

Dennis Potter: An Unconventional Dramatist

Dennis Potter (1935–1994), graduate of New College, was one of the most innovative and influential television dramatists of the twentieth century, known for works such as single plays Son of Man (1969), Brimstone and Treacle (1976) and Blue Remembered Hills (1979), and serials Pennies from Heaven (1978), The Singing Detective (1986) and Blackeyes (1989). Often controversial, he pioneered non-naturalistic techniques of drama presentation and explored themes which were to recur throughout his work.

I. Early Life and Background

He was born Dennis Christopher George Potter in Berry Hill in the Forest of Dean, Gloucestershire on 17 May 1935, the son of a coal miner. He would later describe the area as quite isolated from everywhere else ('even Wales').¹ As a child he was an unusually bright pupil at the village primary school (which actually features as a location in 'Pennies From Heaven') as well as a strict attender of the local chapel ('Up the hill . . . usually on a Sunday, sometimes three times to Salem Chapel . . .').² Even at a young age he was writing:

I knew that the words were chariots in some way. I didn't know where it was going ... but it was so inevitable ... I cannot think of the time really when I wasn't [a writer].³

The language of the Bible, the images it created, resonated with him; he described how the local area 'became' places from the Bible:

Cannop Ponds by the pit where Dad worked, I knew that was where Jesus walked on the water ... the Valley of the Shadow of Death was that lane where the overhanging trees were.⁴

I always fall back into biblical language, but that's ... part of my heritage, which I in a sense am grateful for.⁵

He was also a 'physically cowardly'⁶ and 'cripplingly shy'⁷ child who felt different from the other children at school, a feeling heightened by his being academically more advanced. At the age of 10, when the family were temporarily living in London, he was a victim of sexual abuse at the hands of his uncle. He referred to this in 1993, describing how:

... without ... any ability to tell my mother or my father [and] between V.E. Day and V.J. Day, I was trapped by an adult's sexual appetite and abused out of innocence.⁸

¹ James MacTaggart Memorial Lecture, 27 August 1993.

² Interview with Melvyn Bragg, Channel 4, March 1994.

³ Interview with Alan Yentob, 'Arena', BBC2, 1987.

⁴ Interview with Melvyn Bragg, Channel 4, March 1994.

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ Interview with Alan Yentob, 'Arena', BBC2, 1987.

⁷ Interview with Melvyn Bragg, Channel 4, March 1994.

⁸ James MacTaggart Memorial Lecture, 27 August 1993.

The experience, unsurprisingly, was to have a profound effect on Dennis Potter, and this was to manifest itself not only in his character, his perceived attitude to sex and his relationships with other people, but also in his dramatic writing. He noted that the great bulk of his work was:

... about the victim, someone who cannot explain, cannot put into the right words, or even cannot speak at all.⁹

Such victims (of all types) are indeed seen time after time in his plays and serials.

Following his 2 year National Service, which saw him at the Intelligence Corps and the War Office in Whitehall, Potter came up to New College in 1955 via a scholarship to study Philosophy, Politics and Economics (PPE). While at Oxford he took an active role at the Oxford Union and the Oxford Labour Club, as well as the college and university Drama Societies, and became editor of 'The Isis' magazine.

Despite this activity, Potter found life at Oxford difficult owing to the fact he felt as though he were caught between two worlds – the poor, rural one of his youth and upbringing, and that of privilege and status in which he suddenly found himself. He referred to this struggle in a television documentary, 'Does Class Matter?', made while he was at Oxford in 1958. In 1978 he described how, during that interview, he had commented that his father now asked him questions through his mother, reflecting the gulf that had appeared to open up between them following Dennis' advancement to Oxford.¹⁰

It is too easy to accuse others of betrayal when you are not ready to acknowledge your own ... Teachers love to get their hands on a bright and pliant child ... You are first made to feel a little different, and then you want to be different ... you do not for a long time realise what you have lost.¹¹

Potter described in several interviews his feeling that he had betrayed his working-class background and values, his parents and particularly his 'shy, gentle' father, by going to university at Oxford and pursuing a career in writing. He said it had intimidated his father, even to the point that he was 'almost scared of me.'¹² This sense of 'betrayal' clearly stayed with Potter and it became a theme, in various forms, in many of his works:

You cannot betray and be comfortable with the betrayal, and it's pointing out or observing ... that can give some of the spring and tension in the drama.¹³

Potter was to claim that the writing of 'Stand Up, Nigel Barton' (1965) came from his desire to expunge his shame and guilt over the comments he made about his father in that documentary.¹⁴ This play, and its sequel, 'Vote, Vote, Vote for Nigel Barton' (1965), clearly draw on Potter's experiences at Oxford and later as a parliamentary candidate, the key scene coming where Potter has Barton participating in virtually the same television interview in which he had himself appeared.

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ 'The South Bank Show' with Melvyn Bragg, London Weekend Television [LWT], 11 February 1978.

¹¹ James MacTaggart Memorial Lecture, 27 August 1993.

¹² Interview with Melvyn Bragg, Channel 4, March 1994.

¹³ Interview with Alan Yentob, 'Arena', BBC2, 1987.

¹⁴ 'The South Bank Show' with Melvyn Bragg, LWT, 11 February 1978.

The spires of Oxford had been ‘not so much dreaming as calculating.’¹⁵ On the back of articles he wrote for ‘The Isis’ and ‘New Statesman’, and believing it was a field in which he would be effective, he decided to enter politics in ‘an indecently short time.’¹⁶ He eventually graduated from New College in 1959 with a second class degree and married his long-term girlfriend Margaret, who was also from the Forest of Dean, the same year.

His first encounter with the BBC came in 1959, when he joined the Television Talks Department, worked on the current affairs programme ‘Panorama’ and became fascinated by the process by which programmes were made.¹⁷ Potter published his first book, ‘The Glittering Coffin’, in 1960, a study of the changing state of British culture since the end of World War II, which he had actually written while still at Oxford. Also that year he made a documentary for the BBC about life in the Forest of Dean, ‘Between Two Rivers’, on which he based his second book ‘The Changing Forest’, published in 1962. The early 1960s saw Potter appearing on the BBC book review programme ‘Bookstand’, as well as working at the newspaper The Daily Herald (which became The Sun in 1964). A fellow journalist, David Nathan, collaborated with him on writing sketches for the famous satirical BBC TV show ‘That Was The Week That Was’ in 1963.

The years 1961-62 also saw the onset of ‘psoriatic arthropathy’, an acute form of psoriasis, that severely affected his skin and contributed to arthritis of his joints. This condition would plague Potter for the rest of his life, resulting in a number of prolonged stays in hospital. Unsurprisingly illness, both physical and mental, would be another major theme running throughout his work.

In the 1964 General Election Potter stood as the Labour Party candidate for the Hertfordshire East constituency. Losing to the Conservatives, Potter later claimed he was so disillusioned by politics that he didn’t even vote for himself!¹⁸ As a result he turned his back on both that and journalism—he was to later declare of his time at The Daily Herald that he had ‘hated every second of it.’¹⁹ Suffering increasingly from the effects of his skin condition, thus rendering a public life impossible anyway, he set out to carve a new career for himself. He later described how he:

... had the opportunity of reassembling myself from what I hesitate to call scratch. I had the chance of making myself up all over again ... In any form of personal crisis, all kinds of memory and aspiration, hope and disappointment, grief and bloody-mindedness fly up at you ... And in that unbidden mix ... I began at last, and seriously, to make links that I had studiously or even furtively avoided making for too long.²⁰

He also declared that:

... the invention of the self became a fundamental physical necessity for me. At the same time came the knowledge of what the so-called significance of my life was supposed to be. The two things came together.²¹

Potter’s belief in ‘the self’ is something to which this article will return.

¹⁵ James MacTaggart Memorial Lecture, 27 August 1993.

¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁷ Interview with Alan Yentob, ‘Arena’, BBC2, 1987.

¹⁸ *Potter on Potter*, ed. G. Fuller (London: Faber, 1993).

¹⁹ Interview with Melvyn Bragg, Channel 4, March 1994.

²⁰ James MacTaggart Memorial Lecture, 27 August 1993.

²¹ *Potter on Potter*.

His chosen method of achieving these very personal goals was to be via the creation of fictional worlds and people – he became a television playwright. He explained why he chose television (over theatre or novels) in several later interviews. It was:

... far and away the most important of the mass media,²²

a medium that was available to anyone and everyone. It was:

... a medium of great power, of potentially wondrous delights that could slice through all the tedious hierarchies of the printed word and help to emancipate us from many of the stifling tyrannies of class and status and gutter-press ignorance.²³

WORKS Part 1

THE CONFIDENCE COURSE (BBC 1965)

Potter's first television play (now unfortunately lost) was transmitted as an instalment of BBC1's 'The Wednesday Play' on 24 February 1965. A take on the self-improvement courses of Dale Carnegie, its use of characters speaking directly to the viewing audience, especially the unseen narrator, pioneered the non-naturalistic techniques for which Potter would become renowned.

ALICE (BBC 1965)

This play, an early example of Potter's interest in the theme of childhood, followed the relationship between Charles Dodgson, aka Lewis Carroll (George Baker) and Alice Liddell, his inspiration for the character of Alice in 'Alice in Wonderland'. It drew criticism from the family of Dodgson and publisher Macmillan, for the depiction of that relationship.²⁴ There is undeniably a suggestion in the play that Dodgson had feelings for Alice that were potentially more disturbing than mere friendship.

STAND UP NIGEL BARTON/VOTE, VOTE, VOTE FOR NIGEL BARTON (BBC 1965)

These semi-autobiographical works, also for 'The Wednesday Play', star Keith Barron as Nigel Barton, the son of a miner, and follow his experiences first at Oxford University and then when standing as a Labour party candidate in a General Election. While attracting critical acclaim, the plays proved controversial within the BBC itself for sailing dangerously close to the mark politically. 'Stand Up' not only saw Potter have Nigel 'breaking the fourth wall' (speaking direct to camera) but also, in flashbacks to his youth, use adult actors to portray children for the first time – this device would be seen at its most powerful 14 years later in 'Blue Remembered Hills'.

EMERGENCY WARD 9 (BBC 1966)

This drama, for 'Thirty Minute Theatre', is a study of race and class as seen through the eyes of patients in a men's ward of a London hospital.

²² 'The South Bank Show' with Melvyn Bragg, LWT, 11 February 1978.

²³ James MacTaggart Memorial Lecture, 27 August 1993.

²⁴ W. Stephen Gilbert, *The life and work of Dennis Potter* (Overlook 1998, quoted on Potter's Wikipedia page).

WHERE THE BUFFALO ROAM (BBC 1966)

Hywel Bennett plays a teenage social outcast with learning difficulties, who retreats into a Wild West fantasy life, culminating in a violent end when he goes on a rampage with a gun. The character who has one foot in the real world and the other in a world of fantasy, seen here for the first time, would reappear many times in Potter's works.

MESSAGE FOR POSTERITY (BBC 1967)

A parliamentary committee commission a portrait as a memorial to a former Prime Minister, but the artist's views and values are diametrically opposed to those of his subject. The subject of the portrait was supposedly based on Churchill, resulting in much rewriting and delays from a worried BBC.²⁵

THE BONEGRINDER (ASSOCIATED REDIFFUSION 1968)

This play saw Potter move to ITV for the first time. Interviewed in 1993, Potter suggested this was prompted by the BBC's rejection of his script for 'Cinderella', conceived as a Christmas special for 'The Wednesday Play'.²⁶ 'The Bonegrinder' is notable not only for the themes of sexual betrayal and guilt, but also because it was effectively the first of Potter's 'visitation' plays: those in which a disruptive stranger enters an apparently respectable household or community and proceeds to destabilise it, breaking down the façade to reveal the concealed or repressed malaise beneath. The figure here of Sam, an American seaman who works his way into the home of middle-class George King (George Baker), who in turn is retreating from his loveless marriage into the arms of prostitutes, represents the concern Potter had at the time about the intrusion into English life of American culture and consumerism.²⁷ Potter's own view of the play was that it was 'a shoddy, unthinking piece of work . . . mere prejudice.'²⁸

SHAGGY DOG (LONDON WEEKEND TELEVISION [LWT] 1968)

A polemic about corrupt and inefficient management and practice in business. An unstable man ends his frustrating job interview by shooting his interviewers and jumping from a window to his death.

A BEAST WITH TWO BACKS (BBC 1968)

A fictionalized retelling of a legend from Potter's own Forest of Dean from the 1890s, when local villagers stoned to death some dancing bears owned by a group of itinerant Frenchmen. A variation on the 'visitation' device, the play's themes include xenophobia and racial prejudice within an isolated rural community, as well as infidelity, guilt and the plight of the isolated.²⁹

MOONLIGHT ON THE HIGHWAY (LWT 1969)

The first dramatic use of popular music in Potter's writings, utilizing the music of 1930s jazz singer Al Bowlly, to whom Potter himself would listen and whose music he would reuse in later works, most

²⁵ Dave Evans, 'Message for Posterity'. The Official Dennis Potter Website.

²⁶ *Potter on Potter*.

²⁷ Dave Evans, 'The Bonegrinder'. The Official Dennis Potter Website.

²⁸ *Potter on Potter*.

²⁹ Dave Evans, 'A Beast with two backs'. The Official Dennis Potter Website.

notably in 'Pennies from Heaven'. The character of David Peters (played by Ian Holm) was, like Potter himself, a victim of childhood sexual abuse. Peters uses his obsession with Bowllly's music to articulate feelings he cannot express himself and, at the end of the play, high on a mixture of alcohol and prescription drugs and surrounded by members of the Bowllly appreciation society, his 'friends', he reveals his dark secret: that he has slept with 136 prostitutes. Having kept the secret for so long, he is relieved to have finally made his confession ('I've said it! I've said it!').

II. Potter and: Sex & Human Relationships

Potter's childhood abuse almost certainly contributed to an unsettled attitude to sex. His timidity and extreme shyness as a child, a condition which he claimed stayed with him his entire life, not to mention having to daily cope with a debilitating illness, would also have had an affect on his ability to form relationships with other people including, maybe especially, women. Kenith Trodd opined that Potter's relationship with his soon-to-be wife while at Oxford meant that he bypassed much of the 'sexual trauma' others contended with, and this too maybe contributed to problems later in his life.³⁰ Certainly the themes of sex (and, more especially, his characters' attitude to it) and sexual abuse would recur in many of his works.

The abuse suffered by David Peters in 'Moonlight on the Highway', and the way he kept it secret for so long, clearly mirrors Potter's; is it coincidence that they share the same initials? Potter's long-term producer Kenith Trodd has claimed that, like Peters, Potter himself confessed to having visited many prostitutes while living in London in the 1960s.³¹ Trodd also noted that Potter himself had repeatedly said that writers are liars! Potter's biographer, Humphrey Carpenter, stated his belief that there is some truth to the claim but that Potter then built up the experiences into an 'obsessive nightmare', which manifests itself in his works.³²

In 'Double Dare' (1976), the meeting of actress Helen and author Martin (Alan Dobie), who has invited Helen to a hotel to discuss a role in his new play, appears to be mirrored by that of a businessman and prostitute Carol – the latter are seemingly manifestations of Martin's characters. After Martin supposedly hears the businessman assaulting Carol in the next room, he finds Helen on his own bed, raped and strangled. The play is based on an actual meeting, alone in a hotel, that Potter arranged with actress Kika Markham, who plays both female roles in the play.³³ Markham, who has said that much of the dialogue between Helen and Martin was lifted from that meeting,³⁴ was understandably wary about Potter's motives and the purpose of the meeting.

It seemed to me that one of Dennis's preoccupations was, where do the boundaries begin and end and, also, who controls what . . . You can push people about on a page [but] actually we are real people . . . and we can say no and we can argue back . . . I think that he did write with truth, and unpleasant truth, about his desires.³⁵

Markham believed that, having the prostitute and the actress being played by the same person, Potter was intending the former to represent the side of the latter's personality who would do literally anything for money—and that this represented his opinion of actresses!

³⁰ 'Up Close: Dennis Potter: Under the skin', BBC TV, 1998

³¹ *ibid.*

³² *ibid.*

³³ *ibid.*

³⁴ John Williams, 'Double Dare'. BFI Screen Online.

³⁵ 'Up Close: Dennis Potter: Under the skin'.

Potter's biographer Humphrey Carpenter has said that:

He was always ... looking at himself in the mirror while doing things. He became acutely conscious of this and it works itself into the plays ... It meant that he had curiously artificial human relationships with people, who had a sense that he'd written a script for them before he'd ever met them. You became figures in his drama – but he was a figure in his drama himself.³⁶

Gareth Davies, who directed many of Potter's early plays, parted company with the writer after 1970's 'Angels are so Few', as the ambivalent sexual themes of that play alienated him. In Humphrey Carpenter's biography, he expressed his dislike of Potter's depiction of women, claiming the writer had said that 'I can create women who do what I want.'³⁷

The idea that Potter was placing people, including himself, as figures in a world of his own fantasies perhaps reached its apotheosis with his 1989 serial 'Blackeyes'. An author writes a novel about the experiences of a young model called Blackeyes, a character who it turns out is based on the life of his own niece, Jessica. Potter's intention with the serial was to show how a male society portrays women as sexual commodities, as consumer goods, in everything from advertising to fiction and, in showing it, to condemn it. He decided to direct the series himself and also added a narrative voice-over commenting on the drama, and he voiced this himself.

The television critics savaged the serial and its extensive nudity and sex, condemning it as soft pornography, with reviews ranging from The Daily Express's 'the world's most complicated porn film' to The Sunday Times' 'porno twaddle', while some papers attacked the author on a personal level, The Evening Standard calling him 'a dirty old man'. Potter himself said later that, while 'Blackeyes' was about alienation, in this respect it was:

... so successful it alienated every f—ing person who ever saw it!³⁸

Piers Haggard, director of 'Pennies from Heaven', has said that the problem lay with the fact that, while the serial intended to show and thus damn the male obsession with the female form, it actually only showed the obsession itself.³⁹ In this respect, Potter personally performing the voiceover only added to the feeling that the audience was being let in on his own views and fantasies. Gina Bellman, who played Blackeyes, was not so sure that this wasn't actually the case. Even though she was portraying a fictional person, she believed the lines definitely blurred between Potter's relationship with the character on the page and that with the actress *playing* that character, and that Potter was to a degree obsessed with her.⁴⁰

I was completely unknowingly ... living out this fictitious fantasy that he'd written, which is really quite chilling when I discovered that that was the case.⁴¹

This echoes Kika Markham's views on 'Double Dare'. Renny Rye, director of 'Lipstick on your Collar', told how new drugs became available to treat Potter's condition in the 1980s, and these

³⁶ *ibid.*

³⁷ Ian Greaves, 'British Television Drama: Angels are so Few'. www.britishtelevisiondrama.org.uk

³⁸ *Potter on Potter*.

³⁹ 'Up Close: Dennis Potter: Under the skin'.

⁴⁰ *ibid.*

⁴¹ *ibid.*

allowed him to shake off the life of seclusion and enter 'the real world'. However he lacked the 'protective layer' most people naturally have to combat the pressures of that world.⁴² As a result, he did not know how to effectively interact and co-operate with people – director Jon Amiel has spoken of his 'combative' relationship with people, especially long-time collaborator Kenith Trodd, who finally parted company with Potter in the pre-production of 'Blackeyes'.⁴³ Humphrey Carpenter has said Potter needed someone to question him.⁴⁴ On 'Blackeyes' he was in full control, and it all went too far.

Sex itself is portrayed in ambivalent terms in many of Potter's works reflecting both a horror of, and a fascination with, the act itself. The disgust the 'angel' Michael feels for it in 'Angels are so Few' (1970) is countered by his seduction by frustrated housewife Cynthia. In 'Follow the Yellow Brick Road' (1972), Jack Black's distaste and inability to consummate his marriage has driven his wife to have several affairs. The rape of the disabled girl in 'Brimstone and Treacle' (1976), an act of 'evil', brings about her healing and recovery. The quiet and apparently virginal Eileen, Arthur Parker's lover in 'Pennies from Heaven' (1978), ends up selling herself to earn them some ready cash. Philip Marlow in 'The Singing Detective' (1986) confronts his disgust with the act itself via passages of what would now be called 'bad sex' in his own novel.

It is notable, too, how few wedded couples in Potter's works have happy, impassioned marriages. George King in 'The Bonegrinder' (1968) visits prostitutes for his sexual gratification. Tom Bates in 'Brimstone and Treacle' is revealed at the end of the play to have had an affair, his daughter's discovery of which lead to her accident. In 'Only Make Believe' (1973), Christopher Hudson's wife has already left him. The only passion in Tom and Elizabeth's marriage in 'Schmoedipus' (1974) is Tom's for his train set. Arthur Parker's frustration with his frigid wife Joan in 'Pennies from Heaven' drives him into the arms of the more liberated Eileen. Two couples are linked by faithlessness in 'Rain on the Roof' (1980). The young Philip Marlow witnesses his mother's infidelity with her lover in 'The Singing Detective'.

Potter's own marriage, to Margaret, with whom he had three children, was strong, lasting until Margaret's death mere days before his own, and he clearly relied on it:

The love of my family, and the steadfastness of my wife Margaret in particular, became for a long while the only or major defence against a near-total reclusiveness.⁴⁵

Kenith Trodd stated his belief that, while he found it hard to 'philander', Potter did find a monogamous relationship difficult to accept. Sex, and sexual liberation, Piers Haggard believed, was important to Potter himself and in his work.⁴⁶

WORKS Part 2

SON OF MAN (BBC 1969)

'Son of Man', depicting the last days of Jesus Christ as played by Colin Blakely, resulted in Potter incurring the wrath of TV clean-up activist Mary Whitehouse for the first time, when she accused him of

⁴² *ibid.*

⁴³ *ibid.*

⁴⁴ *ibid.*

⁴⁵ James MacTaggart Memorial Lecture, 27 August 1993.

⁴⁶ 'Up Close: Dennis Potter: Under the skin'.

blasphemy. At a time when the depiction of Jesus on film was almost universally (some may say overly) reverential, Potter's Christ is a passionate, almost wild, and decidedly human figure, racked by self-doubt and fears, certainly not a man of miracles, a carpenter who recognizes the quality of the wood used to construct his own cross, and desperate to get over his message of universal love. Certainly the stark ending, with no sign of resurrection, was revisionist in the extreme for the time.

LAY DOWN YOUR ARMS (LWT 1970)

Drawing on Potter's National Service as a Russian language clerk at the War Office, the play tells of Robert Hawk, mocked for his working-class background and pretending to be people he is not. Potter would rework this play into 'Lipstick on your Collar' 23 years later.

ANGELS ARE SO FEW (BBC 1970)

Returning to the 'visitation' device, Potter's story tells of Michael (Tom Bell) who arrives in a suburban street, convinced he's an angel. His desire to be one is linked, however, to his view of sex as a dirty, undesirable part of life. Frustrated housewife Cynthia (Christine Hargreaves), however, sees Michael's arrival as too good an opportunity and seduces him, causing him to lose his faith.

PAPER ROSES (GRANADA TELEVISION 1971)

An embittered veteran journalist (Bill Maynard), now reduced to more trivial pieces, remembers better days working on his Fleet Street newspaper. Flashback, voice-overs and a surreal ending featuring a TV critic commenting on the play itself all feature in Potter's attack on tabloid journalism.⁴⁷

TRAITOR (BBC 1971)

Former British Intelligence controller and Soviet double agent Adrian Harris, a character loosely based on real-life Russian spy Kim Philby, is interviewed by some Western journalists attempting to discover why he became a traitor. Drinking to excess, Harris proclaims himself disillusioned by his aristocratic upbringing and his belief that he has betrayed his class but not his country - an echo again of Potter's own earlier guilt. Potter himself on many occasions professed his love of England and the places he'd known. What interested him here was the idea someone could 'politically betray their country and be presumed not to love it.'⁴⁸ John Le Mesurier, an actor known for his comedic roles, won the BAFTA for Best Actor for his performance.

CASANOVA (BBC 1971)

The 6-part 'Casanova' was a landmark in that it was Potter's first work in serial form. Loosely based on the life of the 18th century Italian adventurer and starring Frank Finlay, Potter saw the story as Casanova's search for freedom and spiritual (via sexual) fulfilment.⁴⁹ Each episode saw Casanova remember his amorous escapades from the cell in which he is imprisoned. The serial was uncompromising in its non-linear narrative structure, flashing between past, present and even future events while the strong sexual content and nudity, unusual for the time, attracted much criticism.

⁴⁷ Dave Evans, 'Paper Roses'. The Official Dennis Potter Website.

⁴⁸ 'Potter on Potter'.

⁴⁹ Dave Evans, 'Casanova'. The Official Dennis Potter Website.

FOLLOW THE YELLOW BRICK ROAD (BBC 1972)

Jack Black (Denholm Elliott) is an actor who believes his life is actually a television play, directed by an unseen author and acted in front of unseen cameras. He prefers commercials to dramas, believing them to represent, through what Potter calls 'those happy families, those sunlit fields, those blue skies and those wondrous jingles',⁵⁰ everything that is good, pure and wholesome in life. In the 'real' world, Jack has lost his faith in God, while his distaste for sex has driven his wife to several affairs. He only finds peace when given a drug called Mogabrium. The final scene of the play reveals Jack acting in a commercial for that very drug, the suggestion being that his 'life' was indeed a play. The character of Jack Black, reaching for an ideal in the world of commercials that doesn't exist, can be seen as an ancestor of Arthur Parker in 'Pennies from Heaven'.

ONLY MAKE BELIEVE (BBC 1973)

Owing to a self-inflicted injury Christopher Hudson (Keith Barron), a writer whose wife has left him for another man, dictates his new play (Potter's own 'Angels are so Few') to a typist to whom he is attracted, but she has no interest in him or his play. Potter declared the play was about 'damage: sexual inhibition and deep sexual anxiety.'⁵¹

JOE'S ARK (BBC 1974)

Pet shop owner Joe Jones (Freddie Jones) has lost his faith in God—his wife has died, his young daughter Lucy is dying of bone cancer and he is estranged from his son Bobby. Prompted by a request from Lucy, a friend tells Bobby of her condition—he returns but not before she dies. However, this leads to a reconciliation with Joe, a new hope for the future.

SCHMOEDIPUS (BBC 1974)

The only passion left in Tom and Elizabeth's marriage is that he has for his model railway. In his absence one day a young man Glen (Tim Curry) appears, claiming to be the son Elizabeth (Anna Cropper) had at 16 after a one-off encounter and was put up for adoption. It later transpires that Elizabeth had actually smothered her son at two days old. Glen is in her mind—the manifestation of the life-long guilt she has carried for what happened. Potter claimed that the idea for the play, another 'visitation', came from the Jewish joke 'Oedipus, Schmoedipus, what does it matter so long as the boy loves his mother.'⁵²

DOUBLE DARE (BBC 1976)

A meeting between an author and an actress is seemingly mirrored by that of a businessman and a call girl. The play recalls 'Follow the Yellow Brick Road' and presages 'Karaoke' (1996), both of which similarly examined the relationship between author and character, and blur the lines between fact and fiction.⁵³

⁵⁰ *Potter on Potter*.

⁵¹ *ibid.*

⁵² *ibid.*

⁵³ John Williams, 'Double Dare'. BFI Screen Online.

BRIMSTONE AND TREACLE (BBC 1976)

The notoriety of this 'Play for Today' was assured when it was banned from screening by the then BBC Director of Programmes (and future Director General) Alasdair Milne. In the play, another 'visitation' piece, Michael Kitchen plays a strange young man who is invited into the house of Mr and Mrs Bates (Denholm Elliott and Patricia Lawrence) whose daughter has been left severely disabled, both physically and mentally, a victim of an accident. The controversy derived from a scene in which the man rapes the daughter, after which she appears to miraculously recover from her disabilities, with the implication being that the young man is in fact the Devil. The play thus inverts the scenario of 1970's 'Angels are so Few', where the 'visitation' is by an (alleged) angel. An audience may expect an angel to do the good thing and heal the girl; it was, Potter said, that 'reversal of what would have been sanctimonious and sentimental'⁵⁴ that upset people. Milne described 'Brimstone and Treacle' as 'brilliantly made' but 'nauseating', and it remained untransmitted by the BBC until 1987.

PENNIES FROM HEAVEN (BBC 1978)

This 6-part musical drama is set in the 1930s and stars Bob Hoskins as Arthur Parker, a sheet music salesman trapped in a passionless marriage, who wishes his life could match the idealistic lyrics of the songs he tries to sell. The serial mixed reality and fantasy, and was the first of Potter's works to feature 'lip-synching', where characters burst into song by miming to contemporary recordings of popular songs. The serial was a great critical and popular success, winning the BAFTA for Most Original Programme, and turning Hoskins into a star. On the songs themselves, Potter noted that they:

... were in a direct line of descent from the Psalms and ... they were actually saying the world is other than it is. The world is better than this ... and he [Parker] believed in them, and that was his tragedy.⁵⁵

BLUE REMEMBERED HILLS (BBC 1979)

A 'Play for Today' evoking childhood during wartime and set in the Forest of Dean one afternoon in the summer of 1943, this play featured an adult cast, which included Helen Mirren, Michael Elphick, Colin Welland and John Bird, all playing children—a dramatic device Potter had previously used in 'Stand Up, Nigel Barton'. Made entirely on location, the play is shocking in its depiction of children's cruelty and bullying, and the effects it has on the victims, all the more so as it is portrayed by adult actors. Potter described how childhood 'is full to the brim of fear, horror, excitement, joy, boredom, love, anxiety.'⁵⁶ He was:

. . . using the adult body as the magnifying glass for ... childhood, of physicality in childhood, emotion in childhood, restlessness, but using that as the reverse of the magnifying glass as well, to make you see how much of it was still in adult life.⁵⁷

BLADE ON MY FEATHER (LWT 1980)

⁵⁴ Interview with Melvyn Bragg, Channel 4, March 1994.

⁵⁵ Interview with Alan Yentob, 'Arena', BBC2, 1987.

⁵⁶ Interview with Melvyn Bragg, Channel 4, March 1994.

⁵⁷ Interview with Alan Yentob, 'Arena', BBC2, 1987.

A deal between Potter's newly-created independent production company, Pennies From Heaven Ltd, and London Weekend Television lead to Potter's return to ITV in 1980. This resulted in three new plays (cut down from the originally planned six). The first is a further 'visitation' play involving espionage, betrayal and political disillusionment, with Tom Conti as the stranger arriving at author Donald Pleasance's home to discover the truth about the writer's past allegiances. Denholm Elliott won the BAFTA for Best Actor as butler Mr Hill.

RAIN ON THE ROOF (LWT 1980)

Another visitation piece, this play features more unhappily married couples, with one husband involved in an affair with the other's wife, the tensions in both marriages revealed by the stranger in their midst.

CREAM IN MY COFFEE (LWT 1980) Winner of the Prix Italia

A study of a relationship between a couple, flashing between their youth in the 1930s and the present day. Favourite themes feature once more, of betrayal (infidelity), illness and memory, set again to contemporary music.

III. Potter and: God

The view in 'Son of Man' of a 'human' Christ figure and no obvious indication of the divine or a life-after-death certainly corresponds with Potter's own stated views about God and religion:

God's a rumour if you like . . . The kind of Christianity, or indeed any other religion, that is a religion because of fear of death, or hope that there is something beyond death, does not interest me . . . religion to me has always been the wound, not the bandage. I don't see the point of not acknowledging the pain and the misery and the grief of the world . . . I see God in us or with us, if I see it at all, as some shreds and particles and rumours, some knowledge that we have, some feeling why we sing and dance and act, why we paint, why we love, why we make art. All the things that separate us from the purely animal in us are palpably there . . . and you can theologize about them and you can build great structures of belief about them.⁵⁸

We hunger for archetypal, universalizable, mythic or near-mythic figures [such as Christ] in order to understand our own dreams and our own mortality.⁵⁹

Many characters in Potter's plays have lost their faith in God. He gave some insight into why this should be when he said:

I am as interested in finding 'the cancer in God' . . . It's simply that ordinary human feeling of being abandoned and betrayed and left to endure. Even if a tree struck by lightning falls across a car, killing a little girl in the back seat, you can't say 'God is working His purpose out.' You can't bellow out one of those hymns and understand why a cat tortures a mouse.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Interview with Melvyn Bragg, Channel 4, March 1994.

⁵⁹ *Potter on Potter*.

⁶⁰ *ibid.*

As Graham Fuller puts it:

In Potter's writing, god (but not God) is always in the details—not a deity waiting in the wings to absolve man of his sins, but a promise of redemption, of wholeness, for those that seek to know themselves by gathering up the fragments of their shattered psyches . . . his writing grows out of a matrix of [Christianity and Marxism], resulting in a deeply felt, humanistic optimism. To understand that optimism, though, often requires a leap of faith . . . that what traditionally passes as 'good' might contain the seeds of 'evil' or vice versa.⁶¹

Some writers have seen the 'visitation' plays as religious in their telling. Potter himself responded that:

... certain structures . . . recur through fiction and parables and tales and dreams. And one of those is certainly the stranger, the visitor'⁶²

By reversing the expected pattern in some of these tales (for example, having the Devil cure a disabled girl rather than an angel),

... it can sometimes make you see the original pattern more closely.⁶³

WORKS Part 3

THE SINGING DETECTIVE (BBC 1986)

After spending the early 1980s developing movie projects, Potter returned to original television drama with this complex multi-layered drama. Michael Gambon portrays Philip Marlow, a man confined to hospital with psoriatic arthropathy, the condition from which Potter himself suffered. While there reality, past and present, merges with fantasy in his mind as he variously remembers events from his childhood during World War II, and immerses himself in his own 'noir' novel, casting himself as the private detective who sings at a dance hall. Actors play multiple parts, fictional and non-fictional characters interact and, as in 'Pennies from Heaven', characters lip-synch musical numbers. A sex scene at the end of one episode invoked the wrath once more of Mary Whitehouse, provoking a storm of controversy. The serial was a major critical success, due in no small part to Gambon's tour-de-force performance. It was eventually adapted into a film starring Robert Downey Jr. in 2003.

Many have believed 'The Singing Detective' to be Potter's most autobiographical work, on account of Marlow suffering from the same disease and the wartime childhood scenes being set in a similar locale to the Forest of Dean (though the script never states that it is). However, Potter claimed that actually:

... it's one of the least autobiographical pieces of work that I've ever attempted.⁶⁴

⁶¹ *Potter on Potter*.

⁶² *ibid.*

⁶³ *ibid.*

⁶⁴ Interview with Alan Yentob, 'Arena', BBC2, 1987.

The whole inner structure of that man is different to me ... He was stripped of everything. He had no faith in himself, no belief in any political, religious or social system. He was full of a witty despair and cynicism. Now I have never been like that . . .⁶⁵

He explained that it was essentially a detective story about Marlow finding himself. It required a crisis, in Marlow's case his illness, to act as a catalyst, fuelling the creation and assembly of the facts, the fantasies and memories, blending and blurring the lines between them, 'and all of them became him and all of them allowed him to walk.'⁶⁶

VISITORS (BBC 1987)

An adaptation of Potter's 1983 stage play, 'Sufficient Carbohydrate', with Potter decrying once more the encroachment of American commercialism and consumerism on British culture, via the rivalry between two businessmen who work for the same food company, one British, one American.

BLACKEYES (BBC 1989)

Adapted from Potter's 1987 novel, this hugely controversial serial concerns an author who writes a novel about a young model who, it transpires, is based on his own niece. Labelling it as merely soft pornography, owing to the copious amount of nudity and sex, the serial was savaged by the critics.

LIPSTICK ON YOUR COLLAR (Channel 4 1993)

Following the critical drubbing that greeted 'Blackeyes', Potter retreated from television for four years. He returned with this reworking/expansion of his 1970 LWT play 'Lay Down Your Arms'. The 6-part romantic comedy drama, set during the Suez crisis of 1956, again utilized the technique of characters lip-synching to contemporary musical numbers, and featured an early starring role for Ewan McGregor as the bored young Russian translation clerk at the Foreign Office in Whitehall who is more interested in girls and rock 'n' roll.

KARAOKE /COLD LAZARUS (BBC/Channel 4 1996)

In his 1994 Channel 4 interview with Melvyn Bragg, Potter revealed he was writing two final TV serials, which he suggested be made jointly by the BBC and Channel 4. The two organisations agreed, the results being 'Karaoke' and 'Cold Lazarus', starring Albert Finney as writer Daniel Feeld. The first serial is set in the present day where events and people in the life of a terminally ill Feeld appear to be mirroring those in the play he has written, the people seemingly speaking the lines he has given his characters. The second serial is set in a dystopian 24th century where a team of scientists is attempting to extract and market Feeld's memories, utilizing his disembodied head which was cryogenically preserved when he died. The two serials were broadcast posthumously on both BBC1 and Channel 4 in 1996.

IV. Potter and: The Media

⁶⁵ Interview with Melvyn Bragg, Channel 4, March 1994.

⁶⁶ Interview with Alan Yentob, 'Arena', BBC2, 1987.

It has already been seen how Dennis Potter fell out of love with politics and journalism, and consequently embraced his chosen outlet of television in the early 1960s. A growing dislike of the increasing level of consumerism and commercialism he saw in British culture also began to manifest itself in his work, perhaps first in 1968's 'The Bonegrinder', embodied by brash American Sam. In his introduction to the published script of 'Follow the Yellow Brick Road' in 1973, he noted that:

. . . the commercials are made with more skill and more resources than the majority of the programmes, and they even say more as well . . . [television] sells aerosoled reassurance during the programmes and aerosoled deodorants in between.⁶⁷

In that same play, Jack Black can only find joy in the unreal world of those commercials – the real world is soiled.

In 1993 Potter delivered the James MacTaggart Memorial Lecture. He pondered what lies at the heart of British society, 'what it means to be a citizen (or do I mean a consumer?) in the United Kingdom plc.' He took the opportunity to describe how, in his childhood, the BBC (here, radio) had been an important part of his life and, indeed, British life:

. . . it was the voices out of the air which, as though by magic, pushed out those constricting boundaries . . . at a crucial period of my life it threw open the 'magic casement' on great sources of mind-scape at a time when books were hard to come by, and when I had never stepped into a theatre or a concert hall . . .

He went on to deliver, to use his own word, a 'polemic' against what he saw as the then-current state of both the BBC and the British media in general. He had just finished making his BBC Films co-production of 'Midnight Movie' and, seeing the Corporation's 'miserably demeaning condition', in terms of the way it was 'now controlled, owned and organized', he laid the blame squarely at the feet of the then Director General John Birt and Chairman Marmaduke Hussey, describing them both as 'croak-voiced Daleks'. With 'a one-way system of communication, . . . the signals being sent down . . . alien and hostile', he saw the 'new management culture' pervading the Corporation 'as it trims down its staff almost as fast as it loses its viewers', as demoralizing and stifling the creativity of those people making the actual programmes.

The Corporation has already been driven onto the back foot by the ideology-driven malice of the ruling politicians, and its response has been to take several more steps backwards, with hands thrown up.

Likening 'Management Culture' to 'the bacteria proliferating around a wound', he also declared that:

Our television has been ripped apart and falteringly re-assembled by politicians who believe that value is a monetary term only, and that a cost-accountant is thereby the most suitable adjudicator of what we can and cannot see on our screens. And these accountants . . . are employed by new kinds of Media Owners who try to gobble up everything in their path . . . No individual, group or company should be allowed to own more than one daily, one evening and one weekly newspaper. No newspaper should be allowed to own a television station, and vice-versa.

⁶⁷ Potter in R. Muller, ed., 'The Television Dramatist', Paul Elek 1973, quoted in: Dave Evans, 'Follow the Yellow Brick Road', The Official Dennis Potter Website.

In this he was, of course, referring to Rupert Murdoch—and said so.⁶⁸ When Murdoch himself had delivered the McTaggart lecture some years before, Potter said it was:

... the kind of peroration I would like to hear him deliver from the scaffold ... Put Rupert Murdoch on public trial, and televise every single second of it. Show us who is abusing us, and why.

A month after his diagnosis with terminal pancreatic cancer in February 1994, Potter was interviewed by Melvyn Bragg for Channel 4. Bolstered by occasional doses of liquid morphine to counteract his pain, he noted that he had named his cancer 'Rupert', after Murdoch:

There is no one person more responsible for the pollution of what was already a fairly polluted press, and the pollution of the British press is an important part of the pollution of British political life.⁶⁹

No one could accuse Potter of not going down fighting! One final point should also be made, regarding his relationship with TV clean-up activist Mary Whitehouse. Despite her attacking his works almost throughout his writing career, he did actually have a degree of respect for her and did not join in, what he called, abusing her:

At least she acknowledges the central moral importance of ... art.⁷⁰

Conclusion

Dennis Potter died on 7 June 1994, nine days after his wife Margaret had lost her own battle against breast cancer. In the 30 years between 1965 and 1994, he had created 28 single plays and 11 serials (including adaptations), along with screenplays for 8 movies.

The use of non-naturalistic devices—actors lip-synching to recorded songs, flashback and non-linear storytelling, characters speaking direct to the camera, adult actors portraying children, actors playing multiple roles—has become synonymous with his works.

The same themes and devices recur throughout his work:

- Betrayal, in various forms, and subsequent guilt: marital infidelity in many plays & serials, betrayal of one's class *and* country in 'Traitor'. Potter once said that 'betrayal is the long receding prism of human life. It's the truth about us.'⁷¹
- Childhood: 'Alice', 'Stand Up, Nigel Barton', 'Blue Remembered Hills', 'The Singing Detective'.

⁶⁸ Potter also mentioned that Murdoch had previously announced his intention to fund the 'Murdoch Chair in Language and Communications' at Oxford University. Apparently he sent Kelvin MacKenzie, editor of 'that daily stink they call The Sun', to the ceremonial dinner, where he sat with two professors. 'Well, that was one set of cutlery not needed on the crisp linen ... I hope for the sake of all concerned that both the professors were from the Anthropology faculty.' What, one wonders, would Dennis Potter make of the reason for MacKenzie's recent sacking from, or 'parting company with', The Sun?

⁶⁹ Interview with Melvyn Bragg, Channel 4, March 1994.

⁷⁰ 'The South Bank Show', London Weekend Television, 11 February 1979

⁷¹ *Potter on Potter*.

- Illness, both physical and mental: 'Emergency – Ward 9', 'Where the Buffalo Roam', 'Moonlight on the Highway', 'Brimstone and Treacle', 'The Singing Detective', 'Karaoke'.
- Memory and memories: 'Stand Up, Nigel Barton', 'Moonlight on the Highway', 'Casanova', 'The Singing Detective'.
- The entrance of the disruptive stranger: 'The Bonegrinder', 'Angels are so Few', 'Schmoedipus', 'Brimstone and Treacle', 'Blade on my Feather', 'Rain on the Roof'.
- The blending of reality/truth and fantasy/illusion: 'Where the Buffalo Roam', 'Double Dare', 'Pennies from Heaven', 'The Singing Detective', 'Blackeyes', 'Karaoke'.

Other favourite themes include political disillusionment and wariness of consumerism and commercialization.

When speaking of his decision to abandon politics and journalism, he declared that: 'The invention of the self became a fundamental physical necessity for me'. Potter reiterated this concept when asked how he expressed 'true values' in his work:

Principally by showing or attempting to assert how sovereign you are as an individual human being, if you knew it. And that means contending with all the shapes ... all the memories, all the aspirations of your life – what, how they coalesce. How they contradict each other, how they have to be disentangled ... by you yourself. This sovereign self beyond, behind all those selves that are being sold things, remains the unique, sovereign, individual.⁷²

He stated his aims on writing 'The Singing Detective':

What I was trying to do with [it] was to make the whole thing a detective story, but a detective story about how you find out about yourself, so that you've got this superfluity of clues, which is what we all have, and very few solutions—maybe no solution—but the very act of garnering the clues and the very act of remembering, not merely an event but how that event has lodged in you and how that event has affected the way you see things, begins to assemble a system of values, and only when that system ... is assembled was Marlow able to get up out of his bed, which is why it isn't about psoriasis or psoriatic arthropathy—or detectives or that particular childhood, but about the way we can protect that sovereignty that we have and this is all that we have and it is the most precious of all the human capacities, even beyond language ... Out of this morass ... of evidence, the clues and searchings and strivings, ... we can start to put up the structure called self ... out of which ... we can walk ... saying at least ... you know better than before what it is we are.⁷³

Potter stated that 'The Singing Detective' was not autobiographical because Marlow's 'inner structure' was not the same as his. But this concept of a person's 'sovereign self' was clearly central to Potter's character and philosophy. The coalescence of memories, experiences, emotions (positive and negative), illnesses, hopes, dreams—the way a person assembles and structures these in their mind allows that person to truly know who they are and allow them to be at peace with themselves. The theme of needing to come to terms with oneself and the world one inhabits is a recurring aspect of Potter's characters.

⁷² Interview with Alan Yentob, 'Arena', BBC2, 1987.

⁷³ *ibid.*

When asked whether he felt he had been ‘daring’ in the writing of his plays, he stated that it was never a conscious or deliberate intent on his part to innovate or ‘break the mould’:

That’s the only thing I really resent ... I have never felt the need to do that ... the mould, if broken on any one point, has come out of the need to do what I was doing. Not, ‘How do I break the mould?’ It’s the other way round, so things have happened.⁷⁴

At the end of his life, and speaking of his chosen career, he said:

I do have a sense of vocation ... I will have it to the last ounce of my life, the last second ... and I’m proud that I’ve got it ... and it was writing.⁷⁵

OTHER WORKS

ADAPTATIONS

A Tragedy of Two Ambitions by Thomas Hardy (BBC 1973, for the series ‘Wessex Tales’)

Late Call by Angus Wilson (BBC 1975; 4 episodes)

Where Adam Stood: based on ‘Father and Son’ by Edmund Gosse (BBC 1976)

The Mayor of Casterbridge by Thomas Hardy (BBC 1978; 7 episodes)

Tender is the Night by F. Scott Fitzgerald (BBC 1985; 6 episodes)

Christabel: adapted from the memoirs of Christabel Bielenberg (BBC 1988; 4 episodes)

FILMS, NOVELS, PLAYS

Pennies from Heaven (1981): screenplay, based on his 1978 BBC serial.

Brimstone & Treacle (1982): screenplay, based on his 1976 BBC play.

Gorky Park (1983): screenplay, adapted from the novel by Martin Cruz Smith

Dreamchild (1985): screenplay. A fantasy: like ‘Alice’ (BBC 1965), inspired by the story of Alice Liddell.

Track 29 (1987): screenplay, based on his 1974 BBC play ‘Schmoedipus’.

Secret Friends (1991): directed by Dennis Potter, screenplay from his novel ‘Ticket to Ride’.

Midnight Movie (1994): screenplay

Mesmer (1994): screenplay

Hide & Seek (1973): novel. As in ‘Follow the Yellow Brick Road’, the main protagonist here believes he is a character, this time in a book, whose life is being manipulated by an unseen author.

Pennies from Heaven (1981): novelization

Ticket to Ride (1986): novel

Blackeyes (1987): novel

Sufficient Carbohydrate (1983): stage play

Postscript

An article of this length on Dennis Potter cannot aspire to be fully comprehensive, but it is to be hoped that the reader will have gained some appreciation for both the man and his works. It seemed

⁷⁴ Interview with Melvyn Bragg, Channel 4, March 1994.

⁷⁵ *ibid.*

appropriate to take a decidedly non-linear approach to the writing. It is my intention that the reader may approach the biographical sections and those on the works separately if they so wish, and they will work as individual entities. At the same time, the piece should be more informative, and hopefully interesting, when both are read together. I hope I have succeeded in this goal.

Jason Morgan
Assistant Librarian

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