

Interview with Jack Shepherd, British actor and playwright

By Vicky Short and Antoine Lerougetel
11 July 2012

Award-winning actor and playwright Jack Shepherd was born in Yorkshire in October 1940. As well as acting, writing, producing and directing, he also plays the saxophone and jazz piano.

Shepherd is best known in Britain for his roles on television in Trevor Griffiths' *Bill Brand* (1976), as a radical Labour Member of Parliament, and *Wycliffe* (from 1993 to 1998), as the Welsh detective Superintendent Charles Wycliffe.

Jack Shepherd was one of a group of British artists and intellectuals who in the 1960s and 1970s were radicalised by events around the world and the class struggle in Britain. Some of these gifted individuals were drawn toward the perspective and programme of the Socialist Labour League, the Trotskyist movement at the time, the forerunner of the Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP). However, with the receding of the radical wave of the 1970s, the crisis in the WRP in 1985-1986 and, later, the collapse of the Soviet Union, most of these artists drew pessimistic conclusions and concluded that socialism was impossible.

To his credit, Shepherd continues dealing with these issues. Many of his plays feature debates on whether social revolution is necessary or possible. As the following interview and accompanying review of his latest play, *Valley of the Shadow*, indicate, however, those events and difficulties still weigh heavily on him.

WSWS: What made you turn from actor to playwright?

Jack Shepherd: I got addicted to the creative process when I was at art school, from the age of 18 to 22. I was already writing play sketches and all kinds of things at that time.

It was a crucial moment, when abstract expressionist painting was giving way to pop art. I wasn't

fundamentally suited to either. I certainly wasn't suited to the Andy Warhol explosion of pop art at the beginning of the 1960s.

In 1965, I got in to the Royal Court Theatre [in London]. There were great writers at that time writing for it—Edward Bond, David Storey, Christopher Hampton and people like that. They were terrific writers and I learnt a huge amount about writing and about acting, and about relating what I did to the world that I was living in. That's been my objective since.

In 1973, through the post, I got this script from the BBC, a play by Trevor Griffiths, which eventually became *All Good Men*. I was involved in Trevor Griffiths' plays from 1973 to 77-78, I was kind of representing him in his plays. When, in *Occupations*, I played Gramsci, we were at our closest.

Then there was a play about the actor who is mistaken for Danton [*Who Shall Be Happy?...*], a play of absolute despair. It is a good play. It's about the French Revolution, but it is absolutely black.

Trevor's the only writer I've met whose politics and reason for writing are the same. The idea that you could have the dialectic at the heart of a play was something I learnt from him. Working on his plays, I realised that you can't lead the audience towards your own conclusions. You have to leave it open. If the audience has to think it out by themselves, you've done something very powerful. If you lead them down the road, as Brecht tried to do, you can end up with propaganda.

WSWS: What changes have you seen in theatre and television since the 1970s, for better or worse?

JS: The worse, by far, is the destruction of the play on television. Those plays gave writers the chance to put their point of view of the world across. Today, the most interesting plays are coming out of the fringe. But

they hardly get paid for it.

My first job at the Royal Court was understudying in *Saved* by Edward Bond. It was like punches on the nose. I could taste blood in the back of my mouth. His play *Early Morning* is a terrifying piece of writing, too. It hammers home his hatred of contemporary society.

WSWS: *You have written plays about Oliver Cromwell, John Milton, Tom Paine, William Blake, William Morris. What attracts you to these figures? What themes do you put forward through them?*

JS: The dialectic that I wanted to put at the heart of *In Lambeth* wasn't particularly Marxist. It was passionate enthusiasm of revolutionary change and, on the other hand, anarchism. Blake is some kind of an anarchist, he fears that revolutionary change will eventually be no better. Which is my problem.

In Lambeth is written before the revolution happens, it is rumbling away in France. But it is optimistic. But its companion piece is at the end of a revolution that failed, the Cromwellian revolution, based on the idea of Milton's poem *Paradise Lost*. Four or five years ago, I wrote *Holding Fire* about the Chartists' failure. It was on at the Globe.

WSWS: *Tell me about your latest play, Valley of the Shadow.*

JS: It takes place in the same village that my parents grew up in, in Yorkshire. For my generation in England, growing up in the 1940s and 1950s, the First World War was still felt by people as a trauma. In my grandmother's family, the men were nearly all killed.

The world that came after was a modern world, with modern art, and the world that preceded it was kind of Edwardian, Victorian England. I knew that composers at the time had been going around collecting folk songs, stealing them for their own purposes. So the dialectic in the play is to do with class, to do with who owns the culture, who is the culture, whose England is it?

WSWS: *Why don't you mention the Russian Revolution, which took place during the last part of your play, in 1917?*

JS: What I wanted to bring into this play was that it was a conservative heartland, a king-and-country working class. It still is. I know miners and shipyard workers refused to load ships destined to attack the workers' government of Russia, but that was in the big cities. When my father had to leave the village and

work in Leeds, he became politicised. He couldn't tell his family he'd joined the union. That's why it didn't come up in that play.

WSWS: *In Against the Tide, William Morris tells the poet Algernon Swinburne that "Art has to be useful". Do you agree?*

JS: Yes, Morris would say, it's the life that you live, it's the creation of beauty, and it's the process of living as part of the thing that you've made—total integration of spirit and materialism. Morris is completely original, and utterly impractical in terms of our society.

WSWS: *Henry Hyndman, the revolutionary, points out to Morris the current economic and social crises in Britain and Europe, saying, "the objective conditions for revolutionary change...are at last discernible". He insists on the need for a disciplined, revolutionary party.*

JS: Morris flirted with anarchism and then abandoned politics altogether. Again, he opposes revolution. Hyndman retorts that unless you have a revolution nothing will ever happen. It is a terrible contradiction.

Morris feared revolution but despite his hostility to Hyndman, he's in an agonising quandary. He cannot find arguments against the need for a Bolshevik-type revolutionary party. I totally identify with his dilemma.

The authors also recommend:

Valley of the Shadow: A drama about art, society and revolution

[11 July 2012]

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