

Dramatic Realism

From Janet Daley, a columnist for *The Independent*

David Edgar (MT December) presents a picture of the subsidised theatre as 'the very best kind of socialist enterprise', both in a symbolic sense, in that it constitutes a non-materialistic collective undertaking, and, in a more pragmatic one, by virtue of its deliberate anti-racism and anti-sexism. As metaphors go, it is tenable, if highly selective. It would be rather difficult to sustain his view that an audience gathering together ('on the basis of collectively agreed rules') in pursuit of communal enlightenment, is an inherently socialist notion. It is much more arguably a religious one. Or, to take an even longer historical perspective,

From Jon Brown, *Artistic Director of the Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh*

I agree with much that David Edgar says (MT December) about British theatre. However, from the perspective of a small theatre in Scotland dedicated to the premiering of 10 new plays a year, the future looks both exciting and terrifying; the Conservatives' arts policy is mean and grudging, certainly, but it has created an energy and a desire not to have all our funding from one basket.

Still, the inescapable fact re-

From Richard Morrison, *arts editor of The Times*

David Edgar (MT December) has concocted a melodramatic description of the current state of British theatre. Parsimonious state funding has put it in 'crisis', 'infected' by the need to attract business sponsorship, yet still battling - against all the odds of a corrupting capitalist society - to produce 'the very best kind of socialist enterprise', one that will 'democratise working practices and widen the audience'.

I agree with him that the government could fund our theatres more generously. But then, I am middle-class and university-educated, as are most of Mr Edgar's audiences. He is deceiving himself if he thinks otherwise. Because he writes plays of subtlety and sophistication, he will always tend to appeal to that audience. So, in effect, he is asking for more subsidy not to broaden ordinary people's access to the theatre, but to make the tickets cheaper for those affluent

a mythic one. Socialists are notorious for appropriating the most elemental needs and desires of the human condition as their own intellectual property.

Does he have any idea how much damage has been done to the cause of public subsidy of the theatre by those who wish to utilise artistic experience for political ends? Those of us who attempt to defend public support for the performing arts, on the grounds that the personal liberation of artistic enlightenment should be made available to as wide an audience as possible, are constantly undermined by the axe-grinders of the left who see subsidised theatre as an arm of social engineering and a job creation scheme.

mains that public investment in the arts is not only crucial, but sensible - because the exchequer gets back more than it puts in, through taxation and VAT. In addition, we beleaguered small theatres pump prime the big guns further up the line, most of whom do nothing to support us in turn; we provide television, film and cable with a huge percentage of the writers, actors, plays, designers and technicians they need, while the public consumes the goods without a thought for where they all

enough to afford them anyway. Meanwhile, the vast majority of the population, if they go to the theatre at all, prefer the entirely unsubsidised and apolitical musicals of Lloyd Webber or the comedies of Alan Ayckbourn.

Trying to change the world from the stage is always fraught with uncertainty. Caryl Churchill's play *Serious Money* was intended as a devastating satire on City immorality, and indeed it was. But who packed the theatre night after night? The Porsche-owning yuppies who were being so mercilessly mocked. They loved the show. Again, Mr Edgar is suffering from delusions of grandeur if he thinks that 'the people who run this country at the moment dislike the theatre so much'.

The truth is that not for some years has a British dramatist produced a play to shake the Establishment, even momentarily. Indeed, one characteristic of the last decade has been not the fierceness of the theatrical onslaught on That-

Of course art is inevitably political. In the most important sense, it is subversive of any conceivable authoritarian orthodoxy because it is, left to itself, immutably individualistic. It offers, to those who are permitted to experience it, the priceless resource of an internal life and personal criteria by which to judge whatever is offered to them by way of dogma. As the ultimate guarantor of intellectual freedom, art offers to its audience the wherewithal to resist ideological oppression of whatever stamp. Given the resources, people may make up their own minds about your politics and mine. But then, perhaps, insulting people against authoritarianism is not what socialists have in mind. •

come from. Without this pool of talent the standard of broadcasting would be much lower.

The arts in Britain more than earn their keep, but we haven't won this argument by any means. The main worry for me is the boards and institutions who are running scared, providing the public with pap - second-hand musicals and safe product. They are the ones killing vitality and progress. Keep the bums on seats by all means, but make sure that the product is worth the sitting through.*

cherism, but the supine sense of helplessness and confusion emanating from the theatres.

What have upset the Establishment, however, are ITV drama-documentaries, such as *Death On The Rock*, that directly challenged specific government interpretations. It must be disconcerting (from Edgar's point of view) to note that, as these were produced by the commercial network, they were actually financed by 'big business'. Sponsorship need not 'infect' an artist's ability to challenge preconceptions.

Only in the unreal atmosphere of theatreland would it be possible to sustain Edgar's argument that the more state subsidy given to performers, the better it is for artistic freedom. The opposite is surely closer to the truth. Mr Edgar could argue that the theatre is an important mouthpiece of opposition to government policies, or he can argue for much bigger government subsidies. But he cannot plausibly do both at the same time.

Abuse Of Faith

Bea Campbell's article on ritual child abuse (MT November) presents only one side of the story. She says nothing about the 18 foster parents who did not report any signs of ritual abuse from the children in their care, or the intensive forensic investigation that did not turn up a single trace of human or animal sacrifice.

Campbell talks about the inquiry's 'need to believe' that there is no sub-culture of Satanic abuse in Britain. I would like to know why Campbell needs to believe in something for which there is about as much physical evidence as there is for flying saucers.

Over the last two and a half years, the ritual abuse myth has been rising in Britain, and there is no doubt whatsoever that it emanates from the US Christian right via international fundamentalist information networks. In America, the ritual abuse allegations focussed on day-care centres, but so far no physical evidence has been produced to show that satanic abuse rings have been making use of these centres - all the evidence has consisted of the 'disclosures' of very young children who had been through months of therapy with people who firmly believed in ritual abuse.

It has taken this time for the idea of satanic abuse to become established in Britain. It generally takes about that long for American cultural ideas to penetrate to Europe. Had ritual abuse rings been operating in Britain before 1987-8, details and hints of it would have been circulating for years beforehand.

Instead, the current British scare has all the appearance of a transplanted myth, with the confirming 'proofs' appearing only after the details had been made part of public knowledge through tabloid reporting.

'Believe the children' is Campbell's entirely understandable gut reaction to satanic abuse. But gut reaction simply cannot be trusted! I wish that she showed some of the honesty and insight of Simone Weil, who wrote: 'I know that if at this moment I had before me a group of 20 young Germans singing Nazi songs, a part of me would instantly become Nazi. This is a very great weakness...'. Justice is not served by wild emotionalism - just ask the Guildford Four. #

Val Dobson, Lancashire

Parting Thought

It seems to me paradoxical, from my perspective in France, that as both the British and the French communist parties celebrate their 70th anniversaries, the British party seems to be making plans for its retirement while the French party is still vigorously campaigning for democratic socialism and setting an agenda based on the challenges of the 90s.

It has never been more important for the voice of the left to be put forward. Old and new fissures are being opened up by the integration of Europe; social conflict is on the increase, evidenced by an upsurge in racism. However, the collapse of the eastern European communist states and their rush towards 'casino' capitalism seems to have traumatised the British party.

There is also the prickly question of the environment, which without doubt represents the biggest challenge to capitalism since the 1960s, but is desperately short of a response based on the ideology of the left. All these issues mark areas that will dominate the last decade of this century, and the British Communist Party can and should make important contributions upon every one.

History is full of lessons on the dangers that a void on the left can cause. Now is exactly the wrong time to be contemplating the departure of the Party.

An optimist believes this is the best of all worlds; a pessimist knows it is. The Communist Party cannot be a pessimist, even if individuals are. I hope the Party will decide to keep its name, remain a party and enter the political field with renewed vigour*

Andrew Ellis, Paris

Moore Cynical

I enjoy Suzanne Moore's column and am in awe of her ability to come up with a seemingly endless series of vehicles for the same old message of hopelessness.

Her basic trick when she writes about men is to suggest that the anti-sexist ideas and practice of some men are invalidated by the conservative sexism of others. It must be a sign of the times that in a magazine which borrows its title from the founder of dialectical materialism, the existence of a

contradiction is employed to bludgeon the progressive with the reactionary.

Moore is determined to mould the changing world to her static and cynical view of it. At least she has the honesty to admit that in dismissing the struggles of men and women to find new forms of parenting, for example, as 'cosy', she is being 'bitter and twisted!.*

Brendan Martin, London

Roots

Marxism Today has for some years been exploring a political terrain well beyond 'marxism'. 'Radical', which the Concise Oxford Dictionary defines as 'going to the root', has a suitably green ring to it. Why not call yourselves *The Radical!*

As for the Party, Bea Campbell is quite right. The party's over. Enjoy it, and give whatever is left to a renamed magazine and its supporting activities and networks.*

Simon Partridge, London

Pressure Points

In Fred Steward's article (*MT* December) there was not one mention of the Green Party. Either this was a gross oversight, or he recognises, as I do, that as soon as pressure groups attempt to become 'real' political parties, they only succeed in paralysing the principle on which they were founded. You have only to look at the SNP and their dogmatic support for an independent Scotland to see that a party based on what is essentially a fringe issue does harm to its cause.

This tallies with the tame environmental reports from all

three 'main' parties: surely more severe measures would have been outlined if this would not have been tantamount to endorsing another, albeit minor party, the Greens?

Until the unwritten parliamentary rule forbidding MPs to champion another party's policy is broken, it will be much more beneficial for the Greens and their ilk to remain as pressure groups rather than to be seen as political competition.*

Ross McMillan, Glasgow

Ego Tripping

Barry Richards' reply to Martin Pawley's article on the car (*MT* September and October) fails to address the latter's main contention, that 'personal mobility is a priceless freedom' we have to preserve. Freedom for whom? For me queueing for a crowded bus that then gets stuck in a traffic jam? For the woman with a baby buggy festooned with bulging carrier bags?

Richards euphorically calls the car 'the vehicle of dreams'. So was nazism. Isn't it time to wake up and grow up? When the steam engine was invented, our forefathers realised that its benefits had to be devoted to public purposes. We should demand no less of the internal combustion engine. Really adequate and comfortable bus services, with perhaps a subsidised taxi and car hire service for special purposes and needs, should become the civilised norm.

The 'I'm alright Jack' syndrome used to be considered a working-class phenomenon. For today's middle-class centre-lefties, 'freedom' is fast becoming an appealing euphemism for egotism.*

Dorothy Friedmann, London

Phoning In

Stuart Hall and Martin Jacques' article on post-Thatcherism (*MT* December) suggests that any new radical project for the 90s must appeal to, amongst others, 'the highly skilled, highly educated salariat... in leading-edge, hi-tech industry'.

Sounds to me just like the members of my trade-union branch, some of whom remain committed Tory supporters. When Mrs Thatcher resigned, my phone did not stop ringing with relieved members anxious to tell me the news. They have seen the demoralising chaos which Thatcherism's radicalism has brought. To most, a period of do-nothing Kinnockism would be most welcome, I suspect.

The forces which led to Thatcherism were around before Thatcher, and despite the verdicts of the media pundits, will continue to have an impact long after she's gone. But the survival of my union branch is a potent symbol that Thatcher's mission failed*

Keith Flett, Society of Telecom Executives, London

Taking The Mick

Michael Ignatieff (*MT* December) probably doesn't read *Marxism Today*, but it would be interesting to have him explain how movements would form governments*

Amanda Norrie, London

Christmas Draw:

In the *Marxism Today* totally free Christmas Draw, J Mark Prescott wins the Factory Records hamper; M Caulfield wins the Brixton Cycles voucher; and Ruth Middleton wins the ANC watch and diary*

Apology:

In Ralf Dahrendorf's article last month, there was a sentence on p. 16 that read, 'Full monetary union of the present 12 members of the European Community by the year 2000 is... highly probable'. It is more than probable that the final word should have been 'improbable'.

Editorial Note:

We welcome your letters to add to discussion. Please send them to *MT* Letters, 6-9 Cynthia Street, London N1 9JF. Brevity means you are more likely to be published. We reserve the right to cut*



Best Of Newman (Corgi £2.91), is a selection of our cartoonist Nick Newman's work from the last 10 years.