



The last acre of truth

by Patrick Wright

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It was, in its own way, vintage Potter. There he was last week at the press screening of *Lipstick On Your Collar*: it was one of those buffet meals which is bound to be incredibly stressful, not least because holding plates and forks is nigh on impossible for a man with his condition. But then he started to talk and the flow, once started, carried him off and he only had to open the next day's paper to see the result. Throwing conventional media tact to the wind, he had laid into Michael Green, chairman of ITN, for donating money to the Conservative Party. And then he had started to make disclosures that he really did regret about his wife's recent illness.

'The problem,' he remarked, 'is that I have been a recluse for so long, and you forget how to behave in public.'

Potter was given a rough ride when *Blackeyes* was broadcast on BBC2 in 1989. Leering tabloids were quick to dub him Dirty Den and Mr Filth, and even Julie Burchill had the nerve to call him 'grubby'. Germaine Greer graciously defended Potter, insisting that his critics were confusing him with the misogynistic condition that he had set out to investigate. Potter was somewhat consoled by this, but he still regards *Blackeyes* as a failure. Yet, as he adds, 'if you didn't ever fail, you'd never succeed. And who wants just to plod along down the middle of the road? It's in the verges that all the interesting flowers and animals are.'

With *Lipstick On Your Collar*, Potter has made few immediate concessions to the critics who advised him to clean up his act. There is squalor and lust, tits and bums, lavatory humour and even a swollen organist who peers out of bushes in search of his own kind of exaltation. The search for the dirty little secret behind Dennis Potter's plays will continue, but there is a deeper story animating his new six-part 'romantic comedy' which should concern us more than the rumours alleging that Potter was abused as a child growing up in the Forest of Dean.

It concerns the emergence of a young Britain, associated with sex advertising, bright plastics and popular song — which must struggle, like a nervous private soldier in front of an officer, to gain 'permission to speak' in a cramped and old imperial country brought face to face with its own decline by the humiliating Suez crisis of 1956.

Potter discourages the suggestion that his dramas are autobiographical yet in the new serial he has certainly caught up with himself. Potter was at Oxford in the late fifties, the gifted son of a mining family swept suddenly into university from his village in the Forest of Dean. One day, he was in the Berry Hill Working Men's Club, being seen off by the people he felt guiltily relieved to be leaving. The next he was walking up a stone



staircase in New College Oxford and being addressed as 'sir' by a man introducing himself as Potter's 'scout'.

He remembers reading Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* (1957) in his first year, and finding his own situation reflected in its account of difficulties facing the scholarship boy, torn from his working class roots and yet painfully out of place in his new circumstances. 'You know what you gain easily enough — exams, Oxford, the chance to walk around with Dostoevsky under your arm — but it takes longer to find out what you've lost.'

Potter remembers looking around on arrival, expecting to find 'those supremely intelligent beings' and then getting on with things when he realised they didn't exist as he had imagined. He edited *Isis*, chaired the Labour Party Group, and was held in awe by the fellow students who still remember expecting him to step out in the footsteps of Aneurin Bevan. Potter's reputation was considerably enhanced by *The Glittering Coffin*, his excoriating book about the condition of England, published in 1960.

Then, as now, the Labour Party was languishing in a slough of de-spond; Potter described how, having lost the 1959 election, it lay 'thrice-defeated' and tempted into the strategic dilution of socialist policies that even then, as the young Potter noticed disdainfully, was called 'rethinking'. He saw the party 'aping the methods, the armoury and even the vocabulary of the victors', and feared a future in which 'posters and jingles will matter more and more and policy will go by the board'.

He called for a 'genuine' alternative, wondering where was 'the driving, biting contempt' for the casino society of modern Conservatism, and hoping that 'socialist fervour' wouldn't always just mean 'thick-headed, time-bound reaction, or trade union lethargy'.

The *Glittering Coffin* shares Richard Hoggart's fear that the new forms of popular culture were sapping the initiative of the working class youth: 'unbending the springs of action', in Hoggart's famous phrase. Potter had noticed that, while the miners of the Forest of Dean would still organise on behalf of a sick or injured work-mate, they were already singing advertising jingles under the showers.

He worried that the chrome and comfort was 'not going to lead us very far towards socialism', and that the 'classlessness' of post-war Britain was 'little more than a rootless, acquisitive, shoddy and processed version of capitalist America.'

The jukebox, so famously condemned in Hoggart's account of its enervating impact on teenagers a milk bar in Goole, still stands pre-eminent in Potter's imagination, pumping out its ambivalent dreams in the title sequence of *Lipstick On My Collar*. But, as far as Potter is concerned, *The Glittering Coffin* could hardly be left too far behind. He squirms at the mere mention of it, declaring that he doesn't possess a copy and would probably recoil, even if he came across the title on the cheapest shelf of a second hand book shop. It was written, he says in explanation, by 'a young man on the make'. 'I thought I was



going to be a public figure then,' he explains, adding that 'all public figures are corroded by a desire to set the record straight.'

Potter says he has turned his back on all that. And while the break may have been emphasized by the disease, psoriatic arthropathy, that has forced his lengthy retreat from public life, it was a deliberate decision. Potter had always distrusted the smooth talk of Conservative MPs, but he isn't much kinder about the Labour Party, for which he stood as a candidate in 1964.

He can't abide the 'sanctimoniousness' of the Labour politician 'who can walk down the street thinking: 'What a good man I am' while everything is rotting around him. And he is dismayed by what the parliamentary system does to a man like Dennis Skinner. 'He's obviously a decent and honest man – but he's been safely neutered as a kind of predictable buffoon.'

Even before he came to the conclusion that the public ambition of politics was full of 'canting, sanctimonious humbug', Potter had been busy keeping other routes open. He committed the Labour Group at Oxford to staging dramas. They put on Brecht's *Caucasian Chalk Circle* in the Town Hall, motivated by the conviction that Labour should be concerned with more than 'political agendas and programmes' – and that 'important truths' lie outside the conventional arena of politics. And he builds on that now, describing writing as the 'one remaining area in which individual personal sovereignty can still apply. He calls writing 'the last truth-telling acre we've got', adding that 'fiction is the last repository of truth'.

So that 'truth-telling acre' has to be defended against the people who would impose 'isms' on it: branding it in accordance with their own dead certainties, straightening up its crooked corners, or forcing its naked creature into the drab dungarees of 'political correctness'. Socialism, Thatcherism, feminism . . . Potter counts them off together as 'various sorts of blinkers', and then declares himself indebted to the non-conformist religious sensibility — another legacy of the Forest of Dean — that has made him so resistant to them. 'It's the people who vote the ticket, whatever the ticket is: they're your enemies.'

This may sound like the predictable rant of an Angry Young Man grown old. But Potter is actually making a quite different claim for the ability of drama to deal with the issues he might seem to be dismissing out of hand.

'Take the question of racism,' he says. 'There is a scene in *The Singing Detective*, which would now, he suspects, be almost impossible to get screened in America. Phillip Marlow, the flaking and skinless hero, lies in his hospital bed needling the Asian patient next to him in racist language. A young liberal doctor comes in and reprimands him, quite failing to grasp, as the Asian evidently does, that this abusive banter is freighted with affection and even love.'



The answer to racism can't only be to deny it and encourage positive images in its place. It needs to be addressed with incomparably greater depth and subtlety. And Potter is adamant that drama should be the vehicle for that tricky encounter. This is the way it is with Potter's writing. He gave up on programmatic politics and turned his back on the corrupting allure of public life. But his drama has brought him directly back to politics. *Lipstick On Your Collar* may be a 'romantic comedy', but it is also a story of the English class system, of how it cramps and confines people, turns them into types, or offers them 'permission to speak'. But only at a price.

Meanwhile the juke box, inherited from Richard Hoggart, whirls on. Potter explains that *Lipstick On Your Collar* is the third leg of a trilogy in which he wanted to 'explore what popular song can do'. First of all, in *Pennies From Heaven*, songs are there as a cheap lie. Arthur Parker, the sheet-music salesman at the centre of the drama, believes the world can be other than it is, but his is a sort of fake transcendence, a kind of tawdriness: 'The only way he knows of bringing it about is through the songs he's peddling.'

In *The Singing Detective*, set in the forties rather than the thirties, the songs come at the bed-ridden Marlow like 'stones thrown at him', or 'dark chariots laden with unwelcome truths'. *Lipstick On Your Collar* brings us into the fifties, the age of the teenager, bright colours, plastics, and the music that Potter calls 'proto-rock'. By this time, the music is functioning as political metaphor.

Potter won't judge the juke-box — remarking only that you can love the songs or hate them, but that as a dramatist he doesn't have to come down on either side. He does take his stand, however, on the question of television. Remembering how he joined the BBC as a trainee in 1969, he remarks that 'the dream of a common culture used to move me enormously.'

That is hardly a possibility now, due to a fragmentation that is both technological and a product of political changes. He knows it was paternalistic and patronising, but people really believed that television should be used to 'educate, inform and entertain'. Potter himself had great hopes of what he calls 'the Palace of Varieties in the corner of the living room'.

He still likes the idea of suspicious viewers allowing themselves a moment of hesitation: 'You're about to switch off and then for some reason you don't,' he muses, 'or you watch for a bit and then say to yourself: "I know that, but I didn't know that I did"'.

The other constant thing about Potter is that he is determined, against considerable odds, to remain an English patriot. In *The Glittering Coffin*, he spelt out the challenge facing his generation in words that needn't embarrass him so terribly. 'We have the job of remaining young and hopeful where there is no youth and precious little hope; of remaining patriotic in the decent sense of the word, when our identity is dwindling away in a steady capitulation before the Coca-Cola onslaught of the new world on the one hand and a dangerously militant and even criminal nostalgia for the supposed glories of the past on the other.'



Thirty years later, Potter has conceded some ground to Coca-Cola and, more willingly, to the juke-box, but when it comes to patriotism he is still fighting. Patriotism has been 'hijacked by the right,' he says, making no attempt to hide the outrage he feels when he sees the smug wreckers in the Tory Party all lined up at their conferences with the Union Jack behind them.

Doesn't the truth ever rankle with them, he wonders? Doesn't the nagging doubt ever sneak up on them — perhaps when they're ill, or bereaved or just too drunk to sleep — that there must be more to life than the craven, opportunistic masquerade that keeps them on the road? Just as the Soviet Union stole the language of socialism, the language of patriotism is being merged with a kind of nationalism and chauvinism that it need not imply. 'The trouble with words,' Potter says, 'is that you never know whose mouths they've been in.'



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