

Tony Garnett, *The Day the Music Died: A life Lived Behind the Lens* (London: Constable, 2016), pp. 306, ISBN 9781472122711 (pb), £9.99; ISBN 978-1-47212-273-5 (hb), £20.00

The previous issue of the *Journal of British Cinema and Television* carried a fascinating interview with the producer Tony Garnett, all of whose best-known television work as either producer or executive producer was made for the BBC, and the current issue carries a substantial review of Patrick Barwise and Peter York's book *The War against the BBC* (2020), so this is an opportune moment to review, albeit belatedly, Garnett's autobiography *The Day the Music Died: A Memoir*.

By no means all of the book concerns Garnett's life in television (and, of course, film too). Indeed, it's not until p.118 (of 306) that he starts work at the BBC as an assistant story editor on *The Wednesday Play*. A significant amount of the first part of the book is taken up with the devastating personal consequences of his mother dying from septicaemia when he was five, following a then-illegal abortion, the subsequent suicide of his father, and, in 1963, his partner Topsy Jane having a nervous breakdown from which she never fully recovered, not least as she was subjected to ECT and the pharmacological equivalent of being repeatedly coshed on the head. And a good deal of the later part is concerned with his attempts – finally successful, via years of therapy with the great Charles Rycroft – to come to terms with these appalling events.

There are, however, important links with his television and film work here, as his mother's death made him utterly determined to include the controversial abortion scene in *Up the Junction* (1965), on which he was story editor. As he says: 'This scene alone would have persuaded me the film must be made ... I would have cut off my arm to get that scene in front of the public (141). Similarly, his detestation of what he calls the 'ignorant, pseudo-scientific assault' (111) on Topsy in the name of 'therapy' was at the root of his request to David Mercer to write the screenplay for what would turn out to be *In Two Minds* (1967). This concerns a young woman mis-diagnosed as 'schizophrenic', and although the actual story was based on a case history in

R.D. Laing's *The Divided Self* (1960), Garnett avers that 'I did it for Topsy, for her lost life, for the future that we didn't have together' and that 'I was sure we were doing a service in illustrating that ECTs and crude pharmacological interventions were not the only options' (172). Topsy's fate and her experience of the psychiatric profession was also the spur for the cinema film *Family Life* (1971), which Garnett produced and Ken Loach directed from another screenplay by Mercer.

Turning to Garnett's experiences at the BBC, what is particularly striking is the highly nuanced way in which he writes about them. His period at the BBC (1966 -78, with a short break to help set up Kestrel Films) is neither an evocation of a 'Golden Age' of television drama nor a catalogue of rows and bust-ups, although there are elements of both. On the one hand, his entry into the institution is remarkably informal and un-bureaucratic: the story editor Roger Smith introduces him to the producer Sydney Newman who 'shook my hand in a fatherly way and the three of us began work on *The Wednesday Play*' (120). He notes that the then Director-General, Sir Hugh Carleton Greene, aided by the Controller of Television, Stuart Hood (a Marxist no less!) and others 'had clearly noticed social trends and was busy trying to persuade Aunty to get rid of the corset and try a mini-skirt. He was opening up recruitment to a wider background' (121). In particular, Garnett celebrates the what he calls 'the capacity to allow' (141) which he contrasts with the top-down management style which later badly damaged the BBC's creativity. Producers were left to do their jobs, and if they thought there was a potential problem, they were trusted to refer upwards. Of course, this is where the real problems could set in, but Garnett concludes that 'despite all the battles caused by me pushing my creative freedom to the BBC's limits I was allowed to produce films which would be killed at pitch stage in today's BBC' (172).

In this respect Garnett's description of how he came to commission the first BBC productions by the then unknown Mike Leigh and Les Blair is both instructive and amusing.

Having watched their aptly titled film *Bleak Moments* (1971), curious about their ideas and impressed by their seriousness and principled dedication to their methods – namely ‘hire a group of actors and pay them to rehearse for three months in the hope there might be a film to shoot at the end of this improvisation’ (208) – he gave them a production each, which would become *Hard Labour* and *Blooming Youth* (both 1973). When Garnett casually told the head of plays, Gerald Savory, to whom he formally reported, what he was working on, his response was a slightly bemused: ‘Well ... Jolly good luck’. As Garnett describes the process:

This was management by benign neglect. Something we might recommend to the management consultants like McKinsey. Only the BBC would take that chance. Who would risk funding a cast and director without a track record for months on the small chance of a film worth shooting at the end? (208)

But of course, and as is now well-known, Garnett faced numerous problems and became involved in various rows – the vast majority of them involving the politics of the works that he produced. The start of *The Wednesday Play* was delayed by three months, although this had less to do with politics than economics, as the Channel Controller, Donald Baverstock, thought single plays to be too costly. As Garnett explains:

We knew he didn’t want single dramas. None of them do. They’re expensive – no economies of scale, each a one-off – and renewable one-hour series and soaps guarantee larger audiences. Of course, we now know that battle is long over. But those who mourn the loss of single dramas do not know how long the battle raged. (131-2).

An early Dennis Potter *Wednesday Play*, *Vote, Vote, Vote For Nigel Barton*, for which Garnett was script editor, ran into problems when BBC Current Affairs objected to the negative representation of a Labour constituency agent (125). There were the now much-rehearsed rows over ‘fiction posing as fact’ and ‘left-wing bias’ (151-7), whose flames were assiduously fanned by the right-wing press, specific instances discussed by Garnett being *The Big Flame* (1969)

(161-6), *Days of Hope* (1975) (211-19) and *Law and Order* (1978) (224-9). The vexed question of MI5 blacklisting of BBC personnel – in this case Roland Joffé and Roy Battersby – is also discussed (231-4), although the existence of this shameful practice wasn't publicly admitted by the BBC until it was famously revealed by Paul Lashmar and David Leigh in the *Observer* in August 1985.

What is clear from the book is that the reason why Garnett, a committed socialist, could survive, and indeed prosper, within an institution such as the BBC in the 1960s and 1970s was that he had a really incisive understanding of its politics. This meant that he knew which battles were winnable, and which were not, and how best to fight the former. He fully understood that 'there was some suspicion, indeed, resentment of working-class ruffians, especially of ones like Roger and me, coming in on raiding parties' (121), but he also knew, as indicated earlier, that people like Greene and Hood were keen to revitalise the Corporation with new blood. Most people with whom he came into contact were not particularly right-wing (as many of them would undoubtedly be today) but were from middle- or upper middle-class backgrounds, traditionalists who were

keen to absorb the BBC ethic. This embraced modest, socially liberal attitudes but didn't rock the boat ... Most were natural establishment characters who didn't want to tarnish their reputations as they proceeded up the ladder. As the saying went, 'They knew how to behave' and it became second nature. (121-2)

But for those like Garnett who did want to rock the boat and didn't want to 'behave', the BBC's modestly liberal ethic, allied with its belief, however illusory, in its political independence, opened up a space in which someone as politically aware and institutionally adept as Garnett could work. As he put it: 'I realized how complex, flexible and sophisticated the BBC was: a reliable part of government that not only managed to pretend it was independent and separate from the power of Whitehall but also believed it' (123). He also understood that 'it contained all

that was good and bad in the inheritance of the BBC's first Director General, John Reith'. The good, in Garnett's view, was a conception of broadcasting as 'an equalising, democratic force', and on his arrival there he decided that he would energetically 'pursue Reith's ideals, but perhaps not in the way he would have tolerated' (123).

In the early 1980s Garnett moved to America, where he wrote, produced and directed the still-underrated *Handgun/Deep in the Heart* (1984) and produced *Follow that Bird* (1985), *Earth Girls Are Easy* (1988) and *Fat Man and Little Boy* (1989). On his return to the UK in the early 1990s he was invited to become head of Island World Productions, an independent production company co-owned by John Heyman's World group of companies and Chris Blackwell's Island Records. When Blackwell sold Island in 1994 the company became simply World Productions. Garnett's first production was the Barry Hines-authored single drama *Born Kicking* (1992) for the BBC Screen One strand, but from now on he was for the first time to concentrate as producer or executive producer on series/serial dramas, made mainly for the BBC, such as *Between the Lines* (1992-4), *Cardiac Arrest* (1994-6), which gave Jed Mercurio his first break, *This Life* (1996-7), *Ballykissangel* (1996-2001) and *The Cops* (1998-2001).

Even this abbreviated list of productions represents a quite remarkable achievement by any standards, and it shows Garnett using popular genres and the series/serial format in order to engage with social and political subjects just as effectively as he utilised the single drama format to the same ends in the 1960s and 1970s. It is thus rather to be regretted that the parts of the book which deal with this period of his career do not go into more detail about his working methods at World Productions, and, in particular, how he produced such an intensely creative working environment. But what does come across very clearly is that he was above all a great facilitator, and knew exactly how to put together an effective production team. As he says, my job was 'to use my experience to guide them and to bolster their courage, to help them express themselves

(289). In particular, he wanted to allow people the opportunity to fail, and, by doing so, to learn from their failures. As he puts it:

If you want to learn anything, you have to risk going down in flames. Playing safe is treading water, which is in itself a failure. This is something television management has forgotten. I wish they would think more about nurturing young talent through creative failure. That's how talent find itself. Its absence is the reason for so much drama being boring and predictable. (290)

To this end, Garnett decided to free World Productions of management, 'one of biggest con tricks of the last century. We had efficient business systems, of course. But I replaced management with leadership, self-management and creative freedom' (299). As will already be apparent, intense dislike of rigid and bureaucratic management structures is very much a leitmotif of Garnett's autobiography, but he doesn't reproduce here his famous malediction on its steely grip on the latterday BBC (and indeed on all other public institutions), which is in some ways a pity, as it deserves far wider circulation than it currently enjoys (it can be accessed here: <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2009/jul/15/tony-garnett-email-bbc-drama>). Of course, since Garnett wrote this, in 2009 in the dying days of the New Labour government, the situation has grown infinitely worse, so perhaps it's just as well that this inspiring work doesn't end on what would have been a very bum note indeed.