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#### INTRODUCING TREVOR GRIFFITHS – A CONTEMPORARY ENGLISH PLAYWRIGHT.

Literary history now moves so rapidly that it seems a simple matter to take a perspective on even the most recent literary products, and not simply a provisional estimation, but a final judgement. Puffing of new authors and writers by publishers, critics and flatterers has not suddenly taken over the literary market-place, but the system of authorial patronage by the aristocracy has evolved to match the needs of the times, and now the latest Ph.d student or academic in the search for the 'new' latches on to authors with alacrity often without much consideration of whether the author in question is a worthy subject of attention. Patronage is now the gift of the academic for the writer with pretensions to serious intent, and flattery is the property of the same critics. Of course, we should not forget that there is an alternative to academic patronage – the commercial market itself, still the best place for a dramatist, novelist or poet whose aim is more pecuniary than profound. In his seminal work on the place of English studies in intellectual development, *Education and the University*<sup>1</sup>, F. R. Leavis has a salutary reminder for all persons engaged in the study of literature, and the search for the 'new-for-its-own-sake' method of literary study:

".... there is no more futile study than that which ends with mere knowledge about literature. If literature is worth study, then the test of its having been so will be the ability to read literature intelligently, and apart from this ability an accumulation of knowledge is so much lumber. The study of a literary text about which the student cannot say, or isn't concerned to be able to say, as a matter of first-hand perception and judgement – of intelligent realization – why it should be worth study is a self-stultifying occupation."

The polemic tone of this is clear. Literary criticism is to be a process of justification, of intelligent reason-giving, clearly giving reasons why this text deserves attention over that. Whilst time is limited, and we cannot read everything, then we must be careful not to waste time with the trivial and the dross. If we are to draw serious attention to contemporary literature, and we are to attend to Leavis's concern, then we must recognise the moral responsibility that this entails, and not waste our time (and, if we are teachers, by implication the time of our students) by attention to quantitative knowledge, and by extrapolation; by attention to ephemera. This is a necessary

preface to the discussion of any contemporary literature, and judgement of such literature must inevitably be provisional, hesitant, modest. Unlike the repository of accepted 'literature' (taking the designation 'literature' as itself an evaluative term), the work of previous times pondered and considered at length by previous critics, contemporary writing, if it is not obviously trivial or commercially motivated\*, needs to establish its claims to our attention.

The literary history of contemporary drama is an interesting commentary on the misdirection of attention. The 'revolution' in the late 1950's with the two plays by Samuel Beckett and John Osborne (*Waiting For Godot* and *Look Back in Anger* respectively<sup>2</sup>) now seems to be less shattering on Osborne's side than was initially thought – his 'breakthrough' against dramatic conventions now seems considerably diminished in its importance, whilst the critical estimation of Beckett has proceeded apace with studies galore of his work. Whilst the latter has refined, condensed and sharpened his central ideas and dramatic techniques, the former has dissipated both ideas and technique in successive plays since 1956 until the 'anger' and emotional force has become drenched in meandering language and strained plotting (*West of Suez* is a prime example). The legacy of Beckett's drama has been the work of Pinter, and, in a peculiar sense, Edward Bond<sup>3</sup> – with Pinter the threatening menace and disturbing word-play of *The Birthday Party* has since been confirmed as merely that, word-play without substance, menacing atmosphere without a sense of context: squibs rather than rockets. As with Shakespeare, the continued interest of Beckett is precisely in word-play of *The Birthday Party* has since been confirmed as merely that, word-play without substance, menacing atmosphere without a sense of context: squibs rather than rockets. As with Shakespeare, the continued interest of Beckett is precisely in proportion to the profound universality with which the drama deals, and the firm grasp which the writer demonstrates on both themes and technique. The decline of interest in Osborne can crudely be related to his lack of this universality, and the critical reaction against Pinter can be connected with his attempt to touch universal emotions without connecting this to any significant intellectual perception, so that his drama lacks the profundity of Beckett's. It isn't the *Naturalism* of Osborne that has seen his decline (if that were so then Ibsen and Chekhov would too be of little interest) – literature cannot be pre-determinedly judged in that way. Nor is it the absurdist elements of Pinter that render his drama trifling, but the lack of substance supporting them (unlike Beckett's work).

This necessary context which is modern drama gives a basis for the discussion of contemporary drama in England, and especially here the plays of Trevor Griffiths. \* The current state of English theatre is, like all contemporary history, a state of flux in which it is difficult to isolate anything clearly, risky to trace particular 'trends', and certainly

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\* By 'commercially motivated', I do not (unlike Leavis) wish to be taken to mean that commercial (popular) pulp writing is not of interest – it is. But the interest concerned here is recognisably of a different order from the work of authors not so primarily motivated.

\* If you teach in a University it is too easy to become forgetful of the fact that The Theatre to the vast bulk of – the population of England means not Osborne and Beckett, nor even Pinter and Bond, but musicals, sub-Agatha Christie's, soft pornography, and farces – each of which has its own literary-sociological interest.

speculative to pick out individual writers as being more important, significant (or whatever critical term you choose) than others. But, even bearing in mind Leavis's warning (is it worthy of attention – can we justify our attention?) it is still possible to make provisional assessments, and the object of this article is to draw attention to the work of Trevor Griffiths, and to justify (in some sense) this attention<sup>4</sup>.

Trevor Griffiths was born in Manchester in 1935, and studied English at Manchester University, graduating in 1955. For eight years, from 1957 until 1965, he taught; in an experimental private school, and as a lecturer in a technical college in Stockport. From 1965 he worked as Further Education Officer for the BBC in Leeds for seven years, leaving this job in 1972 to write full time. He has written plays for radio, television and the theatre, but his expressed preference is for television.<sup>5</sup> He has not received the critical attention of academics that a Pinter, Bond or Beckett has, which seems to be due to several reasons:

- he writes naturalist drama predominantly, and critical taste now flows in the direction of drama which signifies its own non-naturalist status.
- he writes plays with direct political connotations, which non-neutrality is again not within the stream of current taste amongst critics/academics.
- he writes for television, and sees one of his tasks as a contemporary playwright to be to engage with and utilise the new media. In academic criticism, television occupies a place analogous to the early days of cinema; "it might be entertainment, but is it Art?" seems to be the (futile) question.

As a preface to the mention of his central plays, and the discussion of his most important, it is useful to draw out the threads of each of the above three issues.

The only significant analysis of Griffiths' work to date is a short article in *New Society* by Albert Hunt.<sup>6</sup> In this article Hunt offers several reasons for 'directing attention' to Griffiths. The general basis for his argument is simply that Griffiths is working in different ways on different themes from other contemporary English dramatists. The first point is, as Hunt says, that

Griffiths is passionately committed to an exploration of ideas. This runs counter to a general tendency in our theatre to see ideas and theatricality as opposites which are mutually incompatible..... Griffiths sees ideas as dramatic events.<sup>7</sup>

Given the context of Pinter, Beckett, Bond et al, this is a re-direction for English theatre. The second major point for Hunt is the nature of the ideas that interest Griffiths.

The nature of the ideas to which Griffiths is committed is unusual, not just in our theatre, but in the English intellectual tradition. Griffiths is concerned with marxist thought as a basis for action. He uses the theatre to examine the basic contradictions in the way marxist ideas have been used, and in doing so, he examines the way those contradictions are reflected in himself as an individual.<sup>8</sup>

The direction of Hunt's remark is that Griffiths, in his major plays, is exploring undogmatically the utility and internal contradictions of left-wing thinking as represented in particular individuals, whose drama we see on stage. In *Occupations*, Griffiths' play concerning the Italian political ferment of 1920, two central characters, Gramsci (an Italian marxist imprisoned by the Fascist dictatorship) and Kabak, a Soviet contact, debate the nature of revolution and the role of the 'leaders and the led'.

A crucial point of the play occurs when Gramsci gives his view of 'the masses':

..... it was then I began to see masses as people and it was only then that I began to love them, in their particular, detailed, local, individual character. It is the correct, the only true dialectical relationship between leaders and led, that can ensure the political health of the new order that the revolution seeks to create.<sup>9</sup>

**Occupations** can be seen though as a hesitant working out both of Griffiths' ideas about the nature of socialist thought, and the dramatic expression of those ideas. Throughout the play there is clear sympathy for Gramsci, and his humane approach to political issues stands out and can be seen as representative of Griffiths' own position. Gramsci and Kabak are, for Griffiths, but two sides of a possible dialectic, which forms the backbone to all of Griffiths' plays, and this marks him out from the general course of English drama, certainly contemporary English drama.

The second point concerning Griffiths is his consistent use of naturalism as a means of expression. Hunt has more to say on this issue:

Nearly all the writers or groups with claims to seriousness in our theatre are consciously struggling, for the most part unsuccessfully, to break away from naturalistic forms. Griffiths, on the other hand, asserts that naturalism is the form he wants to start from – because he's introducing unfamiliar ideas and therefore wants the form, at least, to be familiar and because, as he sees it, naturalism has a powerful hold on people's imagination.

I believe, however, that there is another reason for Griffiths' commitment to naturalism. Naturalism is basically about the observed details of everyday life. One of Griffiths' central themes is the connection and sometimes collision – between political ideas and the texture of lived experience..... Griffiths draws on naturalist conventions to create such a texture of lived experience. But his originality lies in the way he injects into naturalist conventions a debate about potential ideas, which becomes a dramatic element in its own right.<sup>10</sup>

John McGrath has offered one of the strongest attacks against naturalism judged from a socialist perspective in recent times:

....as a form, it imposes a certain neutrality on the writer, the actor and the audience..... It encapsulates the status quo, ossifies the dynamics of society into a moment of perception... Naturalism forces itself to present a world that is static, implied and ambivalent.<sup>11</sup>

A description of the situation, of the conflict between reaching out to a wide audience (as Griffiths seeks) and yet not pandering to that audience, of changing the viewpoint of a large audience and yet not simply manipulating that audience, is given by Alan Lovell, and it is a description that suits admirably the tensions that Griffiths is exploring in his work as a playwright:

....(the socialist artist) ... can't accept the mass audience unproblematically, he can't say he'll give the audience what it wants, and accept as sovereign the audience's demands and desires as indicated to him..... On the other hand he can't stick within the avant-garde, because he must be aware of the class situation and cultural limits of working within the avant-garde that exist within our society. So he lives with those tensions.<sup>12</sup>

And, in the case of Trevor Griffiths, he acts within those tensions, exploring them in his work. In the case of *The Party*<sup>13</sup> for example, a play in which Griffiths explores the effect of the Paris revolutionary situation of 1968 upon a group of suburban intellectual socialists in a London flat, the play is not simply a naturalist drama, but has a device prefacing the 'action proper' which undercuts the unity of the form. A prologue of sorts is spoken by a Groucho Marx figure who wittily harangues the audience about money, political truth, and their own social position. In *Comedians*, the smooth naturalist flow of the play is completely disrupted by the performance of one of the central characters of a shocking, disturbing mime and monologue with a pair of dummies up on stage. Such anti-naturalist devices are used by Griffiths to disrupt not only the flow of the action, but also to jolt the audience out of certain dramatic pre-conceptions at crucial moments of the play. He uses naturalism to gain the attention, and disjoins this naturalism to re-direct the attention.

One of Griffiths' oft-repeated aims is that of reaching as wide an audience as possible, which is in turn a clear reason for his use of fairly conventional methods of expression and structure. But it also explains his preference for television as a mode of delivery over the theatre. He has increasingly turned to writing for television:

I have a prior commitment to television. Writing for television provides me with the widest spectrum for communication that is available in this society. It cuts right across the classes.<sup>14</sup>

The avant-garde theatre, even conventional theatre, reaches very few people: for Griffiths, the combined use of naturalism and television is a logical solution to the problem of how to reach an audience on a massive scale, without becoming simply or crudely populist.

## II

When we turn to one particular play, *Comedians*<sup>15</sup>, we see even more clearly the dramatisation of ideas through individualised characters that is the basis of his work. He is concerned to give an unfolding interplay of conflicting views, a dramatised dialectic, giving room for ideas concerning moral and political action to collide and confront one another. He himself has said in reference to *Comedians*

My plays up to now have been about contradictions, about antitheses, about two parts of a three-part dialectic, if you like. But I think this play is more dialectical; it has moved beyond mere statement or the exploration of conflicting stances.<sup>16</sup>

What Griffiths brings to a head in *Comedians* is the drive towards complexity of perception that has always been latent in his work; a constant questioning of action and ideas rather than the supplying of glib answers. When asked in an interview what he saw as the function of political theatre, propagandistic or analytical, he replied

I think it should be analytical and descriptive. I think there is a terribly important job to go on doing in journalism, in books, in academy, in theatre, which is to go on offering descriptions, painstakingly, to say, 'No', we have not completely looked at the society we live in, we've not completely examined it. Analytically is to take it a stage further, is to say 'What do we make of this? How do we evaluate this? How do we judge it?'<sup>17</sup>

In none of Griffiths' plays can the meaning or significance of them be reduced simply to

a sum of the politics. The characters in *Comedians* reveal their own inner contradictions, and in so doing fundamental contradictions at the centre of our social existence. The problems that Griffiths embodies in his characters and action are presented not to be watched, simply, but to be thought through by the audience. Griffiths maintains that he is concerned to challenge his audience, but the challenge is not the mystification of a Pinter, but the request for a dialogue. What is crucial about *Comedians* is that no synthesis of the presented moral contradictions is attempted by Griffiths – this would be a false formalisation of the model of dialectic that he uses, i. e. a step back from reality. The political challenge made is, in the last stage, to consider the implications of the drama in connection with our own lives. It seems banal to emphasise the importance of the audience for drama, but in the context of recent English theatre, some exemplars of which seem loftily unconcerned with reaching out to the audience, this recent comment by Griffiths is pertinent:

.....plays in the theatre don't exist fully until they confront and are confronted by an audience. Without an audience, plays don't have any meaning, except as therapies for the actors. The play is the swimmer and the audience the water. I suspect that that's what the best teaching is – essentially open-ended and exploratory; insisting on the active participation of the audience.....<sup>18</sup>

It is clear that Griffiths' plays are a fresh departure in recent English theatre: they are all facets of an educational course, in one sense. Not the tedious dogmatic pedantry of rote fact-learning, but an exploration of how best we can live our lives now.

### III

A drama of political ideas, a drama of conflict resulting from moral disconnections, a drama of comic eruption within a framework of yearning for change – all these elements which work diffusively and fragmentarily in his previous plays come together much more tightly in *Comedians*. The play is set in Northern England, Manchester, in a schoolroom, where a small group of budding comedians (of the type who work clubs and pubs, telling jokes, perhaps singing a song or two – the traditional 'stand-up' comic) are given a final briefing by their professional tutor before they go out to give their 'apprentice' performance in front of an agent's man from London, who holds out the prospect of wealth and fame – if their performance pleases. In three acts, the play is an elaborate setting-forth of not only the social (and socialising) nature of comedy, but also of the relationships between an audience and a performer, with a before, during, and after analysis of the basis of 'comedy'. Act one sees the 'warm-up' session, act two the 'real' performances of the group of comedians, act three the aftermath, their successes and failures. At the centre of the play's theme is the issue of just what it is to be 'successful' in comedy. What the audience wants (both from Griffiths' play *Comedians* and the putative audience of the comedians' performances, the 'play within the play' so to speak) is entertainment. What Griffiths questions is the nature of what is contemporarily considered 'entertaining', how far this should be a criterion of success for the comedian, and by extension, the dramatist, Griffiths himself.

An old professional comedian, Eddie Waters, is the 'tutor' to the group of apprentice comics. We meet them at the culmination of this teaching: their 'course' has ended, and

tonight they are to perform before a live audience, one member of which, Bert Challenor, is a talentspotter from London, which immediately invokes for the group the sense of bright lights, wealth, fame and a more cosmopolitan life. On the basis of Challenor's judgement of their performances, they may be offered lucrative contracts to work in London, as professionals. The group of aspirant comedians are all working in dull, routine jobs, without much reward (either financial or spiritual) and see the contract as the means by which they can change their personal lives. They arrive gradually, and crack jokes spontaneously whilst they await the arrival of Waters. When he appears we are quickly given a sense of the inevitable conflict that will be the central focus of the play. This conflict concerns the very nature of what is morally acceptable as comedy, the moral status of comedy, and its social functions, and the two professionals, Waters and Challenor, represent diametrically opposed views of comedy – the former expresses his view of comedy as being morally liberating, the latter sees it simply as a business, a means of making money and worldly success. When the trainee comedians ask Waters what this man Challenor is like, he side-steps the issue, merely giving an oblique, veiled criticism:

Waters – “Well, put baldly, if I've done a job with you lot, he'll see it, and he won't like it. That's all.”

In a sense Waters comes to represent a hopelessly idealistic stance regarding the function of comedy in our society – he has tried to teach his 'pupils' ethics as well as comic techniques but after all, they want to learn a trade, a profession, to earn money, not to be Good Men. The implication must be a complex one, that Waters represents positive values but has nevertheless shirked some responsibility, that of teaching his 'pupils' the nature of the trade – which is to 'give the people what they want', and what they want is not ethics, but 'entertainment', to laugh, not to consider what it is that they are laughing at.

The group settles down to a 'warm-up' of their acts prior to the actual performance, extemporising their comic routines. And their routines expose the heart of the contradiction which is comedy – laughter at the expense of other people, amusing unethical stories. (There is a flaw in the play at this point – if Waters has indeed taught them this is not the case). The bulk of the 'pupils' react with the stock-in trade humour of the conventional stand-up comic – prejudice, sexual innuendo against women, ridicule of the weak, the different, the odd. Except for one of the group, Gethin Price, who attempts to construct an act out of social irresponsibilities. In this part of the play we have a precise (and ironically enough, amusing) illustration of the ways in which humour reveals unwittingly the mind that makes it. This point is given vicious elaboration by Waters himself, who imitates the performances in a matter-of-fact tone:

Waters – “I've never liked the Irish you know. Dr Johnson said they were a very truthful race, they never spoke well of each other, but then how could they have? ..... Big, thick, stupid heads, large cabbage ears, hairy nostrils, daft eyes, flapping hands, stinking of oil and Guinness. The niggers of Europe.....

“They have this greasy quality, do Jews. Stick to their own. Grafters. Fixers. Money. Always money. Say Jew, say gold..... Hitler put it more

bluntly: 'If we do not take steps to maintain the purity of the blood, the Jew will destroy civilization by poisoning us all.' The effluent of history. Scarcely human. Grubs.

"Workers. Dirty. Unschooled. Shifty. Grabbing all they can get. Putting coal in the bath. Chips with everything. Chips and beer. Trade Unions dedicated to maximising wages and minimizing work....."

This calculatedly disgusting parody of the performances of his group of 'pupils' meets simply with puzzlement from them what is Waters getting at? This again seems a flawed moment in the play – if Waters has been teaching them over a period of time then it's impossible that this conflict between his liberal, humanist, generously balanced view of comedy and their view of it (the conventional exploiting of the defenceless and socially ostracised) should not have been dealt with before – either he would have stopped teaching them or they would have altered their acts. But this flaw does not devalue the conception of the play as a whole.

Waters goes on to elaborate his conception of the moral function of comedy:

Waters – "A real comedian – that's a daring man.... what he sees is a sort of truth, about people, about their situation, about what hurts or terrifies them.... A joke releases the tension, says the unsayable, any joke pretty well. But a true joke, a comedian's joke, has to do more than release tension, it has to liberate the will and the desire, it has to **change the situation**..... when a joke bases itself upon a distortion... and gives the lie to the truth so as to win a laugh and stay in favour, we've moved away from a comic art and into the world of 'entertainment' and slick success."

Waters reveals in this speech the kernel of his antagonism towards Challenor (a dramatic conflict) and towards humour without ethics (a dramatised conflict of ideas). The comic for Waters is a healing agent, and the comedian has the responsibility of both a teacher and a doctor (both comparisons are made) – both of which professions have ethical connotations at the centre of their *raison d'être*. Waters again:

Waters – "A joke that feeds on ignorance starves its audience. We have a choice. We can say something or we can say nothing. Not everything true is funny, and not everything funny is true. Most comics feed prejudice and fear and blinkered vision, but the best ones, the best ones.... illuminate them, make them clearer to see, easier to deal with."

The first appearance of the London agent, Challenor, displaces these notions immediately, dissipates them as though they were puffs of smoke. His first words to the group are

"Going to give me a good show then?"

and

"I'm looking for someone who sees what the people want and knows how to give it to them... they demand, we supply..."

and dramatically and intellectually morality is brought face to face with market values, and also, contradictorily, reality. For Challenor comedy is neutral as to responsibility, social criticism, personal integrity; the only values he recognises are those pragmatic



virtues of 'knowledge of the market'. It is not difficult at this point to see the play as having fundamentally not an ethical intention (in the sense that a Morality play might have) but a more broadly ethical motive, that of bringing into emotional conflict ethical idealism with a version of amorality, setting them up in opposition like two antitheses, Waters against Challenor. The denouement is to be in the hands of the third central character, Gethin Price, one of the pupils, who will come to represent a synthesis of sorts.

In act two we see the 'live performances' of the 'pupils', in a setting which has the aura of a working-men's club. The first to go on is Mick Connor, an Irishman, who attempts an unsatisfactory compromise (not a synthesis) between Waters and Challenor, trading on his Irishness, but also at the same time trying to undercut his jokes against the Irish. The next act is that of the Jewish Samuels. No compromises here: his act is full of anti-jewish jokes (one of the black ironies of *Comedians* is the way in which Griffiths has the various performers making obscene comedy against the race or class they derive from), miser jokes, money jokes, racist jokes. But Griffiths doesn't set Samuels up to be simply dismissed, he permits the act to have real professionalism, in much the same way that genocide can be conducted efficiently. Griffiths comments on this particular contradiction, the desire to laugh at the obscene, in this way:

Some of the things you find funniest you also find most reactionary, most supportive of prejudice. You get absolutely trapped inside a sort of dialectic; what the man is telling you is that it's right to despise Pakistani immigrants. Yet he makes you laugh with the proposition, not at it.<sup>19</sup>

The next act we see is that of two brothers, Phil and Ged Murray, who make another ineffectual attempt (like Connor) at a compromise between ethics and 'realism', with the result that their act falls apart after a depressing joke against Pakistanis:

Phil – This Pakistani, see, up on a rape charge. So they decide they'll have an identity parade. They get eight Pakis and they put this one at the front and explain what they're doing. Then they bring in the girl and the Pakistani shouts" (Pakistani voice) "She's the one officer. No doubt about it..."

The contradiction of the funny and the disgusting occupying the same psychological space is also one of the important ethical issues that Griffiths is trying to get us to consider, in a way unlike other dramatists. The final act of all, that of another Irishman, McBrain, is simply without alleviating polish of technique: he has the distinction of achieving three racist and one sexist joke in four lines.

These acts represent a dramatisation of the spectrum of possibilities between the two positions of Waters and Challenor, ranging from weak compromise to acceptance of the philosophy of Challenor – no-one adopts the idealist stance of Waters. They launch a relentless assault on the audience/s – on the putative audience, and on the audience to *Comedians*, thus enabling Griffiths to dramatise his ideas and also to challenge the audience of his own play. It is always an interesting question, when *Comedians* is performed to an audience without previous knowledge of the play, as to how the audience will react to the unmitigated prejudice of the first four performances. The performers, Connor, Samuels, the brothers Murray, and McBrain, continually ask the two audiences 'Do you like that?' in connection with the prejudiced jokes they tell,

thus drawing into the conspiracy of prejudice the audience of **Comedians** – a technically brilliant device. But the brilliance of this contrivance is emotionally overshadowed by the shock of the final performance, that of Gethin Price. He rejects the whole tangled nastiness of the stand-up routine, with its conventions of sexual innuendo and racialism, offering instead the performance of a social critique, through mime and monologue. He enters dressed as a football supporter, one of the most iconically aggressive non-military costumes we now possess. A spotlight illuminates a pair of dummies, male and female, in evening dress. He tries to strike up a conversation with them, in his role as football supporter, inarticulate, cocksure, confused, half-friendly and half-prepared for a fight. No finer non-naturalist representation of a class gulf can be imagined, in all its disturbing, menacing power. Of course the dummies can't speak to him, nor can he communicate with them – they are after all only dummies. But above the literal truth is hovering a frightening reality, that of absolute distance between different worlds. Price makes a final gesture of communicative friendship, by pinning a flower to the breast of the woman. But the dummy bleeds, and Price cries out wildly in horror. At this point we can only share his despair at the sheer meaninglessness of this symbol of unnecessary pain and non-communication. He recovers, and manages to turn it into a joke, spitting out,

Who needs them? ... we manage... You won't keep us down with the tiddlers, don't worry. We're coming up there where we can gerrat yer!"

These are his first words directly spoken to the audience, and they amount to an onslaught not only on class distinction, but also on prejudice in general. Griffiths has indicated the source of this episode;

Grock\* used to get a middle-class stereotype on stage and just reduce this person to nothing, to a point where it wasn't even funny, just painful. And the straight man would become so distressed that he would refuse to speak. Then Grock would become incredibly alone: in fear of the void. And he'd try to make the man laugh, and finally manage it, and then the thing would be sealed and healed.<sup>20</sup>

But there is no sealing and healing in Price's act, no synthesis of this kind, no false easing of the pain. But a synthesis is made, between the ethical impetus of Waters, and the pragmatic realism of Challenor, in that Price has posited the need to destroy the gulf between classes (and obviously, individuals) through recognition of the gulf in the first place. The initial impact of what Price performs is literally shocking, in the context of what has gone before. For what he has done is to break the unwritten rules of politeness (which we have seen are obscene though conventionally acceptable), substituting for them something which has more than a grain of truth but is nevertheless unacceptable – it was certainly unacceptable for the early audiences of **Comedians** in London.

The concluding Act, following immediately Price's performance, is inevitably something of an anti-climax. Challenor gives his 'analysis' of the performances, dismissing Price's act as 'repulsive' (as did much of the audience at the first performance of the

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\* A unique early clown who used mime to convey tragi-comic aspects of life. Grock (real name Adrien Wetlach) was born in Switzerland in 1880, and died in 1959. Like many great clowns, he created humour out of failure and absurdity.

play, thus falling into the prejudicial clichés that the play has as one of its prime targets). Challenor, offering work to Samuels and McBrain, the two who came closest to his market values, reveals the sum of his wisdom to the group, his 'Four Golden Rules'.

One. All audiences are thick, collectively, but it's a bad comedian who lets 'em know it. Two, Two laughs are better than one. Always. Three. You don't have to love the people, but the people **have** to love you. Four. Sell yourself. If you're giving it away, it won't be worth having.

The crucial dialogue at the end is of course between Waters and Price. Waters declares that Price's act was "brilliant" but "ugly"

Waters – "It was drowning in hate. You can't change today into tomorrow on that basis. You can't forget a thing called ... the truth"

The ethical idealist is offended by a moral outburst, even though Price tells him that for him the truth is ugly, and the play is a testament to exactly that thesis. The morality of success is immorality, and there is no "sealing and healing" between the positions of Waters and Price either. The audience of *Comedians* is left by Griffiths with only questions, no facile answers, to real problems, rather in the way the best teaching leaves students with a sense of the complexity of problems and not with a complacent sense of having answered everything. But then, Griffiths is a rare teacher in English drama today.

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> see Leavis, pp. 67–68
- <sup>2</sup> *Look Back in Anger* was first performed in England in 1957, and *Waiting For Godot* saw its English debut in 1956.
- <sup>3</sup> Edward Bond would no doubt feel that it was a misdescription of his work to link it in this way with Absurdist drama, but there are strong elements of the Absurd in all his work, and his play *Early Morning* seems very sub-Beckettian.
- <sup>4</sup> Trevor Griffiths has written nine stage plays to date, the most important of which after *Comedians* are *Occupations* (1970), *Sam, Sam*, (1969), *The Party* (1972) and *All Good Men* (adapted from a TV play of the same name in 1975). A comprehensive list of his work can be found in *Theatrefacts* volume III. An interesting commentary on the influence of Beckett and Pinter on recent English drama is that Griffiths' first stage play, *The Wages of Thin* (1969) has the same Kafkaesque quality of Pinter's *The Birthday Party*, which constriction Griffiths managed to dispense with rapidly.
- <sup>5</sup> Several of his best plays have been written specifically for television; perhaps the hardest-hitting is *Through The Night*, a play about enforced mastectomy, which had an audience of over twelve million when first screened, thus confirming in part his feelings about the potentialities of television. *Comedians* has just recently been shown on British television.
- <sup>6</sup> Hunt, Albert. "A Theatre of Ideas". *New Society*. 16 Jan. 1975, pp. 138–140.
- <sup>7</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>8</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>9</sup> *Occupations*, pp. 50.
- <sup>10</sup> Hunt, loc. cit.
- <sup>11</sup> MacGrath, John. "The Case Against Naturalism". *Sight and Sound*.
- <sup>12</sup> Lovell, Alan. "Brecht in Britain". *Screen*.
- <sup>13</sup> *The Party*.
- <sup>14</sup> Griffiths, T. *Plays and Players*. July 1974.
- <sup>15</sup> *Comedians* The play was first performed at the Nottingham Playhouse on 20th February 1975.
- <sup>16</sup> *Plays and Players*. July 1974.

- <sup>17</sup> *Plays and Players*. April 1972.  
<sup>18</sup> *Times Educational Supplement*. 21 July 1978. p. 16.  
<sup>19</sup> *Plays and Players*. July 1974.  
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### TREVOR GRIFFITHS - WSPÓŁCZESNY DRAMATURG ANGIELSKI

#### Streszczenie

Niniejszy artykuł ma na celu przedstawienie wykładowcom dramatu angielskiego w polskim środowisku akademickim dorobku nowego, ciekawego i stale rozwijającego się angielskiego dramaturga oraz zasugerowanie im, że najnowsza twórczość dramatyczna zaczyna wylamywać się spod dominującego w ostatnich latach wpływu Osborne'a i Pintera. Griffiths jest dramaturgiem współczesnym w tym sensie, że próbuje zająć się współczesnymi problemami społecznymi, a jednocześnie wywołać reakcję intelektualną i zaangażowanie w swe sztuki.

Artykuł zaczyna od podkreślenia wagi wnikliwej oceny najnowszej literatury, przypominając następnie pokrótce nagły wzrost i upadek zainteresowania dorobkiem Beckett'a i Osborne'a. W dalszym ciągu rozpatrywana jest oryginalność sztuk Trevora Griffiths'a w kontekście współczesnej dramaturgii angielskiej. Autor sugeruje, że Griffiths jest pisarzem dydaktycznym lecz jednocześnie nie dogmatykiem. Uwaga autora koncentruje się na sztuce "Comedians"; choć wspomina on też inne godne uwagi sztuki tego samego dramaturga.

Najwięcej miejsca poświęcił autor dyskusji i analizie najważniejszej w dotychczasowym dorobku Griffiths'a sztuki "Comedians". Artykuł prezentuje centralne motywy i najważniejsze momenty sztuki łącząc tę prezentację z dyskutowanymi uprzednio poglądami Griffiths'a. Autor podkreśla, iż zachęcenie czytelnika do przeczytania prac Griffiths'a byłoby dlań miarą sukcesu niniejszego artykułu.