

The Writer and Revolution: WSWS arts editor David Walsh in conversation with Trevor Griffiths

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On November 12 at the University of Manchester WSWS arts editor David Walsh and screenwriter-playwright Trevor Griffiths held a discussion on the subject of "The Writer and Revolution."

*Griffiths has been writing for the theatre, television and film for four decades. His work for the theatre, including plays such as *Comedians*, *The Party* and *Occupations*, has been performed all over the world. He also wrote extensively for British television when new drama was a living presence in that medium. His film work has included the award-winning *Reds*, written with Warren Beatty, as well as his own *Food for Ravens*.*

An article describing the event has already appeared on the WSWS. Here we present an edited and somewhat abbreviated transcript of the event.



Trevor Griffiths and David Walsh at the University of Manchester meeting last month

David Walsh: I'll make some introductory remarks, then Trevor and I will have a conversation for a while, and farther on, we'll open the floor to questions and comments on anything we've talked about.

I'd like to try and explain why I think this is an extraordinarily propitious event, a well-timed event, for a number of interrelated reasons. There may be an element of coincidence in all this, but, I think, in a more profound sense, we have the coming together, or the beginning of the coming together, of a number of social and cultural processes.

In the most general sense, first of all, we're meeting under the general banner of 'The Writer and Revolution' in the midst of a world-historic economic crisis and the collapse, as a result, of all or much of the received wisdom about the miracle of the market and so on that has accumulated over the past three decades. Capitalist ideology and capitalist economy have received a shattering blow. The situation has prompted Martin Wolf, the chief economic writer of the *Financial Times*, to raise the spectre of revolution.

In the recent presidential election in the US, the question of socialism and redistribution of wealth suddenly arose, to general amazement. This

took the form of Republican John McCain's claims about Barack Obama's program, and Obama's vehement denials, but the issues were raised, and contrary to McCain's hopes, it turned out that the notion of redistributing wealth was not unattractive to millions of Americans.

And this issue, American political life, is also related to the discussion this afternoon, at least in part. We're having a conversation with a writer who has spent a good deal of time working on a drama, *These Are The Times* [1], about the life of Tom Paine, a significant and popular figure in the American Revolution, as well as a participant in and near victim of the French Revolution. We'd like to spend some time on that, in just a moment. But I simply want to point out that a good portion of the global academic 'left' dismisses the American Revolution as a revolt led by slaveholders and considers the American population hopelessly conservative and backward.

I think both views are terribly wrong. In regard to the American population, it is clear that a radicalization is under way with far-reaching implications, which only found the most pallid and distorted reflection in the election of Obama. In fact, it will not be long, once the euphoria dies down and the reality of the new administration's program becomes clear, before wide layers come into sharp conflict with Mr. Obama.

These issues arise in the context of a discussion of a particular artist and his work, and it's appropriate in this regard as well. Because Trevor Griffiths, it seems safe to say, is one of the most historically acute writers of our time. In several senses.

First of all, he has treated a remarkable number of critical historical moments, some of them more than once: the American Revolution, the French Revolution, pre-revolutionary Russia, the formation of the Bolshevik Party, the horrors of Stalinism, the Italian revolutionary strike wave of 1920, the Spanish Civil War, famously, John Reed and Louise Bryant and the formation of the American Communist Party, the race to the Pole, the transport workers strike of 1911 in this country, the Labour Party from various sides, the Conservative Party, the experience of Thatcherism, neo-Nazism, the Gulf War, and our own party in Britain at an earlier stage of development.

And other kinds of pieces as well, about more intimate matters: family, husbands and wives, the consequences of illness, the death of love and relationships.

The historical pieces grapple with human emotion and behaviour; the intimate pieces are informed by a historical approach. Even when husbands and wives are screaming at each other, there is a sharp sense of the historical moment and set of larger social relationships within which this takes place. As a historical realist, if I can use that phrase, I think Trevor Griffiths is highly unusual in our period, if not perhaps unique. When I say realist, I don't mean in the sense of a given formal school, but as someone, in various forms, seeking to get at the truth of the historical process for very contemporary and compelling reasons.

I would say about his writing, and I can't think of anyone else at the moment about whom I could say this: if you were to read, or preferably see, his plays and films you would both gain some understanding of the general contours, in outline form, of the first half of the 20th century and some of the critical problems of the last three decades created by those earlier events, as people genuinely lived and felt them.

My final point: I think he's a remarkably honest writer, gifted with considerable objectivity. As with any artist, not everything is of an equal quality and I don't necessarily agree with the implications of every piece, but no one who is honest with him or herself could deny that Trevor makes a strenuous effort to get the picture right, to give everyone his or her due. He puts himself in the shoes of the various characters and understands why they do what they do.

'Everyone has his reasons' in his pieces, but not in the sense of a flaccid 'There are two sides to every question,' because the whole is always infused with an impulse of opposition to the existing order. The simultaneous multi-sidedness and urgency of the approach is highly unusual.

This is not pat material, when we speak about 'political' material the eyes sometimes glaze over, because it's simply the fleshing out of a pat and already conquered idea. Writers and artists explore what they don't fully understand, that's the whole point of the process. The issue here is being oriented to critical moments, but writing about aspects of those moments around which significant political and moral problems remain. These are living questions. Both knowing something, important things, but not everything—opening up spaces, rather than closing them. That's very unusual, particularly in our day.

With that as an introduction, I'd like to begin by asking about Trevor's interest in Thomas Paine. The editor of a volume of Paine's writings, *Common Sense and other writings*, says "Thomas Paine arrived in Philadelphia at the end of 1774 with high hopes, no money and a letter of introduction from Benjamin Franklin. Paine left behind him [in Britain] a record of failure, with frequent job switches, multiple bankruptcies and two marriages ending in death and separation. At 37 he was an obscure figure." Fourteen months later the publication of *Common Sense*—an argument for American independence—brought him meteorically to prominence as the book sold 150,000 copies to an estimated audience of only 700,000 readers in what then were the 13 colonies.

Could you give some sense of your attraction to that figure, and how you see him as a political figure and human being?

TG: What attracted me to Thomas Paine? I guess his work. I read his work when I was at university here, but it was not anything I could share with my cohort, or the people that were teaching, because Thomas Paine is not well read in English literature here or at any other university. It seemed to me he was an outsider, that he was passionate about certain principles to do with the rights of men and women, the abuses that men and women were put through habitually throughout their lives, he was born into poverty and died in poverty, without medical help, without insurance—all the things that we think constitute a modern, developed state.

It seemed to me reading this that it is like reading a rehearsal of the 20th century in Britain. He is talking quite frequently of a welfare state, we need a state that supports its members, and that without it people will go on living miserable lives. By the end of his life, at the beginning of the 19th century, he was writing quite deliberately about a revolution being required. Not a political revolution, not an insurrection, but a revolution in civilization. He says if we are not prepared to do this, to have this revolution in civilization, then people will continue for evermore to live in misery and that will cause more problems politically for the rulers of this state than if they were to recognize the humanity of those they rule. That's 200 years ago, and if anyone wants to find it written up, it's in *Agrarian Justice*, 1797, '98.

The other thing that interested me in doing it is that I had already done one film. That's the other thing. You don't just work, you work in media, you work in form. I had come to some sort of tentative mastery of the screenplay. I had been working very hard for ten years. It culminated in writing a film with Warren Beatty called *Reds*.

Actually it was initially called *Comrades*, but *Comrades* was a bit too communist. *Reds*, which is a term of opprobrium in America, is a gently ironic title, which I had no power over anyway, so I accepted it, but I would have preferred it to be called *Comrades*, because that deals with the overt political structure of the piece and also the relationship, love and trust, between Louise Bryant and John Reed.

So during the '80s I started writing, where it was possible to find commissions for this work, movies. I wrote one about the ANC [African National Congress] in South Africa. I did secret research there and brought it back and wrote it for Warner Brothers who didn't want it. That's just one of five or six films I have written that haven't seen the light of day.

What else about Paine was important? Socialism. Where was it? When was it coming? When was 'class' going to become a major force in the development of America and Europe? Paine was an incredible harbinger of all the shifts that were going to begin, in Britain certainly, which would involve the Chartists and the whole Chartist movement.

So that is where Paine comes from. I have written probably four drafts now. It was published in 1997. It has taken on a life of its own that has nothing to do with being a movie. It's been on the radio. It's coming on the stage. Ultimately, I have more confidence that it will become a movie. When I wrote it, it was five and a half hours. I have been working for 10 years to get it down to four and a half hours, and now this year I have to try to get it down to three hours for Shakespeare's Globe [Theatre in London]. Keep in touch and I will let you know when it will be there. It will be ready for next July, I hope, in time for the 200th celebration of Paine's death.

DW: The question of social equality comes up in his work, which obviously is a burning question for us. Is it safe to say that that comes both from the social circumstances that were arising as well as from the Enlightenment? To what extent was he a student of the Enlightenment?

TG: Yes, he was a considerable student, although he only read in English. He didn't have Latin, Italian or French. But he felt the weight of his own class. He was born into a craft family in Thetford [a market town in Norfolk, 85 miles northeast of London]. His father was a defective Quaker who became a corset maker, a stay maker. At 15 or 14, Paine took up his father's trade and also became a stay maker. He moved around the country a lot.

He worked for Customs and Excise. He wrote a very interesting document—an address to the board who were responsible for the conditions and pay of the people who worked in that service. It's a first piece of writing, and absolutely brilliant and well worth a read, though people don't concentrate on it. I certainly do, in the piece I have written.

Paine got married twice. Neither of the marriages were in any way satisfactory to either party. He then spent some time in London and this was very critical for me in understanding the guy. He became very interested in science and adult education and he fell in with people who were involved in this very loose fabric of adult education at the end of the 18th century in London. And some of those people were remarkable—Oliver Goldsmith and Ben Franklin.

And it was through a brief friendship with Franklin, which involved literature and crown green bowling, that he decided he would like to see what it was like somewhere else, and so he borrowed 30 quid and went off to America. On the boat there he contracted typhus and was carried off the boat in a sail, which is usually an indication that a person is dead, but died too late to drop overboard. So he was carried down and thrown into hay on the side of the dock and was rescued by somebody who found a

letter from Ben Franklin to Franklin's son-in-law who worked and lived in Philadelphia. Franklin was a noted Philadelphian and a major figure in politics. This is in 1774, '75. He was taken away to a boarding house and he recovered and became what he became.

DW: About that. He came to the US as a nobody, so to speak, and yet within 14 months ... It is extraordinary and of course it's a process that takes place in revolutions.

TG: Absolutely, and in pre-revolutionary moments. He arrived in October '74. In 12 months he had written one of the greatest books of the 18th century—*Common Sense*—an extraordinary piece of writing. More than that, he actually became editor of a journal, the *Pennsylvania Magazine*, which was owned by a Scotsman called Robert Aitken, who had not been long out there. A fiery little man—an interesting relationship developed.

As you say, in revolutionary moments, people who were stay makers suddenly become constitution makers. That's what Paine did.

DW: Zinoviev was working in a chemical laboratory and Lenin was doing whatever he was doing in Zurich and half a year later ... And I would say that today there are people in this world, perhaps even in this room, who are not known now but will suddenly come to prominence.

Do you see a development in his writings? From *Common Sense* to *The Rights of Man*, it seems to me there is a development. He's more complicated. He is also responding to Edmund Burke. There is a certain elevation, sophistication in his work, That he is growing and maturing ... ?

TG: Sure, all that is true. But the most important thing about him, and the thing that didn't change about him was that he was not writing for the nobs, the people that sit up there and are already there and have the wealth. He was writing for people like himself, and his own parents.

And I made myself a promise that I would always seek to write for what I call my own people. I have my mother, father, my brother and my sister, my grandmother, they are very much in that. To do that in the 18th century was uniquely difficult. Wordsworth tried to do it at another level in poetry. The Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* will take you right there and you can see what he was trying to do.

But Paine's was a rougher language. Not the language of the street. It was an elegant language in its own way. But a language that didn't ask people to know a lot about other books before they could understand this one, that said trust your heart, and your head, and enter this world of words and you will find something out that I hope will be useful to you. That stayed with him. He never became fancy. He never became Edmund Burke.

It's interesting to read *Rights of Man, Part 1*, which is a critique of *Reflections on the French Revolution*, in which he puts Burke down. He talks about Burke's style. This book, he says, rose like a rocket, but fell like the stick, a rocket stick. Which is a great image for the pomp and circumstance of Burke's writing compared with the stay makers' structures that are much of what Paine wrote and how he wrote.

DW: I would like to broaden the conversation at that point because I think the question of those in our own period who have become Burkes is not a small issue. Flattery or praise is not pleasant, especially not from someone sitting next to you, but you haven't become that. I think the historical approach has some significance in that.

Obviously there were difficult conditions in the 1980s and 1990s. As we know, as of 1989, 1991, history came to an end and it was the end of socialism and a golden age of peace and prosperity opened up. Well, obviously it didn't, but it certainly impressed some people at the time. They said goodbye to all that, and they became something quite different. That's not a small matter.

You spoke in the interview you did with the WWSW of loneliness in two senses. Both the loneliness of the writer, which is something of an occupational hazard, and the loneliness of belonging to a generation, or seeing comrades disappear. You gave an interview prophetically in 1979

where you said that people would be ducking behind doors to avoid you, and I suspect that in one way or another that is what has taken place.

The fact that you have meticulously studied these historical events, in other words that you have some perspective on history, has some relationship to being able to stay the course.

TG: I think that's true, but I don't know that I am very good at speaking about myself. What I do want to talk about, and which you haven't mentioned yet, but I would like to, is that the predisposing decade is the '70s. From '68 to '79—that's the predisposing decade. Now, there are some people I see in this room who will know what I am talking about, but the rest will get it from newspapers and journals and movies. They are all good sources. Mine is a life source. I was actually living it and trying to shape that period, to stop the '60s being trashed as it commonly was in America, in Britain and in most other developed societies.

Those of you who weren't alive at that time, I want you to imagine a society in which Marxism was almost commonplace in terms of its language. It's almost unimaginable now to think that was the case, but I took out last night the National Theatre programme for my play *The Party*, which I wrote in 1972, '73, and which was shown in 1973, starring Laurence Olivier in one of the leading roles and directed by the leading director for the National Theatre at the time, a guy called John Dexter.

This was put together by a critic at the time called Kenneth Tynan, based on my research materials. It's a 48-page booklet.

The Party is set in London in 1968 at a Friday night meeting which is visited by ... at the house of a *Play for Today* producer, who has invited the general secretary of the Socialist Labour League—I call it the RSP, but it's actually just on the cusp of the SLL/WRP [transformation of the Socialist Labour League into the Workers Revolutionary Party in 1973].

This man comes in, takes over the meeting. *Is the meeting* in a sense and delivers a speech which lasts for 22 minutes, uninterrupted. Which is certainly, since Shaw, the longest political speech ever delivered on the British stage. And there is also a nice anecdote for the swear word which is in it, about which Olivier said 'It's the first time that word has ever been used on this stage, did you realize that Trevor?' And I said, 'Well, no, I didn't,' and he said, 'At least as part of the text.'

What we have here is a calendar of the year 1968 with just about every political detail you could imagine: from Vietnam, France, Sweden, Denmark, Italy and from America. It's absolutely extraordinary. And the whole piece is covered with wall graffiti, political graffiti, including a famous one from Paris ... including the famous poem, "Je participe, tu participes, il participe, nous participons, vous participez ... ils profitent." [I participate, you participate, he participates, we participate, you participate ... they profit]

In addition to that there are pages and pages of writing. I'll go through a few to give you an idea of what I'm dealing with.

These are all the notes from my play and somewhere in the play I have drawn on them—not directly many times, but occasionally.

"Spontaneity is the embryonic form of organization," Lenin.

"The executive of the modern state is but a committee for managing the affairs of the whole bourgeoisie," Marx.

"In France, every class of the population is politically idealistic, and considers itself first of all, not as a particular class but as a representative of the general needs of society. The role of liberator can therefore pass successively in a dramatic movement to different classes in the population until it finally reaches the class which achieves social freedom," Marx.

"Communism is the positive abolition of private property, of human self-alienation, and thus the real appropriation of human nature through and for man. It is, therefore, the return of man himself as a social, i.e., really human being, a complete and conscious return which assimilates all the wealth of previous development. Communism is the definitive resolution of the antagonism between man and nature and between man and man. It is the true solution of the conflict between existence and

essence, between objectification and self-affirmation, between freedom and necessity, between individual and species. It is the solution of the riddle of history and knows itself to be this solution," Marx.

And so on and so on endlessly, or not endlessly. It ends with a poem by Brecht, which I very much wanted to get out because it wasn't well known.

"What meanness would you not commit, to stamp out meanness? If at last you could change the world, what would you think yourself too good for? Who are you? Sink into the mire. Embrace the butcher. Change the world. It needs it," Bertolt Brecht.

Not only did we have a programme that was wholly Marxist. We had a play whose subject was Marxism. And it was on the National Theatre stage at the Old Vic at the time and every night for four or five weeks, 900 people came to watch this piece. And they genuinely sat there and listened and watched and wondered as if it had been one of their plays.

Over that period of time, however, some of the clientele of the National backed away, even though the great man himself [Olivier] was in it, in the leading role—and made way for what the manager at the time said were people from the technical colleges and the polytechnics. The 'lesser people' wanted to see the play, they had heard a lot about it. While it was generally slammed by the critics, it was hugely admired by lots of other people.

So what are we talking about? We are talking about a very different age from the one we are now in. We may be accidentally heralding in an age that is about to return. There may very well be a lot more Marxism around in plays and books than at present as a result.

Let me just proceed. It wasn't just a change in theatre. I have never thought the theatre that important. The really important change was in television. I wrote a series called *Bill Brand*, 11 hours of prime time television, about a left-wing Labour MP, a Marxist. One year in the life of this man who gets in from Stockport in a by-election. We got ten million people watching this every week, every Monday night at 9 p.m.

That is the society we were building and creating, and that is the society that both the Labour Party and the Conservative Party needed to rip up. That was the wrong deal, you know, we got it wrong. It was heavy, it was scruffy, it was occasionally very nasty, but, my God, it was alive. It was very alive. The universities were very, very different places from what they are today.

DW: It's forty years since 1968 and a great deal of water has gone under the bridge. That wave of radicalization lasted from about 1968 to 1975. And the reasons for its breakdown are complicated, but, in my view, those organizations that were charged with leading the working class were incapable of taking advantage of that situation and revolutionary opportunities were lost or betrayed, in France, above all, in 1968.

As a result of that a very different mood had set in by the mid-1970s. You had the re-stabilisation of politics, then Thatcher and Reagan, a turn to the right in the middle class and a turn to the right amongst sections of the working class, or at least a turn away from politics.

But as a Marxist we view these things as objective, historical processes. At different historical periods ... although without getting into praise and flattery, some people have stood out against the relatively grim landscape of the 1980s and 1990s ... but the question is not the future of 'socialism' per se, but the future of the working class? Did capitalism solve its problems? Had it solved its problems through the collapse of the Soviet Union, through Thatcher and Reagan, and we insisted, no, it had not, that all these contradictions would re-emerge at a higher level.

Now those decades have, certainly in the US and here, caused ideological problems. We have encountered them, we are aware of them. But come down to it, what are you faced with? A world since 1989 that has plunged into war. Remember, if we hadn't had the economic collapse we might be speaking of war between Russia and Georgia, or Russia and the US, except a few things intervened.

So you have got an extraordinary situation in which all the objective consequences are coming home to roost. In just weeks the sales of Marx shot up and all the stuff that supposedly went away is now coming back. Why? Because the contradictions haven't been solved and because, in our view, capitalism offers a future of poverty, misery, the threat of dictatorship and war. All this is indicated.

That's why it is an objective question, not a personal question, what happened to some of that generation. Why they went away. It's a social problem that you had renunciationism and people running down the street throwing their principles behind them as fast as they could. We face some of those difficulties today as well.

TG: I think the 1980s allowed people, some people who had been hiding, to come out. People who really thought that socialism was shit, but who had to take on the colouring of the 1970s, so that they became radicals, as it were, and then when they started writing in the 1980s and 1990s ... I mean we are looking at Thatcherism-lite as far as they were concerned.

What I want to say also is something about writing itself. There are a lot of young people here and it may be that some have come along because they think writing isn't such a bad idea. Whatever you're studying, writing is writing, you can do it, anyone can do it.

I want to read a piece I was looking at last night and draw it into this grab-bag of ideas. This is from Kurt Vonnegut.

"Here is a lesson in creative writing.

"First rule: Do not use semicolons. They are transvestite hermaphrodites representing absolutely nothing. All they do is show you've been to college.

"And I realize some of you may be having trouble deciding whether I am kidding or not. So from now on I will tell you when I'm kidding.

"For instance, join the National Guard or the Marines and teach democracy. I'm kidding.

"We are about to be attacked by Al Qaeda. Wave flags if you have them. That always seems to scare them away. I'm kidding.

"If you want to really hurt your parents, and you don't have the nerve to be gay, the least you can do is go into the arts. I'm not kidding. The arts are not a way to make a living. They are a very human way of making life more bearable. Practicing an art, no matter how well or badly, is a way to make your soul grow, for heaven's sake. Sing in the shower. Dance to the radio. Tell stories. Write a poem to a friend, even a lousy poem. Do it as well as you possibly can. You will get an enormous reward. You will have created something." [2] Kurt Vonnegut. A great man, a great man.

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Griffiths has been writing for the theatre, television and film for four decades. His work for the theatre, including plays such as Comedians, The Party and Occupations, has been performed all over the world. He also wrote extensively for British television when new drama was a living presence in that medium. His film work has included the award-winning Reds, written with Warren Beatty, as well as his own Food for Ravens.

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Questions from the audience

Question: We are a couple of miles from a graveyard in Ancoats where one of the leaders of the Chartist movement, Ernest Jones [1819-1869], lies. Have the Chartists been presented in an artistic endeavour?

Trevor Griffiths: I have a deal with a friend, Jack Shepherd, a very fine actor, who I have worked with many times. He is also a very fine writer. I was talking to him a few years ago and he asked what I was doing, and I

told him, and I asked what he was doing and he said he didn't know. This is a guy who wrote about Tom Paine for the stage in the 1980s, in a play called *In Lambeth*. It's a brilliant play. It deals with Blake, Blake's wife and Tom Paine and a lot of it takes place sitting in a tree. It's a remarkable play, which asks: Is it a revolutionary moment now in 1792, or isn't it?

Jack has been in a lot of my television and stage work. I asked, "Have you thought of looking at the Chartists?" And he said, "No," he had never read anything about them. So I said, "Read *The Making of the English Working Class*, the E.P. Thompson piece, there's something there." And he wrote this play which was put on at The Globe called *Holding Fire*. Very good title for the Chartists.

So, no, I have not considered Ernest Jones or any Chartist. But you mention Ancoats.

I was born in Ancoats in the Salvation Army hospital. Ancoats was a part of Angel Field, which was the classic slum. And I remember being told about Engels' dad having a factory up New Cross and going looking for it when I was in my early 20s. So that area is alive inside me to this day. I lived there, I was born there. I knew what it was like to be in a slum, really actively in a slum, surrounded by people from all over Europe, in Cheetham Hill for example in 1938, 1939. This has always been my roots. I'm always thinking about it.

So, Ernest Jones, I'm handing that one on—someone will do it.

Question: You said that when you are writing, you're always thinking about the people that are close to you—your mother, your father, your grandparents. I can understand that, but it seems to me that Thomas Paine and your other works are very universal. They don't speak in any local sense, but in a universal sense, and appeal to people who are looking to the truth and have artistic sensibilities. What is the connection between keeping this background close to you and at the same time having this universal context?

TG: I don't know, is the answer. I have never understood how a play like *Comedians* plays all over the world. This country, Canada, Australia, America—parts of the English-speaking world, so-called, are the only places that have a tradition of stand-up comedians. It's an insuperable hurdle for people who don't know anything about stand-up to do a play about stand-up.

How to translate that? Because you're not just translating words and structures, you are translating behaviours, and customs, and it's very difficult. So in Italy they did a cabaret in which everyone was on stage for the whole of the second act. All of them. And also, instead of coming on one by one, they were all there together. And they played music for each other, they made an Italian theme out of it. And for nine weeks that played to full houses. People kept coming back, wanting it, wanting it. And it put a new word in the language for a year—comedian—because they don't have a word, so they used the English word in a slightly Italian way.

David Walsh: I think the other side to that question is that a very rich and concrete grasp of a particular situation is the road to the universal. That's in what Hegel says about Dutch painting—he speaks of the fleeting moment, the peasants, the people playing cards and so forth; it is precisely through that grasp of the fleeting that the universal is grasped.

And I think that the historical approach is critical in that. Because you're talking about putting yourself in the shoes of people in a different era, that's a very difficult thing to do. As a writer it is a very difficult thing to do.

What do we see at present? In 95 percent of so-called historical dramas today we see 1990s' or 2000s' people in costumes. They have the hang-ups, neuroses, whatever, of the 2000s. To be able to recreate the historical moment is very rare. It takes a great deal of effort, and I do appreciate that. It's precisely in that grasp of the concrete that you open the door to the universal. People respond to these things because of that

sense, that class sense, the historical sense, the emotional sense, the artistic sense, the writing sense. That's all brought together in some concrete, sensuous fashion, then I think you have the universal.

TG: That's interesting. There is a quote here from Chekhov that is a model in some respects. A hugely interesting life, not just as a writer of plays. Tolstoy explained the greatness of Chekhov, before he had written a single play, on the basis of 200 short stories that are probably as good as James Joyce's short stories.

I love the quietness of Chekhov. I love the beadiness, the eyes all over the place. Being not just himself, but everybody on the train, or down the pub. This empathy, this ability to be the other in a room, not the self, but the other.

Charles Simic, a really interesting American poet, is doing a review here of the latest Philip Roth novel in the *New York Review of Books*, and I thought it would be interesting to jot it down here as a thought. It's a quotation from a short story by Chekhov called "Gooseberries."

"There ought to be behind the door of every happy, contented man some one standing with a hammer continually reminding him with a tap that there are unhappy people; that however happy he may be, life will show him her laws sooner or later, trouble will come for him—disease, poverty, losses, and no one will see or hear, just as now he neither sees nor hears others."

Now that fits with what I believe about writing. What is writing? Kafka says writing has to be a scalpel, no, not a scalpel, an ice-pick, to smash the frozen tundra of the heart. Literature and art are about fleeting moments of recognition. And writing that disturbs you in that way and lifts you in that way is full of life, and writing that leaves you inert is dead and therefore to be avoided, a bit like statins.

Question: What is your analysis of the reception for your play *The Party* [1973] at the time and also, decades later, *Food for Ravens* [1997], the television drama about the founding of the NHS [National Health Service]? I'm interested to know your analysis about that because it relates to the shift you were talking about in the 1970s. I wonder if we can understand these two things as points on that journey?

TG: Yes, you're right, and it's such a journey as well. I was a television writer and I knew how to do it. And somewhere around 1982, '84, it became increasingly difficult to get work. Any idea I put up through my agent was never taken up. It was left on the table. I'm a worker, I love working. It's what I do. So I went looking for work wherever I could do it. If not in television, then in theatre. And theatre has been my mainstay since the *Kulturkampf* [culture struggle] that Thatcher quite consciously waged from 1979 onward. And there has been a *Kulturkampf* going on, not only through the Major years, but especially through the Blair years and where we are now.

They don't want their airwaves filled with thought, with ideas, with dangerous notions. So they decided that the people found my work boring, or too difficult. Too difficult was the phrase that almost sank *Food for Ravens*. I was asked by BBC Wales, by a guy that I knew there who is a good man, to write a television play, a television brief, for the 50th anniversary of the founding of the National Health Service, 1998.

I said, I'm going to do a piece about [left-wing Labour MP and Minister of Health Aneurin] Bevan, I don't know what it will be, but I'm going to do it. And because I was working with this guy, he said, I don't want anything on paper, just do it. And I did it, and we read it together, and he said, we can do this—we have to find the money. But London said that you'd have to have a PhD in politics to understand it. 'We're not interested in putting out work that requires only graduates or post-graduates for its audience.'

This is not tested, it's just a thesis they have, or that the person who is spending £11 million a year for BBC 2—BBC 2, not 1—has. 'We have to be much more populist than anything Griffiths could ever possibly imagine writing.'

So this guy, who is very resourceful, a good socialist, went to his budget and found he had a million pounds unspent which he had been given to bid for Welsh rugby. He was new to the job, he thought, I haven't got rugby, but I can make this film. So he put £750,000 into the making of this film. It went out at 20 to 12 at night with no advertising, with nothing in the *Radio Times*. I got an audience of a million, half a million, whatever it would be. Which proved nothing—to me anyway. If it had gone out at 9 p.m. that same night it would have got maybe 5 million.

So what can I say? For me it happened much earlier, when I was trying to write a series of single plays called *Country: A Tory Story* [1981]. And what I had was, from 1945, six plays looking at key moments in the life of British politics, but really looking at the Tory Party. And the only one I managed to make was *Country*. And I rewrote it to try and include everything I had wanted to cover in six hours in 85 minutes. They were very concerned about putting it out, but it won so many prizes that they shut their mouths, but they also shut their wallets. And they never opened them up again for me.

As for the reception of *The Party* ... I described it somewhere as putting a play on the first night before a firing squad, but you didn't know it was a firing squad, you thought it was an audience!

It was such a bizarre piece. What piece has speeches that last for 20 minutes uninterrupted? They knew it sounded rather odd. The audiences loved it. The critics though were of a single voice, which is interesting because they have never been of a single voice with me. I usually get very good reviews and very bad reviews.

And it looked as if they were paying off someone else. They weren't paying me off. They were paying back some pain that they had had from Kenneth Tynan, who was a hugely contentious figure. Tynan was making very boastful claims about having this new great theatre, they didn't like it and they wanted to tell him in no uncertain terms. But three—Milton Shulman, Jack Tinker and Michael Billington—gave it very good reviews.

You will notice I know the reviews even though I don't "read them." Everyone reads their reviews. I read them more and more now. They are loaded with the meaning of their time.

DW: One point, because everyone might not be familiar with the speech and the play. There is a reason why the critics might have been hostile, because to a certain extent they might have taken it personally. Because that long speech is about what the working class can do and what the intellectuals cannot do, and their own feelings of impotence and frustration as a result of it.

TG: Does anyone know that speech?

DW: Read it—it's worth listening to.

[Griffiths gets a copy of *The Party* [3] and reads. The character speaking is John Tagg, a veteran Trotskyist leader, in response to comments by a "New Left" intellectual, who has just dismissed the working class and the social revolution in the advanced capitalist countries and proposed a "new model" based on an orientation to Third World national liberation struggles.]

Tagg: I'll erm... take issue with our comrade's er... analysis and model presently. I'd like to start by explaining why I'm here. It's very simple really. I'm National Organizer and Executive Council Member of the RSP, which is the British branch of the reconstituted Fourth International, and bases itself on the *Transitional Programme* drawn up by Trotsky some years before his death. I spend most of my time with workers—dockers, miners, engineers, car-workers, bricklayers, seamen. And as I'll try to explain later, a revolutionary party or faction that fails to establish itself in the working class, to base itself upon it, can lay no claim whatsoever to serious attention. (Pause.) But a revolutionary Marxist who has lived in Europe, America, or almost anywhere else, for that matter, during the last three or four years, would have to be blind and deaf not to have notice a considerable ... revolutionary potential, shall we call it? growing among sections of the population whose relation to the working

class is either nonexistent, or extremely tenuous, or positively antagonistic. I'm thinking of such categories as students, blacks, intellectuals, social deviants of one sort or another, women, and so on. And so we've decided to begin a general campaign of political education—including *self*-education, I should add—that might result in a broader and more experienced base for all our efforts. (Pause.) It's not a sudden accession of humility, I should point out. It's not a drive for membership. It's not a fund-raising effort. It's not a search for ideological compromise and political blandness. If our analysis is correct, we're entering a new phase in the revolutionary struggle against the forces and the structures of capitalism. The disaffection is widespread: in London, in Paris, in Berlin, in the American cities; wherever you care to look, bourgeois institutions are under sustained and often violent attack. New forces are rising up to throw themselves into the fray. The question is: How may they be brought to help the revolution? Or are they simply doomed forever to be merely 'protests' that the 'repressive tolerance' of 'late capitalist' societies will absorb and render impotent? (Pause.) We shall need some theory, to answer questions like those. But I suspect the theory will not be entirely in accord with that which we have heard expounded by our comrade here tonight. (Pause.) There's something profoundly saddening about that analysis. And, if I might be permitted a small digression, it seems to reflect a basic sadness and pessimism in you yourselves. You're intellectuals. You're frustrated by the ineffectual character of your opposition to the things you loathe. Your main weapon is the word. Your protest is verbal—it has to be: it wears itself out by repetition and leads you nowhere. Somehow you sense—and properly so—that for a protest to be effective, it must be rooted in the realities of social life, in the productive processes of a nation or a society. In 1919 London dockers went on strike and refused to load munitions for the White armies fighting against the Russian revolution. In 1944 dockers in Amsterdam refused to help the Nazis transport Jews to concentration camps. What can *you* do? You can't strike and refuse to handle American cargoes until they get out of Vietnam. You're outside the productive process. You have only the word. And you cannot make it become the deed. And because the people who have the power seem uneager to use it, you develop this ... cynicism ... this contempt. You say: The working class has been assimilated, corrupted, demoralized. You point to his car and his house and his pension scheme and his respectability, and you write him off. You build a whole theory around it and you fill it with grandiloquent phrases like 'epicentres' and 'neocolonialism.' But basically what you do is you find some scapegoat for your own frustration and misery and then you start backing the field: blacks, students, homosexuals, terrorist groupings, Mao, Che Guevara, anybody, just so long as they represent some repressed minority still capable of anger and the need for self-assertion. (Pause.) Well. Which workers have you spoken with recently? And for how long? How do you know they're not as frustrated as you are? Especially the young ones, who take the cars and the crumbs from the table for granted? If they don't satisfy *you*, why should they satisfy the people who actually create the wealth in the first place? You start from the presumption that only you are intelligent and sensitive enough to see how bad capitalist society is. Do you really think the young man who spends his whole life in monotonous and dehumanizing work doesn't see it too? And in a way more deeply, more woundingly? (Pause.) Suddenly you lose contact—not with ideas, not with abstractions, concepts, because they're after all your stock-in-trade. You lose contact with the moral tap-roots of socialism. In an objective sense, you actually stop believing in a revolutionary perspective, in the possibility of a socialist society and the creation of socialist man. You see the difficulties, you see the complexities and contradictions, and you settle for those as a sort of game you can play with each other. Finally, you learn to enjoy your pain; to need it, so that you have nothing to offer your bourgeois peers but a sort of moral exhaustion. You can't build socialism on fatigue, comrades.

Shelley dreamed of man 'sceptreless, free, uncircumscribed, equal, classless, tribeless and nationless, exempt from all worship and awe.' Trotsky foresaw the ordinary socialist man on a par with an Aristotle, a Goethe, a Marx, with still new peaks rising above those heights. Have you any image at all to offer? The question embarrasses you. You've contracted the disease you're trying to cure. (*Pause.*) I called this a digression, but in a way it describes very accurately the difficulty I experience when I try to deal with our comrade's ... analysis. Comrade Sloman was right, under it all. Theory isn't abstract; it isn't words on a page; it isn't... aesthetically pleasing patterns of ideas and evidence. Theory is concrete. It's distilled practice. Above all, theory is felt, in the veins, in the muscles, in the sweat on your forehead. In that sense, it's moral... and binding. It's the essential connective imperative between past and future. (*Pause.*) Now when I look for any of this in our comrade's account, I can't find it; it isn't there. It's simply part of an elaborate game he enjoys playing and plays well. ...

I don't propose a catalogue of counter-assertions to refute the major points made, because I think we can use our time more profitably doing something else. And my text for tonight is really the role of the party in the formulation of revolutionary theory and the building of the socialist revolution. But I'll need to offer a vastly different political conspectus before I can do that. (*Pause.*) Comrade Ford describes the history of the twentieth century as a history of vacuums. That's to say, no proletarian revolutions in the heartland of world capitalism; initially Europe, increasingly, thereafter, America. Well, I felt he ran just a little fast through the actual events, you know. I mean Germany 1919-20; Italy in the same period; Hungary; Bulgaria? Spain in '36. France in the same year, the year of the great General Strike, five million workers raising the question of state power. Greece in '44. The absence of revolution is not final evidence of the elimination of revolutionary potential. But how does he account for this loss of revolutionary direction in Europe? Via Marcuse, we learn that the proletariats of advanced societies have been 'absorbed' into the value systems of the capitalist states, that they are now junior partners in capitalism with a stake in its future and the deepest resistance to anything that would upset the *status quo* of collective bargaining in a property-owning democracy. And this, in itself, is the final refutation of Marx's contention that capitalist societies were class societies whose inherent tensions and contradictions necessarily result in their supersession by social ownership of the already socialized productive forces of those same societies. All right, let's grant, descriptively, at least, an extraordinary low level of revolutionary militancy in metropolitan proletariats. What we have to decide, on the evidence, within the theory, is how this has come about and how it can be changed. Unless, of course, we slip the question altogether, by arguing that the revolutionary moment has gone floating off somewhere else and now rests with the peasant of Asia or Africa or South America, who presumably now must face not only the combined weight of imperialist expansion, massing behind the most sophisticated technology of destruction yet devised by man, but also the active opposition of bourgeoisified proletariats eager to defend their share of the cake against all comers, however oppressed and miserable they may be. (*Pause.*) What's missing is any genuine grasp of the dialectic, of the relationship between the class *inside* the capitalist state and the extruded version of it being waged outwith. The fact is: the two are inextricably linked. There will be no victory in one without victory in both. But it must be the victory of the metropolitan proletariats that will herald the end of imperialist oppression. It is genuinely inconceivable that it could happen the other way round—think of it, think of it. Of course, the colonial struggle will go on, but does anyone really believe that America and Britain and France and Germany—mature capitalist states, at their level of technological development, with their economic resources and degree of destructive potential—will allow significant reversals to occur in their

economic expansion without doing something about it? It's unthinkable. (*Pause.*) So we must answer the questions: How is it that metropolitan proletariats lack revolutionary potential; and how might this be changed? Because if we don't answer them, we might as well take up chess or billiards, because there will be no way in which we can effect the transition we've been talking about and trying to work towards. (*Pause.*) The European and American proletariats appear to have settled for the *status quo*, in my opinion, because they have been consistently and systematically betrayed by their leaders; and particularly by the Communist parties of the various European countries. A simply historical fact that finds no place in Comrade Ford's analysis: Stalinism. Socialism in one country meant the damping down of revolutionary ardour everywhere, even where the flame of revolution was breaking through every crevice of capitalist society. By 1933 the German Communist party, the strongest in Europe outside Russia, had delivered the German working classes to Hitler on a plate. The French General Strike of 1936, which was undoubtedly based on a spontaneous proletarian desire to contest state power, i.e. a genuine revolutionary situation, was cynically reined back by the Stalinist hacks who led the PCF and turned quite deliberately into a struggle for wage increases. Wage increases! At Stalin's behest. The working class throughout Western Europe is even now, in most places, the prisoner of those miserable, anti-revolutionary leaderships, where they are not the dupes of the forces of social democracy. (*Pause.*) If we are to change all this, if we are to put proletarian revolution back on the agenda of European history, we are going to have to replace those defunct and corrupt leaderships with vital and revolutionary ones. (*Pause.*) But those leaderships will emerge not as loose coalitions or spontaneous coalescings, but as a result of patient organization and disciplined effort. That's to say, those leaderships will develop from new revolutionary *parties* which in turn will base themselves in and on the class they seek to lead. There is only one slogan worth mouthing at this particular historical conjunction. It is: 'Build the Revolutionary Party.' There is no other slogan that can possibly take precedence.

(He stops, mops his wet face and neck. Nobody speaks. Buttocks are shifted, feet wriggle, a match flares and sputters.)

Ford: (*finally*) Finished?

Tagg: Almost. (*Pause.*) The party means discipline. It means self-scrutiny, criticism, responsibility, it means a great many things that run counter to the traditions and values of Western bourgeois intellectuals. It means being bound in and by a common purpose. But above all, it means deliberately severing yourself from the prior claims on your time and moral commitment of personal relationships, career, advancement, reputation and prestige. And from my limited acquaintance with the intellectual stratum in Britain, I'd say that was the greatest hurdle of all to cross. Imagine a life without the approval of your peers. Imagine a life without *success*. The intellectual's problem is not vision, it's commitment. You enjoy biting the hand that feeds you, but you'll never bite it off. So those brave and foolish youths in Paris now will hold their heads out for the baton and shout their crazy slogans for the night. But it won't stop them from graduating and taking up their positions in the centres of ruling class power and privilege later on.

[Applause]

DW: You can see why the critics might have had a problem!

TG: Looking back, I see my whole working life as a hopeless adventure! An adventure sustained only by the wind in my own sails, nothing else!

DW: I was going to ask you about your general approach towards form and how that has changed over the last years.

TG: Yeah, I just want to show you ten minutes of the film *Food for Ravens*, which I wrote ten years ago and directed myself. It is the only film I have ever directed. Because I am here and because I know it, I will tell you that it won two BAFTAs [British Academy of Film and

Television Arts awards] and a Royal Television Award. This is the play they would not show before midnight, it was so dangerous to the mental matter of British society.

This is a play about the last six months in the life of Aneurin Bevan. He is living in Hertfordshire in a beautiful farmhouse and he is looking after the pigs. He has had cancer of the stomach and has had half his stomach removed. He is now in a very difficult and delicate state. Part of his life is coming back to him and he is not really clear how it's happening and he is constantly moving between past and present.

And the vector of this returned life is a young boy who is about 13, who is Welsh like him and looks a bit like him, and, in fact, turns out to be him in his own head, but is materialized in the film that I made. There is a complicated reason why I have done it this way, but what it does is play with the future and the past through the present. And I do that in about four or five plays throughout the '80s and '90s—*Thatcher's Children* is one of those plays.

Playing with time and therefore playing with form. From that type of writing which I simply could not do, it's beyond me to write like that [*The Party*], but there are other kinds of writing for me, this is another. And at the heart of it is a kind of social realism that says these are representatives of real people, real human behaviour within a real human project.

This is the penultimate meeting between the old man and the boy.

[Plays a clip from *Food for Ravens*].

TG: So this is a section of a virtually suppressed play. It's unlikely I will get anything else done in television, which is a great shame for me and the viewers as well. I guess one of my passions is the thing that Kurt Vonnegut talks about, creating something. We can all do it. It doesn't matter if it is not the best, why does it need to be the best? It just needs to be the best you can do.

We live in an absolutely great age, surrounded by possibility. If we could sort some basic truths out, such as who makes the wealth and who spends it, we could get somewhere. For me, it's as simple as that. It's also very complicated, but it's very simple. There is a morality underlying what you do that has to be addressed and writing is one way of getting at it. I rest my case really.

I remember the *Daily Telegraph* said that Trevor Griffiths would find class politics in anything. He said, if someone gave Griffiths a 13-part series called Thomas the Tank Engine, he would give us a history of revolutionary struggles.

Yes, I am incapable of writing a piece that is pre-political. I am for my sins a political sensibility. It's not only who I am, it is what I am.

And part of that is the payback, that which is owed, to those who raised you. It's almost mystical that feeling. I have been through all sorts of things with my parents and my grandparents, but I know it is central to much of what I am and much of what I do, unavoidable. Use it as part of that which you explore, and when you are exploring the bigger world.

...

DW: The difficulties are real, the oppression is real, but the objective conditions for transforming it are also equally real; but there needs to be consciousness, there needs to be understanding, there needs to be an understanding of history. There needs to be a revival of a very rich, socialist culture that was damaged by Stalinism.

It's referenced here [in *Food for Ravens*] that culture belongs to everyone. It is certainly my view that the cultural level of the population has to be raised, there has to be a moral awakening, a cultural awakening, as part of the revolutionary socialist project. That, from our point of view, is why we hold this meeting, why we speak of these issues.

As Lenin said, capitalism does the lion's share of the work. There will be no shortage of crises, I promise you, they are ripping it up. I come from the centre of world imperialism. America was the great stability of the post-world war world. What is the greatest centre of instability today?—it's the United States, the dollar, the Bush administration and

soon the Barack Obama administration. We now have a global economic crisis.

What we do, what we make of it, how it is transformed in a revolutionary direction is a complex issue, but we are convinced that the question of culture, a deepening sensibility, sympathy for others ... in my opinion, if there were a mass revulsion, as is growing, in the US against the death penalty, that would be a great step towards the social revolution.

Because the revolutionary programme comes relatively late in the game for masses of people. But sympathy, solidarity, self-sacrifice, nobility, compassion—those are qualities we very much need to encourage, and it is certainly one of the things that art can do. That's why if you look at every great revolution in history it is impossible to imagine it without great artistic and cultural fermentation.

Yes, there are difficulties. As Lincoln said, the occasion is piled high with difficulties, let us rise to the occasion. It's not an easy process. We're not speaking about a transformation in society just at the top, but the whole mass of society participating. That's not an easy matter, but the objective conditions for that are certainly ripening again and I think that consciousness has already undergone extraordinary changes over the last two months and we are only at the beginning of a historical period.

TG: I want to end my contribution with the final scene in the Tom Paine screenplay [*These Are The Times* (4)]. It ends with his death June 8, 1809. It's on a small farm in New York state, which he had been awarded by the American revolution for the work that he did. He took no money. All the money he earned from his books went to the revolution. It went to the American revolution, fed the army that fought the British, so that was treason anyway, and it went to the French revolution. He wasn't in it for the dough.

By the end of the play he is now 74 or something, very sick, and he was broke, because he had no money at all. He was living partly with a French woman, a French comrade, who he had met, who had two children, and they are present at the grave, and she is too. And also at the grave, and there were seven people in all ... John Adams said they should call this the Age of Paine. He said it somewhat ironically because he would have liked it to be called the Age of Adams. But since that wasn't likely, he said, all right, call it the Age of Paine.

That's how important he was felt at the time to be. And yet there were seven people at his grave. Two of them were strangers, African-Americans, who had been slaves, father and son, who had read about it in a newspaper in New York and walked 17 or 18 miles to this little farm because they had read a notice and they wanted to be there because they wanted to honour what they took to be a great American.

This is the moment when they and everyone else leaves and we have an open grave.

[Griffiths reads from *These Are The Times*:]

Paine's Voice:... The present state of civilisation is as odious as it is unjust...

The down-shot heads on past the grave, slowly covers the fields and hedges beyond.

Paine's Voice:... It is absolutely the opposite of what it should be, and it is necessary that a revolution should be made in it ...

The down-shot heads on: odd sounds approaching traffic on a highway.

Paine's Voice:... The contrast of affluence and wretchedness, continually meeting and offending the eye, is like dead and living bodies chained together ...

The shot tilts suddenly, reveals a modern highway, heavy with traffic, ripping past New Rochelle. Mixes, with the southbound flow, to today's New York City and its images of wretchedness and affluence...

Paine's Voice:... The great mass of the poor are become an hereditary race, and it is next to impossible for them to get out of that state of themselves ... The condition of millions in every country ... is now far worse than if they had been born before civilisation began ...

The shot resolves slowly back to the deserted field, the open grave.

Paine's Voice:... It is a revolution in the state of civilisation that is now needed. Already the conviction that representation is the true system of government is spreading itself fast in the world. But there must grow, and soon, a system of civilisation out of that system of government, so organised that not a man or woman born in the Republic but shall inherit some means of beginning the world and see before them the certainty of escaping the miseries that up to now have always accompanied old age ... An army of principle will penetrate where an army of soldiers can not: it will march on the horizon of the world, and it will conquer.

A wind stirs the grass: the grave remains open.

Notes:

1. *These Are The Times: A Life of Thomas Paine*—an original screenplay by Trevor Griffiths, Nottingham: Spokesman Books 2005, 195 pp.

2. "Here is a lesson in creative writing," from *A Man Without a Country*, Kurt Vonnegut, New York: Seven Stories Press 2005, 146 pp.

3. Trevor Griffiths, *Theatre Plays One*, Nottingham: Spokesman Books, 2007,p. 319

4. *These Are The Times: A Life of Thomas Paine*, an original screenplay by Trevor Griffiths, Nottingham: Spokesman Books, 2005, pp. 195

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