

Mayday, Mayday!

Third term Thatcherism is dedicated to the eradication of socialism from the British cultural scene. In *The Second Time As Farce* David Edgar surveys the scope of this assault and searches for a viable cultural offensive for the Left. **Mark Fisher**, shadow minister for arts and media, surveys the cultural battleground

Mrs Thatcher's political tanks are advancing over our culture. After a decade of laying siege to the arts and trying to starve them into submission, she is about to begin her major assault on the redoubt of public service broadcasting.

David Edgar's book of 16 essays surveys the scope and significance of this battleground. In his introduction, 'Thoughts For A Third Term', he charts the progress of Thatcherite strategy. Having tackled manufacturing industry, the economy, local authorities and the trade unions in her first two terms, she is now turning her withering, Medusa eye on our culture.

The war-like metaphors are not inappropriate. She has made it very clear that her priority is the final destruction of socialism. She knows that the arts and media are among the few public arenas in which her writ does not run. In spite of her economic and political victories she has not yet won the battle of ideas. Since cultural values are the DNA of society, she needs to purge our culture of any socialist influence if her political revolution is to last.

David Edgar provides a sharp critique of the background to this assault. Four pieces, 'On The Right', cover the racism and politics of the National Front, which were the subject of his stageplay, *Destiny*, and examine the polemics of contributors to the new Right periodical, the *Salisbury Review*, such as Roger Scruton, Maurice Cowling and Mrs Thatcher's biographer, Patrick Cosgrove. They make a charming bunch of bigots. For Scruton, democracy can be 'discarded without detriment to the civil well-being as the conservative conceives it'.

Norman Podnoretz defines feminism and homosexuality as a form of plague. Their approach to the arts is revealed in Norman Stone's *Sunday Times* article of January 1988 where he attacks *My Beautiful Laundrette* and other British films as 'tawdry, ragged, rancidly provincial'.

We may take some comfort from the pathetic incompetence of Mr Stone's writing ('rancidly provincial?') but at the same time we should recognise that such outpourings are influencing what passes for this government's cultural thinking. As David Edgar says, we are 'dealing with a world which is, sadly, not teetering on the edge of rational order'. It is a world which, as he wryly notes, has given us the 'new British musical', dazzling in form, empty in content. *Cats* is about small furry domestic animals' while 'one of the stars of *Time* is a hologram and the other is Cliff Richard'.

At the heart of this book are essays in which David Edgar considers how this cultural struggle has been reflected in the performing arts generally, and in writing for the theatre and for television in particular. He is an ideal person to do so, having been politically active as a playwright throughout the 1970s and 80s, first with touring companies and later writing plays such as *Mary Barnes*, *Maydays* and *Entertaining Strangers* for the Royal Court, the Royal Shakespeare Company and the National Theatre.

He addresses the central problems facing the political playwright. What role is there for such a writer? Why, since the theatre has been the main arena for political radicalism in the arts in post-war Britain, have the artistic



My Beautiful Laundrette: 'rancidly provincial'?

and the political avant garde failed habitually to combine? What sort of play can best 'grapple with the stories of our times'?

Weighing up the potential of agitprop, naturalism, social realism and the popular touring theatre pioneered by John McGrath with 7:84, he finds them all wanting. Instead he makes an interesting case for the community play as carnival, based on his experience of writing *Entertaining Strangers* for Ann Jellicoe in Dorchester, and then transferring it to the National Theatre.

He argues that, drawing on diverse traditions (Notting Hill/festa/welfare state performance), carnival can break down the divisions between participants and spectators. In doing so it offers a new flexibility and the chance to challenge and upend hierarchies. However, he does recognise the problem of how to incorporate 'the sophistication and complexity of the fully realised theatrical text with the energy and immediacy' of carnival.

This book establishes David Edgar as a major essayist on the Left, prepared to take on big issues. You put it down reluctantly, hoping that he will soon write more on related subjects. What future

for black and feminist theatre companies? What can we learn from political theatre in Europe, in Africa or in Southern America? What will be the impact on drama of cable and satellite?

In her third term Mrs Thatcher is determined to use every available means to limit debate and expression in our culture. She wants a theatre solely concerned with celebration, that doesn't challenge, disturb or dissent. She wants a broadcasting system that lullabies us, not one that makes us sit up and ask questions. Having softened up her targets with the demands of market forces, she is now beginning to introduce her main authoritarian weapons, Clause 28, the Broadcasting Standards Council and a new broadcasting bill.

In *The Second Time As Farce* (Lawrence and Wishart, £12.95 hbk) David Edgar leads the way in opposing the mean times of Thatcherism. He reminds us that 'theatre is not just about what is, but what could be'. But there is an ambiguity in that last phrase. It gives us hope for the future, at the same time as delivering a warning. The political tanks of Thatcherite reaction and authoritarianism are rolling. They must be turned back. •