

“The struggle to tell the truth through stories”: An interview with British film and television producer Tony Garnett—Part 1

By our reporters
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In a retrospective this summer, “Seeing Red,” the British Film Institute (BFI) celebrated the work of veteran film and television producer Tony Garnett. The BFI described Garnett as one of television’s “most influential figures,” who “produced and fostered a succession of provocative, radical and sometimes incendiary dramas.”

Garnett’s career spans 50 years, but he is identified in particular with one of the most significant and creative periods in the history of television drama in the UK. Originally an actor, Garnett moved behind the camera when he was hired as an assistant story editor at the BBC working on *The Wednesday Play*, which ran from October 1964 to May 1970 and aired more than 170 plays.

This famed anthology series, which addressed social issues before an audience of millions, included the likes of *Up the Junction* (1965, about abortion), *Cathy Come Home* (1966, about homelessness), *The Lump* (1967, about casualised labor), *In Two Minds* (1971, about mental illness as a social problem) and *The Big Flame* (about a workers’ revolt on the docks, 1969), all produced by Garnett. During this period he began long associations with writer Jim Allen (see WSWs comments here and here), dramatist David Mercer and, most notably, director Ken Loach.

His producing credits include Loach’s *Kes* (1969), *After a Lifetime* (1971), *Family Life* (1971—the film version of *In Two Minds*), *Days of Hope* (1975), *The Price of Coal* (1977) and *Black Jack* (1978), as well as Roy Battersby’s *The Body* (1970), Mike Leigh’s *Hard Labour* (1973), Julien Temple’s *Earth Girls Are Easy* (1985), Roland Joffe’s *Fat Man and Little Boy* and Bill Shapter’s *Beautiful Thing* (1996).

Garnett was born into a working class family in Birmingham in 1936. An extremely private individual, he only recently revealed that his mother died when he was just five years old of septicaemia, two days after a backstreet abortion during the Second World War. His father, a munitions worker, committed suicide 19 days later.

Garnett went on to read psychology at University College, London, where he developed his acting skills. He appeared in television’s *The Boys* (1962) and *Z Cars* (1962), and also played several small parts in *An Age of Kings* (1960), the BBC’s influential production of Shakespeare’s history plays.

As he explains in the following interview, Garnett came into contact with Gerry Healy and the Socialist Labour League, the British Trotskyists, in the late 1960s. Although he never joined the Trotskyist movement, Garnett was instrumental in organising discussions among actors, writers and directors, including Loach, Mercer, Roy Battersby, and Corin and Vanessa Redgrave, that led to important gains within these circles. Playwright Trevor Griffiths immortalised those meetings

in *The Party* (1978). (See also the obituary of Vanessa Redgrave)

Reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* sat down with Garnett this summer and asked him a number of questions about his life and career, and in particular the political and artistic conceptions that have informed his work.

“The [BFI] retrospective took a lot out of me emotionally”, Garnett first explained. “Your whole life comes back. You watch films, see young talented people on screen and realise they are dead. All the old battles come back. What you were doing with your life then. Who you were with. Who was breaking your heart and whose heart you were breaking.”

We have edited the lengthy discussion that ensued as follows:

WSWS: How was it possible for someone from your social background to make the transition fairly rapidly to a respected producer at the BBC?

Tony Garnett: My generation was the luckiest working class generation in the history of this country. We were the only complete generation that was well fed as children.

A small number were picked to go to grammar school and a tinier number to university.

I received a state scholarship in the late 1950s worth over £300 a year—you could live very well in London on that. Doors opened. In the early 1960s, the whole atmosphere was one of “working class possibility”—even though for most of the working class there was no such possibility.

I came from a working class family, from the “aristocracy of labour”—machine tool makers, master plasterers, bricklayers, car mechanics. I ended up at the BBC, and that is a big cultural shift. You are from one class but not of another. There are feelings of guilt and betrayal. At 21, I was earning more money than my old man could ever dream of.

The tension inside me made me question things a lot more. Being déclassé, in fact, makes you interested in class. It’s not that you can choose your class so much as you can choose your class allegiance. I’m from the working class, but am now a middle class professional and I have been for decades.

You know you are leading a double life. But from the early 1960s it was easier. The BBC was changing in response to the cultural changes in the country. The BBC helps to create culture, but also responds to it. Its income was increasing every year as more people bought televisions and there was a move to colour.

BBC Director General Hugh Carlton Greene realised that “Auntie”

[the BBC] had to take off her corset and put on a mini-skirt. There was big opposition to that, but he had the authority to push it through. One of the consequences was that rough kids—like me, Roger Smith and John McGrath—became some of the lucky few scholarship boys that were allowed to go into the BBC. A window opened.

I first started working on *The Wednesday Play* anthology in 1964. Smith, James MacTaggart and myself put together about 34 feature-length simple dramas.

WSWS: Your work is regarded as overtly political. How did your political views evolve and how did they inform your work?

TG: This was the time that the Labour Party was in office under Harold Wilson and the Beatles were at the top of the charts. It was a time of ferment.

My politics had been developing gradually. I'd developed an attitude towards Stalinism early on because my first father-in-law was a member of the Communist Party. I used to argue with him while I was still at school, because I didn't like what I was hearing. I hadn't heard of Trotsky, but I was suspicious of aspects of the CP, although I had respect for some people in it.

I was 20 at the time of the CPSU 20th party conference, where [Soviet Premier Nikita] Khrushchev made his "Secret Speech", detailing some of Stalin's crimes. My father-in-law wouldn't believe a word of it. But it had a big impact on me.

I was involved in trade unions, and in the 1960s I was on the executive of the Association of Cinematograph Television and Allied Technicians (ACTT). I was reading Marx. I was a leftie rebel without much knowledge.

But with Wilson in government in 1964 and 1966, I was getting disillusioned. We produced *Cathy Come Home*, about a young family made homeless, and in 1965 *Up the Junction*, about a backstreet abortion. These were full of anger at individual people's predicaments. *Cathy* is a reformist, angry piece.

I'm a storyteller, and I appeal to people's feelings as well as their minds. But I was getting more political as I became disillusioned with Labour. It had exposed reformism to me and I knew what wasn't right, but I didn't know what was right.

By the late 1960s, by luck, I met Jim Allen [a former member of the Socialist Labour League]. This was a breakthrough because he had a voice and he knew the characters he was writing about as he lived and worked with them. He was a rough, crude writer but his voice was what I wanted.

Through Jim I met dockers in Liverpool and working class people involved in big strikes. I was researching *The Big Flame*, and I wanted to get it right. That's when I met Gerry Healy. I didn't know him personally or much about Trotskyism, but he had the background information I needed and he seemed to be the only person who made sense of anything.

I was very impressed by the information Healy gave me and his analysis. When I met him, I had already started holding meetings at my place every Friday evening. There was a lot of disillusionment, and these were open meetings, for anyone who thought of themselves as left. There were a lot of people I knew who were pissed off with the Labour government. You could see the Labour Party and trade union bureaucracy were betraying.

I held the meetings for ages, and then others took over. Leaders and supporters of all the main left political tendencies participated. Tariq Ali came for a couple of weeks, then stormed out saying he wasn't going to talk to salon socialists. That was especially funny because he was from a bourgeois family in Pakistan.

Healy turned up, and within three or four weeks he completely dominated the meeting. Many of the representatives of other tendencies stopped coming. There was no doubt that Healy's position was far superior to theirs. He was a better and more relentless debater than any of them...and he terrified them. They just didn't dare come back. It was really interesting to watch.

Within eight to ten weeks, he was recruiting members. Quite a number of my friends joined including Roger Smith, Roy Battersby and a whole number of actors. I didn't join.... Politics for me starts with love. We're dependent on others. A socialist culture is the only one that can allow us to live with each other in peace, encourage each other's creativity, making life worth living. The alternative that's put to us is a society where everyone competes and doesn't cooperate, where everyone wants to get an advantage over others economically and socially and is utterly indifferent to other people's suffering. What kind of human being would prefer that? How can anyone actually say they wish to live in a society based on exploitation?

I don't know how we get there. I have tried to tell the truth about the world and get the biggest platform to tell it on. How that translates into practical politics is difficult. You have an answer that I have not been able to accept. I don't have an answer, except keep connecting with people—keep reminding them of how others are.

In 1974, there was a potentially revolutionary situation. If you had had at that time a strong enough revolutionary socialist movement and leadership, there could have been a chance.... Ken Loach, Jim Allen and I did *Days of Hope*, which followed three people, relatives, between the First World War in 1916 to the betrayal of the General Strike in 1926. Really, we were saying if we don't learn from history, it will happen again. But the film didn't have any effect, because it did happen again.

It was a flawed film, as they all are, but it was the most ambitious politically. The research was difficult. We had to get everything right because I knew we would be attacked. I had back-up documents prepared. Most of the attacks came from the Labour Party and the Trades Union Congress.

The Price of Coal [1977] and *Spongers* [1978] were produced at the end of the Labour government and the run-up to Margaret Thatcher coming to power in 1979. Labour at that time was drowning. It had no answer to the problems of society. Prime Minister Jim Callaghan was drifting to the right and, together with a section of the trade union bureaucracy, was in open conflict with working people. Inflation was high, so there were strikes to compensate. What the ruling class needed was a government who said "No, you can't have it", beat the workers down and make them unemployed. Callaghan wasn't capable, so they had to get someone who was, Thatcher.

To be continued

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