

Through  
the Night  
**Such  
Impossibilities**

*Two Plays for Television by*

Trevor  
Griffiths

# **Through the Night** **and** **Such Impossibilities**

*Two Plays for Television*

by

**TREVOR GRIFFITHS**

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THROUGH THE NIGHT

and

SUCH IMPOSSIBILITIES

*by the same author*

**THE PARTY**

**COMEDIANS**

**ALL GOOD MEN and ABSOLUTE BEGINNERS**



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## AUTHOR'S PREFACE

Of all the outlets available to a playwright for his work, television seems to me at once the most potent and the most difficult; the most potent and *therefore* the most difficult, one's inclined to add. Film boasts a 'global audience' (as one celebrated English director put it, perhaps as a way of justifying his new Californian existence) but has never afforded the writer a status in the power-structure much above that of, say, a second-unit director. With relatively few exceptions, film uses (and has usually always attracted) writers for whom wealth\* and ease and a certain sort of localised (i.e. American) celebrity are or have become inseparable from the writing impulse itself; so that the consequential loss of regard (and self-regard) will be measured against more tangible and presumably more consumable gains. The global audience will then be surrendered by the writer to the expert ministrations of other 'ideas men': studio chiefs ('We could have bought into North Sea oil with what we paid for this shit'), distributors ('It's too long/short/frank'), directors ('Do I get the cut?'), stars ('I know what they want. They want me.') and so on.

Theatre is in important ways the converse; that's to say, while at its most secure it offers the writer a greater degree of control than any other medium over the production of his work, it is incapable, as a social

\* The current top-price for a screenplay that's made into a film is around 400,000 dollars and perhaps 5% of the gross profit. Most screenplays are never made, of course; another aspect of writer's impotence.

institution, of reaching, let alone *mobilising*, large popular audiences, at least in what is more and more desperately referred to as the Free World. Success in the theatre can confer fame, prestige, wealth, critical acclaim and a place in literature, but all of them will be pickled in a sort of class aspic. To write only for the theatre is to watch only from the covered stand; you stay dry but there's a pitch dividing you from another possible, and possibly decisive, action on the terraces.

There are fewer cinemagoers in Britain now than there are anglers; fewer regular theatregoers than car-rallyers. For most people, plays are television plays, 'drama' is television drama (though it's a word used almost exclusively by those responsible for *production*, rarely if ever by audiences). A play on television, transmitted in mid-evening on a weekday, will make some sort of contact with anything from three to twelve million people (twenty if it's a series), usually all at the same time. And the *potential* audience, because of television's irreversibly network nature, is every sighted person in the society with a set and the time and desire to watch. Not surprisingly, a medium as potentially dangerous as this one will need to be *controlled* with some rigour and attention to detail. 'To inform' and 'to educate' may well be in the charter alongside 'to entertain', but information that inflames and education that subverts will find its producers facing unrenewed contracts and its contributors mysteriously dropped. (Who took the decision, and on what grounds, not to repeat the brilliant *Days of Hope*? Or not to renew the contract of Kenith Trodd, producer of *Leeds United* and the suppressed *Brimstone & Treacle*?) It would be odd, of course, if it were otherwise. In a society predicated on the exploitation of

the many by the few, in a world a large part of which operates according to precisely the same capitalist principle, yet where the necessary tactical avowal of democratic process has led to its actualisation, however shallowly, and not always so, in the minds and actions of the exploited, the shaping of consciousness, the erection of the superstructure of consent, will become the major cultural concern of the state and the dominant class or classes it represents. What Enzensberger calls 'the consciousness industry' (cf. H. M. Enzensberger: 'The Industrialization of the Mind' in *Raids & Reconstructions*, Pluto Press, 1976) has become, more than steel, coal or oil or motorcars, the critical industry in the efficient management of modern societies, capitalist and Stalinist alike; as television has increasingly come to be located as that industry's key sector.

The constraints and difficulties of writing for television can then be easily described. Certain sorts of 'language', certain sorts of subject, certain sorts of form - an urban terrorist saying 'Fuck off' straight to camera pithily embodies all three - will inevitably trigger discreetly placed control - mechanisms on the floor above the floor you're working on. And a writer's arguments *ad rem* or *hominem* will never be enough to overcome the blandly prepared positions of a Television Controller. (Theatres have directors; films have chiefs; only television has the need and the confidence to let nomenclature reveal function in this way.) Yet in important ways, the experience cannot be reduced to the simple equation of company diktat = writer's accommodation, as many talented writers and intellectuals of the left have for too long tried to assert, in a puny apology for a theory of the media. For one thing, as Enzensberger

points out, a communications system beyond a critical size cannot continue to be centrally controlled and must then be dealt with statistically. 'This basic "leakiness" of stochastic<sup>\*</sup> systems admittedly allows the calculation of probabilities based on sampling and extrapolations; but blanket supervision would demand a monitor that was bigger than the system itself.... A censor's office, which carried out its work extensively, would of necessity become the largest branch of industry in its society.' Moreover, direct leakage is not the only sort: for example, the 'meanings' or 'messages' of plays are often encoded in such a way that the controllers of television output are incapable of decoding them with any precision. (In particular I'm thinking of plays where working-class idioms, speech patterns, behaviours suggest one thing but imply, by defensively developed irony, something quite other, which only a person of that class or with a deep knowledge of it could be expected to recognise readily. I suspect much of *Bill Brand* worked in very much that way, with a working-class audience.)

To argue, then, as many still do, that television is part of a *monolithic* consciousness industry where work of truly radical or revolutionary value will never be produced is at once to surrender to undialectical thought and to fail to see the empirical evidence there is to refute such an argument. If the medium weren't of the highest critical importance in the building and maintenance of the structures of popular consent, there'd be no need for controllers; conversely, the presence and activity of controllers rigorously monitoring and modifying the nature of the output is one index among many

\* i.e. systems based on *conjecture* rather than certainty.

of the medium's importance. To work in television as a playwright will be to seek to exploit the system's basic 'leakiness', so as to speak intimately and openly, with whatever seriousness and relevance one can generate, to (though it must in time be with) the many millions of cohabitants of one's society who share part of a language, part of a culture, part of a history, with oneself; as not so to work, the opportunity there, will be to settle for less, a sheltering myopia or praise from the cell.

And let there be no cant, finally, about television's 'moving wallpaper', about 'advertising fodder' and the 'manipulable masses' and all the rest of the sad copy of minds tired of the problem and eager for revenge on those who would not listen. 'The "telly-glued" masses do not exist; they are the bad fiction of our second-rate social analysts. What the masses, old or new, might do is anybody's guess. But the actual men and women, under permanent kinds of difficulty, will observe and learn, and I do not think that in the long run they will be anybody's windfall.' The words are Raymond Williams's and, as with so much he has written in the last twenty-five years, I wish they were mine.

The two plays contained in this volume were conceived and written for television. *Through the Night* was transmitted on BBC-1 on 2 December 1975, to an estimated audience of more than eleven million people, and is scheduled to be repeated in August of this year. Close to a hundred phone calls were 'logged' by the BBC's duty officer on the night of its broadcast; the producer's office and *Radio Times* received a heavy postbag during the following weeks; and I received personal mail amounting to some 180 letters. The *Sunday People* opened its columns to readers inviting them to send in their own experiences of

mastectomy treatment. More than 1,800 letters were received over the next ten days. Few critics saw (or at least wrote about) the piece; and the critic of *The Observer* spoke for many, perhaps, when he said: 'I found this week's episode of *The Nearly Man* by Arthur Hopcraft sufficient excuse for not watching *Through the Night* (BBC-1), a Trevor Griffiths play about breast cancer which I lacked the nerve to face.' It is, without question, my best-known piece.

*Such Impossibilities* was written in 1971, commissioned by the BBC as part of a series entitled *The Edwardians*. Though I had explained at some length what I wanted to write, the play was rejected and has never been seen. The ostensible grounds were cost - they often are - but it's at least as likely that the play offered too brutal and too overtly political a contrast with the remainder of the series, which included, if you remember, pieces on E. Nesbit, the Countess of Warwick, Marie Lloyd, Baden-Powell, Conan Doyle, Horatio Bottomley, Rolls-Royce and Lloyd George. Tom Mann might well have roughed the series up a bit, but it's arguable he might also have done something towards redressing its 'balance' too. Still, it must count, till now at least, as a failure. Should it ever be produced, it can then be tested against the severest of its intentions: to restore, however tinily, an important but suppressed area of our collective history; to enlarge our 'usable past' and connect it with a lived present; and to celebrate a victory.

Trevor Griffiths  
Leeds, 14 February 1977

**THROUGH THE NIGHT**



*Through the Night* was first shown on BBC TV in December 1975. The cast was as follows:

CHRISTINE POTTS	Alison Steadman
DR PEARCE	Jack Shepherd
MR STAUNTON	Tony Steedman
DR SEAL	Thelma Whiteley
MRS SCULLY	Anne Dyson
ANNA JAY	Julia Schofield
JOE POTTS	Dave Hill
SISTER WARREN	Andonia Katsaros
NURSE O'MALLEY	Phylomena McDonagh
STAFF NURSE BRENTON	Sheila Kelly
NURSE CHATTERJEE	Rebecca Mascarenhas
REGISTRAR	Richard Wilson
NIGHT SISTER	Patricia Leach
THEATRE SISTER	Wendy Wax
NIGHT NURSES	Sue Elgin, Angela Bruce, Anna Mottram
ANAESTHETIST	John Rowe
DR MOUNT	Richard Ireson
LUCY	Jeillo Edwards
PORTER	Louis Cabot
MRS GOODWIN	Anna Wing
MARTHA PAISLEY	Jane Freeman
OUTPATIENTS SISTER	Rachel Davies
AUXILIARY	Barbara Ashcroft
TEA-LADY	Shirley Allen
RELIGIOUS VISITOR	Peter Lawrence

MOTHER

Kathleen Worth

WOMAN PATIENT

Myrtle Devenish

JOAN

Jeanne Doree

AGNES

Lucy Griffiths

Script Editor

Colin Tucker

Designer

Sue Spence

Producer

Ann Scott

Director

Michael Lindsay-Hogg