

13/17

Tony Garnett: Seeing Red

The first ever retrospective of the controversial producer of TV dramas including *Cardiac Arrest*, *The Spongers*, *Law and Order* and *This Life*



2 April 2013, London. In a career that has spanned over 50 years, **Tony Garnett** remains at the heart of all that is best and most controversial about British television drama. To quote former BBC Director General Mark Thompson he is “simply the best television drama creator and producer there has been.” For the first time this intensely private man has agreed to a full review of his remarkable career and throughout May and June **BFI Southbank** will embark upon the most complete retrospective of his work to date. This will also include **Tony Garnett In Conversation** on **Tuesday 4 June**, a rare chance to see Garnett discuss his remarkable career onstage with writer and broadcaster **Mark Lawson**.

For Garnett, television was and is an important means by which to challenge the status quo and make a direct connection with the widest possible audience across the social spectrum – ‘the National Theatre of the air’. His work remains wholly relevant today, highlighting contemporary issues such as the welfare state (***The Spongers***, BBC, 1978), prostitution (***Prostitute***, 1980), worker’s rights (***The Big Flame***, BBC, 1969 and ***Days of Hope: 1926 (The General Strike)***, BBC, 1975), police corruption (***Law and Order***, BBC, 1978), bureaucracy in the NHS (***Cardiac Arrest***, BBC, 1994), rape and gun control (***Handgun***, Kestrel Films, 1982). The issues that his work has raised over the years are now even more pertinent, and this is precisely why Garnett has chosen this moment to speak out about his work:

"It gives me no pleasure that these films are now even more contemporary than when first shown. It fills me with shame. Society is retreating; painfully achieved gains in dignity and mutual support are swept away; everything and everyone are commodified and our humanity is reduced. Misery and despair are ignored by shiny wealth. But there is no alternative. We must renew our fight for humanity. We are truly all in this together".

Garnett's work is always fervently political and never fails to ask difficult questions of the government and the state; he asserts that trying to get these kinds of dramas made today would be simply impossible. His 2009 critique of the BBC's management structure and commissioning process, comparing it to that of the 1960's, elaborates on this: 'It was largely management by benign neglect...but it allowed creativity to breathe, calmly accepted that failure was one of the prices of success and had faith enough in its people not to micromanage them.'

Focusing on Garnett's rarely seen works rather than the more frequently screened (such as *Kes* and *Cathy Come Home*), Part One of the season deals largely with radical plays of the 60s and 70s which were made with collaborators such as **Ken Loach**, **David Mercer**, **Jim Allen** and **Roland Joffé**. During the season three of Garnett's collaborations with Ken Loach will be screened: ***In Two Minds*** (BBC, 1967), ***The Big Flame*** (BBC, 1969) and ***Days of Hope: 1926 (The General Strike)*** (BBC, 1975). *In Two Minds* is a powerful examination of the link between mental illness and the family environment while *The Big Flame* dramatizes the dockers taking over the Liverpool docks and declaring a soviet. *The Big Flame* so enraged Mary Whitehouse that she dubbed it 'a blueprint for the communist takeover' and wrote to both Prime Minister Harold Wilson and Conservative leader Ted Heath to urge a review of the BBC's charter. Meanwhile *Days of Hope: 1926 (The General Strike)* tackles this pivotal moment in recent British history and was dubbed by Garnett as 'a warning for the future' only a few years before the UK Miner's Strike of 1984-5. Garnett worked with both Mike Leigh and Roland Joffé in the early stages of their careers, providing Leigh with his big break ***Hard Labour*** (BBC, 1973) and Joffé's first full length play ***The Spongers*** (BBC, 1978). The latter was set against the backdrop of the 1977 Queen's Jubilee celebrations and focuses on the plight of a single mother of a disabled child as she struggles against proposed benefit cuts. With searing contemporary relevance given the recent cuts to benefits, it remains one of the most important plays of the 1970s.

Part Two of the season in June will focus on the latter part of Garnett's career. At the end of the seventies Garnett produced ***Law & Order*** (BBC, 1978), which dealt with institutional corruption within the police force. *Law and Order* was directed in a documentary style by director **Les Blair** and was a great critical success, creating huge controversy with questions being asked in the House. Also directed by Les Blair was ***Blooming Youth*** (BBC, 1973), an account of everyday life in a 70s student flat which makes for a revealing comparison with the young professionals in Garnett's ***This Life*** (BBC, 1996) some 25 years later and which came to define a whole generation. With the fortunes of the single drama on the decline, and a sharp move to the right following the election of Margaret Thatcher, Garnett decided to spend a decade working in the US, during which time he wrote and directed ***Handgun*** (1982). As well as being a critique of US gun culture *Handgun* addressed women's exploitation, an issue that also concerned Garnett in his film ***Prostitute*** (1980). Shot in his home town of Birmingham, *Prostitute* was both written and directed by Garnett and employed a clever mix of professionals and non-professionals to create a completely authentic feel to the prostitutes' world and the pressures to which they were subject.

On Garnett's return to the UK in the late eighties he established *World Productions* through which he produced a highly successful run of programmes using what he describes as the "Trojan horse" method of production. Now that TV was dominated by genre forms (the medical drama, the police procedural and so on) he was canny

enough to embrace the outward form of the genre whilst maintaining a high level of meaning and controversy in the content. With productions such as **Cardiac Arrest** (BBC, 1994), **Between the Lines** (BBC, 1993) and **The Cops** (BBC, 1998), he reinvented the medical drama and the police procedural respectively, removing the soap elements and adding layers of depth and his trademark gritty realism. The season will also offer audiences a rare chance to hear Tony Garnett speak about his career in **Tony Garnett In Conversation with Mark Lawson** on **Tuesday 4 June**.

Tony Garnett will be available for interview, please make any requests to Liz Parkinson – Assistant Press Officer, BFI Southbank.

The season will be accompanied by a BFI Mediatheque collection featuring some of Tony Garnett's finest work.

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Screenings taking place in the season:

In Two Minds

BBC 1967. Dir Ken Loach. With Anna Cropper, Brian Phelan, George A Cooper, Helen Booth. 72min
David Mercer's script is a powerful examination of the link between mental illness and the family environment. Katie feels she cannot cope in the outside world. Through a series of interviews and dramatized incidents, the malign force of her mother is revealed. Loach and Garnett once again champion those who have no voice in society.

+ The Parachute

Play of the Month. BBC 1968. Dir Anthony Page. With John Osborne, Alan Badel, Jill Bennett, Lindsay Anderson. 76min

David Mercer's savage and erudite script is served perfectly by an outstanding cast and Page's imaginative and subtle direction. Set in Germany in 1940, it ostensibly tells the story of aristocrat Werner and his complex relationship with his aloof father. On a much wider level it cleverly elucidates German history and the culture that led to the atrocities of the war. In its fine poetic expressionism the play contradicts our stereotypical view of Garnett's work as being exclusively concerned with social realism.

Wed 1 May 17:50 NFT2

Hard Labour

Play for Today. BBC 1973. Dir Mike Leigh. With Liz Smith, Clifford Kershaw, Alison Steadman, Ben Kingsley. 70min

Liz Smith perfectly captures the daily grind for a woman trapped by poverty and a loveless marriage. As she services their every want, those closest to her seem impervious to her own needs. A brilliant cast makes this an affecting account of one woman's reality.

+ Some Women

BBC 1969. Dir Roy Battersby. With Fionnula Flanagan, Natalie Kent, Cleo Sylvestre, Edith MacArthur. 70min

Written by Tony Parker, using the transcripts of real-life interviews, this is a fascinating insight into the causes of criminal behaviour among women and the direct relationship to psychological and environmental circumstance. Four real-life stories are beautifully performed and brought to life, ranging from the middle-class housewife who is a

compulsive thief to a devastating revelation of incest. Battersby's invisible direction is truly astounding.

Wed 8 May 18:00 NFT2

The Big Flame

BBC 1969. Dir Ken Loach. With Norman Rossington, Godfrey Quigley, Peter Kerrigan. 85min

Displaying great confidence in the artless style Loach and Garnett had pioneered, this fine film dramatizes the take over by the dockers themselves of the Liverpool docks, having rejected a proposed change to their working conditions. Betrayed by their own union, the men find great dignity in the co-operative nature of the work, but are inevitably defeated by the army and the government. Marxist ringleader Reagan is a realist who predicts their defeat but sees a beacon of hope for the working man in what they achieved.

Fri 3 May 18:20 NFT2

The Gangster Show: The Resistable Rise of Arturo Ui

BBC 1972. Dir Jack Gold. With Nicol Williamson, Sam Wanamaker, Peter Frye. 105min

George Tabori's adaptation of the play by Brecht deftly exploits the additional depth and texture that the TV play can bring. Nicol Williamson's performance nods to Hitler as the psychotic megalomaniac Ui, who uses violence and extortion to claw his way to the top. Jack Gold's assured direction uses the look and feel of the Hollywood gangster movie of the 1930s to emphasise the wider political points about the nature of society in a depression and the criminal aspects of unbridled capitalism.

Thu 16 May 18:20 NFT2

Days of Hope: 1926 (The General Strike)

BBC 1975. Dir Ken Loach. With Paul Copley, Pamela Brighton, Nikolas Simmonds. 133min

The four films that comprised *Days of Hope* (and ranged from the Great War to the General Strike) are rightly regarded as a television masterpiece. This final film tackled that pivotal moment in recent British history when the uneasy balance between the establishment and the working man fractured apart. Jim Allen's script brilliantly dissects the sectional interests of Government, the TUC and the radical left that led to ultimate betrayal and the Strike ending in defeat. Loach's direction crystallises the issues at stake, while perfectly capturing the texture and mood of the times and providing a deeply human focus.

Thu 23 May 18:00 NFT2

The Spongers

Play for Today. BBC 1978. Dir Roland Joffé. With Christine Hargreaves, Bernard Hill, Peter Kerrigan. 90min

Once more proving his ability to spot talent, Garnett was responsible for providing Roland Joffé with his full length directorial debut. Set during the 1977 Jubilee celebrations, Jim Allen's script focuses on the plight of Pauline as she struggles to make ends meet. With a searing contemporary relevance, the film shows the human cost of decisions made by bureaucratic committees as council budgets are put under increasing pressure. Christine Hargreaves' performance is devastating as we see the full impact of these decisions on her children. One of the most important plays of the 70s, it still speaks loudly to our conscience today.

Fri 31 May 18:20 NFT2

Tony Garnett In Conversation with Mark Lawson & Q&A

Notoriously reticent to receive any accolades, the BFI is proud to present the most complete screening of Tony Garnett's work to date and finally to be able to highlight the significance of his extraordinary achievements. When he got a BAFTA award, he didn't turn up to receive it. He went to the football at Aston Villa instead! A fact that speaks volumes about the man and his values. Illustrated with clips from his films, don't miss this opportunity to hear one of the most important and influential television and film producers providing his controversial views on the state of the industry and the strong beliefs that have always guided his work.

Tue 4 June 18:30 NFT1

Law & Order – A Detectives Tale

BBC 1978. Director Leslie Blair. With Derek Martin, Alan Ford, Roy Stone. 80min

One of four films that examined the legal system from different perspectives (The Villains Tale, The Briefs Tale, The Prisoners Tale), G.F. Newman's script caused major controversy with its portrayal of a metropolitan police force in which corruption was ingrained in the culture of the institution. Derek Martin as Detective Inspector Parr is chilling in the casual way he accepts back handers and uses threats to advance his cause. In style and content a million miles away from "The Sweeney", more akin to "The Wire" of it's day.

+ Between the Lines – Some Must Watch

BBC 1993. Director Roy Battersby. With Neil Pearson, Francesca Annis, Michael Pennington. 50min

Making for an intriguing comparison with the development of the detective genre in the years since Newman's *Law & Order*, this episode of J.C. Wilshire's hugely popular series imagines a clash between Special Branch, MI5 and the Home Office. As the three organisations jockey for position the only casualty is the truth. An episode that plays to Garnett's strengths in articulating the real powers at work behind the mechanisms of the state.

Sun 2 June 16:00 NFT2

Blooming Youth

BBC 1973. *Play for Today*. Director Leslie Blair. With Philip Jackson, Colin Higgins, Peter Kinley. 70min

Taking a risk on first time director Blair, with a specific improvisatory way of working, was typical of the courage Garnett has always displayed and was to pay off handsomely with Blair's later work. This account of everyday life in a student flat is now as much a slice of 1970's anthropology as it is a fascinating portrait of the growing pains of youth and the power dynamics at work in any group. It makes for a revealing comparison with the young professionals of *This Life* some 25 years later.

+ This Life

BBC 1996. Director Sam Miller. With Jack Davenport, Amita Dhiri, Daniela Nardini, Andrew Lincoln, Jason Hughes.

In this opening episode the characters we came to love so much first meet and move in together. Garnett spotted the contemporary appeal of Amy Jenkins's script as we follow the loves, hates and careers of a group of young professionals that somehow seemed to define a whole era and a generation.

Thu 6 June 20:30 NFT3

Prostitute

Kestrel Films. 1980. Director Tony Garnett. With Eleanor Forsythe, Kate Crutchley, Kim Lockett. 97min

Written and directed by Garnett, the film is set in his home town of Birmingham (so rarely seen on the screen). This frank and unsensationalised account of the working women's lives clearly shows the power struggles and the dynamics that limit their choices, torn between the street and the law. Mixing professional actors and non professionals he is able to capture the grim humour of the women and the reality of their lives with great honesty. A beguiling and thought provoking film that is all the more effective for simply presenting the facts.

Fri 14 June 20:40 NFT2

Cardiac Arrest

BBC 1994. Director David Hayman. With Helen Baxendale, Andrew Lancel, Ahsen Bahatti. 28min

The series that at a single stroke redefined the medical drama genre. Written from first hand experience by Dr Jed Mercurio, gone were the reassuring platitudes about the NHS, replaced by a picture of young doctors battling against bureaucracy and a culture of survival against the odds. Sharp, witty and slick.

+ The Cops

BBC 1998. Director Harry Bradbeer. With Katy Cavanagh, Rob Dixon, John Henshaw. 50min
Garnett was to use the outward form of the police procedural to create a series that in following the work of the cops in a disadvantaged northern town became also a detailed examination of the links between crime and social conditions. In this episode tensions run high on Skeetsmoor as rumours of police brutality spread. Both screenings are perfect examples of how Garnett was to revolutionise conventional TV genres to create something more original and daring.

Wed 19 June 18:20 NFT2

Handgun

Kestrel Films. 1982. Director Tony Garnett. With Karen Young, Clayton Day, Suzie Humphreys. 97min

Never more relevant than with America currently locked in a debate about its firearms culture, Garnett both wrote and directed this film examining where the love affair with the gun can lead. Katherine is a well adjusted teacher who moves to Texas to start her career. Here she meets Larry, steeped in Texan culture and obsessed with guns. At first he seems attractive until the night he rapes her at gunpoint. What follows is an inventive and moral tale of revenge that highlights the dangers inherent in normalising guns and raises questions about the male skewed culture of the south.

Sat 22 June 20:40 NFT2

Beautiful Thing

Channel Four/World Productions. 1996. Director Hettie Macdonald. With Glen Berry, Linda Henry, Scott Neal, Ben Daniels.

This hugely successful comedy was written by Jonathan Harvey. What no doubt attracted Garnett was the earthy humour and authentic feel to the lives of the inhabitants of this south London estate on which it is set. We really care about the families we come to know, so well drawn are the characters. Against this background a gay friendship develops between two teenagers. By turns funny, warm and moving, the film's strength lies in having no heavy handed message, just "Gay is OK".

Thu 27 June 18:20 NFT2

Hostile Waters

BBC/HBO/World Productions. 1997. Director David Drury. With Rutger Hauer, Martin Sheen, Max Von Sydow, Colm Feore. 90min.

In 1986 whilst Reagan was in crucial arms talks with Gorbachev, two nuclear submarines (one American and one Soviet) collided 500 miles off the coast of the US. The resultant damage to the soviet sub caused a fire to break out next to the nuclear reactors, with 16 nuclear missiles on board. Using evidence from those involved, Troy Kennedy-Martin's taut and suspenseful script shows just how close we came to nuclear disaster as both countries fought to keep the whole affair secret. Ironically the end of the cold war has driven the secrets of nuclear patrols out of the news agenda, a fact that adds to this fine film's contemporary resonance.

Sat 29 June 18:10 NFT3

NOTES TO EDITORS:

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- Preserving and restoring the most significant film collection in the world for today and future generations
- Championing emerging and world class film makers in the UK
- Investing in creative, distinctive and entertaining work
- Promoting British film and talent to the world
- Growing the next generation of film makers and audiences

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