The Writer and Revolution: WSWS arts editor David Walsh in conversation with Trevor Griffiths—Part 1

11 December 2008

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, along with video excerpts. Part two of the transcript was published on December 12, 2008.

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

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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 revolutional 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 nob, 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 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 WSWS 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 cup 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 ... 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 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 to 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.

To be continued

Notes:


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