track 29* is not only notable because of its director Nicolas Roeg. It is also an event because, so rare for a movie, its writer is also an artist of considerable interest. In *Track 29*, Dennis Potter has reworked a notion from one of his television plays, *Schmoedipus* (1974). And Potter's most fertile soil has always been - perhaps always will be - the heavily cultivated earth of television.

Dennis Potter belongs to a generation of writers who aspired to the kudos of the theatre and the cash rewards of cinema but who wrote for television because it was in practical ways and also in a psychological sense 'simpler'. Many of those writers have done by far the largest portion of - and certainly the best of - their work for television.

Uniquely, Potter has cleaved to the medium with a passion. In 1970, he told *Radio Times*: 'Television is the only medium that really counts for me. It's the one that all people watch in all sorts of situations. Television is the biggest platform and you should kick and fight and bite your way into it. It's true that television is endemically a trivialising medium, but it doesn't follow that it *has* to be. Television is the true national theatre'.

Potter has reworked television projects for movies before, such as *Brimstone And Treacle* and *Pennies From Heaven* and also translated television material to the theatre, (*Son Of Man*, the Nigel Barton plays). But his original work outside television is confined to his three novels, the movie *Dream-child* (1985) and the stage play *Sufficient Carbohydrate* (1983), which went the reverse route to television as *Visitors*.

It is the serendipitous juxtapositions of the drama and

the rest of television's flow, the resonance of the interventions that the playwright can achieve that has always appealed to Potter. In a television increasingly created by accountants, merchandising consultants, coproducers' advertising analysts and ideological orthodoxy surveillance operatives, Potter argues angrily and irrefutably for the individual imagination.

Track 29 develops a number of his preoccupations. The



Dennis Potter: Clue master

child-man played by Gary Oldman (Tim Curry in the television version) is a figure Potter often conjures. A whole play, *Blue Remembered Hills* (1979), cast adults as children to recreate and embellish a childhood in the Forest of Dean, a location much returned to. In *Stand*



Love off the rails; Gary Oldman and Theresa Russell in *Track 29*

Up Nigel Barton, one of his earliest plays (1965), the horrors of school were recreated with the grown-up children set down in class - a dream situation many have experienced. Those school-days were again explored in the six-part *Singing Detective* (1986) with the same actress, Janet Henfrey, as the terrifying teacher.

Oldman's character in *Track 29* is the phantom child of a couple, the repression of whose sexuality is bound up with games and toys. Whether Gary Oldman's character literally 'exists', in so far as a fictional character can exist, is the least interesting question about him, this phantom nature is taken for granted in a number of Potter's works.

The new movie's title comes from the lyric of the song *Chattanooga Choo Choo*. Popular songs, particularly those of his wartime childhood, resonate all through Potter's writing, providing

many of the titles of his works and symbolising the trivialisation of deep emotion that excites many of his characters.

The strand of commercial lyric writing that most exercises Potter is the characterisation of fulfilled emotion as a blessing, almost a religious experience. The relationship between the ecstasy of religion and the orgasm of sex is close to the heart of his concerns.

Two plays, *Angels Are So Few* (1970) and *Only Make Believe* (1973) posited the visit of an angel (or a man claiming to be an angel) to another sexually repressed suburban house. The second of the plays framed scenes from the first in a speculation about a self-disfigured man trying to write the earlier play, a relationship between fantasy and creativity that Potter gave full rein to in *The Singing Detective*. The famously banned *Brimstone And Treacle* (1976) had the

devil visiting a similar household.

This thwarted sexuality is the most persistent and disturbing aspect of Potter's writing. Sometimes he dwells on the man who thinks he only needs a simple fuck for the world to be bright and shining - *Moonlight On The Highway* (1969), *Double Dare* (1976), the six-part *Pennies From Heaven* (1978). Perhaps the most searingly painful, most rawly exposed writing on the agony of unrealised desire occurs in his free-associating novel *Ticket To Ride* (1986).

The writing on sex pays little attention to the orthodoxies of sexual politics. Indeed, Potter's politics on every front are notably individualistic. He is by his own declaration no marxist. My greatest regret about the arc of his career is that his early interest in specific public issues has retreated. His public plays - *Vote Vote Vote For Nigel Barton* (1965)

which drew on his own experiences as a Labour candidate in 1964; *Message For Posterity* (1967) based on Sutherland's commission to paint Churchill; *Traitor* (1971) about Kim Philby - find no equivalent now.

Recurrent illness has kept Potter out of a more public role and his writing that draws on the suffering of the sick not surprisingly finds him at his most trenchant - *Joe's Ark* (1974), *The Singing Detective*.

But, like his late contemporary David Mercer, Potter's distaste for the notion of being a pigeon-holed public figure is manifest and occurs frequently in his work, naturally in that great compendium of his themes *The Singing Detective* but most successfully in perhaps his best play, *Follow The Yellow Brick Road* (1972). Whether it infuriates him or not, we shall go on celebrating his work and gutting it for clues. •