

# From *Five Women* to *Leeds United!*: Roy Battersby and the Politics of ‘Radical’ Television Drama

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## **Abstract:**

Focusing on the work of the left-wing film and television director Roy Battersby, this article seeks to shed light on the issues at stake in the controversies surrounding the production and reception of ‘radical television drama’ during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Through an examination of a number of BBC productions that were either cut (*Five Women*), banned (*Hit Suddenly Hit*) or the subject of moral and political objections (*The Operation* and *Leeds United!*), the discussion indicates how arguments over ‘radical’ television drama involved a degree of shift away from concerns with the blurring of boundaries between ‘fact’ and ‘fiction’ towards a preoccupation with political ‘balance’ (that involved the application of criteria to drama that were originally reserved for documentaries). Although the period in question is often characterised as one in which the creators of television drama enjoyed substantial creative freedom to make work that challenged the status quo, this article also reveals how such work was far from the norm and often only got made, and shown, in the face of considerable opposition. The article therefore concludes with an assessment of some of the ideological and institutional constraints weighing upon ‘radical’ political expression in television drama at this time.

**Keywords:** *Some Women*, *Leeds United!*; Roy Battersby; radical television drama; documentary drama; political balance; censorship; Workers’ Revolutionary Party.

As early as 1967, Philip Purser, writing in the *Sunday Telegraph* on 5 February, felt justified in referring to what he labelled ‘the Red Wing of the Wednesday drama department’. The BBC’s *Wednesday Play* had, of course, proved highly controversial from the outset, and,

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## *From Five Women to Leeds United!*

in 1965 alone, John Hopkins' allegory of race relations *Fable* (BBC1, 27 January 1965) was postponed, Dennis Potter's *Vote, Vote for Nigel Barton* (BBC1, 15 December 1965) was held back from transmission for several months and Nell Dunn's *Up the Junction* (BBC1, 3 November 1965) raised a storm of protest and was not repeated. In the case of *Up the Junction*, the objections were primarily moral in character, arising from the programme's alleged sexual 'permissiveness' and showing of an illegal abortion. However, it was Jim Allen's *Wednesday Play* about conflict in the building industry, *The Lump* (BBC1, 1 February 1967), that not only proved a particular provocation to Purser but also initiated a new kind of controversy focused on the political, rather than moral, outlook of the dramas concerned. Indeed, Allen's portrayal of a workers' take-over of the Liverpool docks in *The Big Flame* (BBC1, 19 February 1969), produced by Tony Garnett and directed by Ken Loach, proved so uncomfortable for the BBC that it was withheld from transmission for nearly two years (Hill 2011: 87–96).

Similar disputes over the production and transmission of 'politically committed' plays continued into the 1970s. They reached a degree of crescendo in the 1974–5 period when Trevor Griffiths' *All Good Men* (BBC1, 31 January 1974), John McGrath's *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil* (BBC1, 6 June 1974) and Colin Welland's *Leeds United!* (BBC1, 31 October 1974) were all transmitted as part of the *Play for Today* series (the successor to *The Wednesday Play*), while *Days of Hope* (BBC1, September–October 1975), a series of television 'films' dealing with the history of the Labour movement made by the team of Allen, Loach and Garnett, ran as a stand-alone four-part mini-series. In his report on 'the history and practice of ... "committed" plays', written for the Board of Governors following the transmission of *Days of Hope*, the BBC's Director of Television Programmes, Alasdair Milne, pointed out that only a dozen or so "political" plays had been shown in the last couple of years out of 'about 150 new single plays, and several hundred episodes of series and serials'.<sup>1</sup> However, while they were relatively small in number, these 'political plays' were nevertheless some of the most expensive and prestigious dramas produced by the BBC and proved capable of attracting a disproportionate amount of attention. They were also made by some of the most talented people working in television who, in many cases, made no bones about their 'radical', left-wing political allegiances. The Trotskyist Workers' Revolutionary Party (formerly the Socialist Labour League (SLL)), in particular, had gained a significant foothold amongst those working in film, theatre and television, and there were concerns, both within and outside the

BBC, that the group was exercising an undue influence upon the Drama Department's output.<sup>2</sup>

One of those who belonged to this group was the director Roy Battersby who had joined the SLL in 1968 and combined working for television with his political activities, including the staging of a historical pageant, *Two Hundred Years of Labour History*, at an 'anti-Tory' rally, organised by the SLL, at Alexandra Palace in 1971. Given that his political affiliations were no secret, he came to be viewed with increasing suspicion by the BBC's management and, following the transmission of *Leeds United!* (which he directed), members of the BBC Board of Governors expressed astonishment that he should even have been hired by the Corporation when 'it was known that he was deeply committed to the Left'.<sup>3</sup> After *Leeds United!*, however, Battersby became increasingly unemployable and, apart from one short drama, he did not direct another BBC play for ten years. Given the openness of Battersby's political commitments and the 'radicalism' of much of the work with which he was associated, an examination of his early career, therefore, helps to shed light on the issues at stake in the controversies surrounding the production and reception of 'radical television drama' during this period (the late 1960s and early 1970s). By focusing on *Five Women*, *Hit Suddenly Hit*, *The Operation* and *Leeds United!* in particular, this article will consider the forms of objection directed at this work and, in so doing, arrive at an assessment of some of the constraints – ideological and institutional – weighing upon 'radical' political expression in television drama at this time.<sup>4</sup> Although this period is often characterised as one in which the creators of television drama enjoyed substantial creative freedom to make work that challenged the status quo, what these controversies also reveal is how such work was far from the norm and was often made, and shown, in the face of considerable opposition.

### Some Women: '*Neither a play nor a documentary*'

Battersby originally joined the BBC's Science and Features department when the Corporation was recruiting new talent in anticipation of the launch of BBC2 in April 1964. His first job was a series of documentaries on the City of London, *Men and Money* (BBC2, April-May 1964), and further science documentaries followed, including editions of the BBC1 annual review programme, *Challenge*. His first move into drama occurred when the producer Tony Garnett, an old friend from university (whom he had directed in a student version of *Hamlet* and employed as a narrator on *Men and Money*), recruited

him to direct a *Wednesday Play*. In the wake of the huge success of *Cathy Come Home*, Garnett had, of course, become associated with a new form of socially-critical television play that was shot on film and emulated recent styles of documentary. To this end, he was keen to employ directors—such as Jack Gold who directed Jim Allen's *The Lump*—who possessed experience of shooting documentary on film rather than drama in the studio. Battersby clearly fitted the bill and was seconded from Science and Features to work on an adaptation of Tony Parker's book of interviews with former prisoners, *Five Women* (1965), a documentary-style project that Garnett appears to have rescued (as he had done in the case of Jeremy Sandford's original script for *Cathy Come Home*) from the Drama Department's reject pile. Like Garnett's *In Two Minds*, to which the production bears some resemblance, *Five Women* was shot completely on location on 16mm film and consists mainly of interviews, by Tony Parker, of former prison inmates. Parker had conducted the original interviews over a period of two years and, even should it have been contemplated, it was unlikely that the women concerned would have consented to be interviewed on film (or would have been prepared to talk about themselves in the same way as they had with Parker in private). Thus, while Parker does appear in front of camera, the women he interviews are not the original interviewees but rather actresses who have previously immersed themselves in the published material. As a result, the production possesses a peculiar status. While it is in part a—selective—recreation of the original interviews, it also consists of a new dramatic event in which the actors are improvising their lines (rather than performing a written script). While this use of improvisation might, in one light, be seen to invest the drama with added 'authenticity', it also imports an element of overt performativity (and stylisation) that positions the production somewhere between a simulated documentary and a dramatic experiment. Given these characteristics, it is, perhaps, not entirely surprising that, on completion, it almost immediately ran into trouble.

Gerald Savory, the Head of Plays in the BBC's Drama department, wrote to the Head of the Drama Group, Sidney Newman, in June 1967 declaring that the production could 'never be a Wednesday PLAY' on the grounds that it encouraged the assumption that the five women are 'the real criminals' and contained 'absolutely no drama'.<sup>5</sup> This view did not go entirely unchallenged. The story editor Ken Trodd, who went on to collaborate with Battersby on a number of productions including *Leeds United!*, wrote to Newman in support of the programme, claiming that its 'subject matter', 'starkness

of ... style' and capacity to provoke an appropriate sense of 'outrage' made it 'an irresistible piece of television'.<sup>6</sup> However, whatever its merits as an innovative work of television, the prevailing view within the BBC was that it had crossed an unacceptable line between 'drama' and 'documentary'. There had, of course, been a history of objections, stretching back to *Up the Junction*, about the way in which work associated with Tony Garnett involved 'blurring the boundaries' between the two. However, *Five Women* was the first of his productions to face a straight ban. The decision appears to have been taken by Huw Wheldon, the Controller of Programmes, to whom the matter had been referred. As he explained in a letter to Tony Garnett (written a year after the play had been completed but not yet shown), he considered the play to have been 'fundamentally misbegotten' due to the way in which it had not only undermined the distinctions between 'drama' and 'documentary' but also between 'fact' and 'fiction' and the 'real' and the 'not real'. For Wheldon, the reputation of the BBC rested upon the maintenance of these distinctions and it was therefore impossible, he believed, for the Corporation to approve of the programme as it stood (particularly as it might pave the way for inferior imitations).<sup>7</sup> Given that Wheldon regarded *Five Women* as a 'misbegotten' hybrid, this meant that it became very difficult for the Corporation to identify the means whereby it might be rendered suitable for transmission. For if it was not held to be a proper 'drama', it was not regarded as a legitimate 'documentary' either. Thus, while Batterby's boss in Features, Aubrey Singer, appears to have been willing to show the programme under a different rubric, the issue remained of how to signal the programme's status to the viewer. As Paul Fox, the Controller of BBC1 since June 1967, indicated to Tony Parker, it was impossible for the programme, even in an edited form, to be transmitted unless it was billed, introduced and scheduled in a manner that made it evident that it was 'neither a play nor a documentary'.<sup>8</sup>

Fox's letter to Parker followed the publication, a few weeks earlier, of a piece in the *Radio Times* (written by Fox but not credited to him) that had questioned whether new kinds of 'experimental' play shaped by 'actual real-life material', such as *Cathy Come Home* and *The Golden Vision*, led to 'confusion in the mind of the viewer' as to whether they are watching 'a play or a documentary'. The article appeared to accept that this was, indeed, the case and, as a result, concluded that there were 'limits which experimental techniques ought not to trespass' if the BBC was 'to keep faith with the viewer'.<sup>9</sup> Although the context for this 'Talking Point' piece would not have been immediately apparent to the casual reader, it became much clearer when a letter signed by

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Tony Garnett, Jim Allen, Roy Battersby, Clive Goodwin, Ken Loach, James MacTaggart, Roger Smith and Kenith Trodd was published a few weeks later. In this they argued that, underlying 'the bland, sweet reasonableness' of the original article, there lurked the threat of censorship of programmes that expressed unacceptable 'social and political attitudes'. Citing two of Battersby's programmes – *Five Women* and *Hit Suddenly Hit* – that the BBC had so far refused to show, the authors of the letter contended that the issue was not really about the legitimacy of 'mixed forms' so much as the presentation of 'content' that the BBC considered to be 'offensive'.<sup>10</sup>

With regard to *Five Women*, this argument might be said to have been overstated. It is, of course, the case that the edited version of the play that was eventually transmitted under the title of *Some Women* (BBC1, 21 August 1969) did remove the play's potentially most controversial character, the 'lesbian drug-addict' played by Bella Emberg.<sup>11</sup> While this was justified on the basis that the original version was too long (and that it was impossible to shorten the original version without removal of an entire section), the cut did succeed in encouraging speculation in the press that the decision had been made on moral, rather than artistic, grounds. Indeed, the documentary producer Norman Swallow, who had been endeavouring to get the programme shown, had predicted that such a substantial cut would be likely to lead to claims of 'censorship' and had argued that the 'bravest thing' to do would be 'to show it uncut' except for the 'new opening' and the 'disclaimer about the actresses' that the BBC management had deemed necessary for the programme to be shown.<sup>12</sup> However, while the elimination of this particular section does suggest unwarranted timidity on the part of BBC management, it was hardly the principal reason that the programme succeeded in generating such institutional unease. In his letter to Garnett, Wheldon had, in fact, explicitly argued that he did not regard the programme as morally 'offensive' and was clearly much more exercised, as was Fox (whose background was in news and current affairs), by what he perceived to be the programme's ambiguous status and its supposed capacity to confuse the unprepared viewer. As he later explained to a meeting of the BBC's General Advisory Council, he had 'felt certain that viewers would believe the actresses were the prisoners, and had therefore stopped the play being shown'.<sup>13</sup> In this respect, it might be said that the programme's claim to 'radicalism' did not so much depend upon its social and political content as its challenge to the distinctions between drama and documentary that the BBC management believed to be so clear. Both Battersby and Garnett, of course, rejected this distinction and, in a letter to

Wheldon, Garnett had argued that 'fiction' and 'fact' were 'woven into the fabric of most programmes', including news and current affairs.<sup>14</sup> This was, however, a viewpoint that the BBC management refused to countenance, particularly given the importance that they attached to maintaining clear generic boundaries between 'fictional' and 'factual' programming in the television schedule.

This is not to say, however, that *Five Women* was merely a formal experiment devoid of a political perspective. Tony Parker was a long-standing proponent of penal reform and the play's emphasis upon the social and psychological factors underlying the women's criminal behaviour (including, in the case of the programme's most 'hardened' criminal, parental sexual abuse) clearly involved criticism of the way in which the legal and penal system dealt with recurrent offenders. However, like *Cathy Come Home*, which had also exposed the injustices inflicted upon a female 'victim' by officialdom, the play may be located within a liberal tradition of social protest that is reformist rather than revolutionary in character and, therefore, not significantly at odds with the way in which 'social problems' were identified in other more formally conventional programmes. Battersby's second banned work, *Hit Suddenly Hit*, however, was much more 'revolutionary' in its political outlook, and its treatment at the hands of the BBC's management, therefore, seems to bear out some of the anxieties of the Corporation's critics regarding its censorship of politically unacceptable viewpoints. For *Hit Suddenly Hit* was clearly a documentary that could not be said to 'confuse' drama and documentary conventions in the way in which it was claimed that *Five Women* did. However, precisely because it was a documentary, it became the object of different kinds of objections relating to 'objectivity' and 'balance' that were, in due course, to be applied to drama productions, such as *Leeds United!*, as well.

Hit Suddenly Hit: 'Contrary to the BBC tradition of  
balance and impartiality'

*Hit Suddenly Hit* was made for *Towards Tomorrow*, a monthly series of science programmes that ran from 1967 to 1969. Battersby was responsible for the first in the series, *Assault on Life, Biology* (BBC1, 7 December 1967) dealing with recent developments in genetics such as cloning and *in vitro* fertilisation. He also teamed up again with Tony Parker for *People Like Us* (BBC1, 22 February 1968), an examination of competing approaches to psychiatry that put into question the excessive use of drugs, ECT and lobotomies. As these brief descriptions

might indicate, *Towards Tomorrow* was a pioneering series that set out to tackle the ethical dimensions of science and weigh up the social consequences of scientific and technological discoveries ('Your future is being created now—for better or for worse?') *Hit Suddenly Hit*, Battersby's next programme for the series, partly conformed to this pattern by setting out to explore the causes and effects of violence. In this case, however, the approach that the programme adopted proved a step too far for the BBC management. Like *Five Women*, the programme was withheld from transmission but, unlike *Some Women*, it was never to be broadcast, even in edited form, and no viewing copy is now believed to exist.<sup>15</sup> As the programme cannot be seen, it is difficult to be sure about its precise features. However, because the documentary became the subject of an internal BBC debate, a transcript of what is said in the programme has survived. What this reveals is the way in which the boundaries of what might be regarded as a conventional 'science feature' are being stretched to the limit. The programme takes its title from Adrian Mitchell's poem, 'To You' (which is recited in the film), and begins with an interview with the German social psychologist and philosopher Erich Fromm, who identifies the film's main thesis—that the causes of man's 'destructiveness' were not to be found in 'his instincts' nor his 'animal inheritance' but in 'specific conditions of human existence'.<sup>16</sup> As in *People Like Us*, this scepticism about biological or chemical explanations of human behaviour linked Battersby's work with the 'radical psychiatry' movement of R. D. Laing and D. E. Cooper whose Congress on the Dialectics of Liberation at London's Round House in July 1967, devoted to 'a demystification of violence', had in part prompted his original programme idea. Battersby had attended the conference (where he was involved in recording the contributors) and many of the speakers at the event, including Herbert Marcuse, Paul Goodman, Allen Ginsberg and Stokely Carmichael, feature in the programme, commenting on the forms of social repression that encourage violence and, in the case of Ginsberg and Carmichael, debating the ethics of revolutionary counter-violence.<sup>17</sup> In a different context, the programme might have been regarded as a powerful record of, and meditation upon, the Round House event and its interrogation of the social dynamics of violence. However, in the context of a science programme, it quickly came to be regarded as unacceptably political and partisan.

This had, in fact, been a matter of concern from the beginning and Humphrey Fisher, the Head of Science and Features, had warned Battersby that the programme should not be 'wholly or significantly about current political protest or violence or upheaval' and should aim for



‘a reasoned and balanced exposition’ rather than ‘personal polemic’.<sup>18</sup> However, although the series producer, Max Morgan-Witts, appears to have been happy with the finished product, his view was not shared by those higher up. Both Aubrey Singer, Head of Features, and Paul Fox, Controller of BBC1, viewed the programme and demanded changes. For Singer, the programme was far too ‘political’ for a science feature and ran ‘contrary to the BBC tradition of balance and impartiality’.<sup>19</sup> Owing to the inclusion of material on the Vietnam War (and the shooting of Martin Luther King, Jr), he was particularly vexed by what he saw as an anti-American bias and called for the ‘scenes of violence’ to be ‘more evenly balanced in geography and political distribution’. This, he proposed, could be achieved through the addition of material on ‘the violence and aggression involved in the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia’, even though this had occurred after the programme had been completed.<sup>20</sup> Battersby rejected the suggestion that his work amounted to ‘political polemics’ and argued that the programme’s approach to the phenomenon of violence ‘balanced’ the ‘endless “anthropological” and “behaviourist” views’ found elsewhere on the BBC.<sup>21</sup> Ultimately, when faced with specific requests for cuts and alterations, he refused to make them, suggesting, in a letter to Morgan-Witts, that they pandered to ‘general categories ... like “mankind”’ and were concerned with ‘maintaining the balance only of the cold war’. ‘I won’t make *your* film’, he concluded. ‘Mine may not be acceptable to you and the B.B.C. but since it was me you hired to make it, it had better be *my* film that is banned ... the issue has to be fought’.<sup>22</sup>

Whether Battersby was right to be so uncompromising, and whether the programme would have been shown if he had been prepared to agree to changes, is difficult to assess. However, there was certainly no chance that the programme would be broadcast without alteration. His refusal to accede to the BBC management’s requests also meant that it had now become very difficult for him to continue working at the BBC. In his correspondence with Battersby, Singer had made it clear that employment at the BBC did not constitute ‘an act of patronage giving freedom of the air’ and warned that if he found the principles of ‘balance and impartiality’ to be so ‘irksome’, he could always ‘leave the Corporation’.<sup>23</sup> Although Battersby was not a staffer, and had only been employed on short-term contracts, his position at the BBC had, in effect, become untenable and he headed off to join Tony Garnett, who, in the wake of disputes over *The Big Flame* and *Five Women*, had himself left the BBC to set up his own production company, Kestrel Films (and, with Ken Trodd, its sister company Kestrel Productions). It was for Kestrel that Battersby went on

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to direct the feature-length film, *The Body* (1970), with a commentary by Adrian Mitchell. This was an unusual feature documentary, charting the life-cycle, that built upon Battersby's interests in the intermeshing of the physical, psychological and social. It was, however, something of a conclusion to this stage of his career as, from then on, he primarily devoted himself to directing fiction. This involved a spell working at Granada where he teamed up with Ken Trodd on a number of *Sunday Night Theatre* productions, including *Roll on Four O'Clock* (Granada, 20 December 1970), a school drama written by the actor and former teacher Colin Welland. It was also the team of Trodd, Welland and Battersby who conceived the idea of a play based on the Leeds clothing workers' strike of 1970. This was developed as a project for Granada but, when the company proved reluctant to commit to the production (partly, it was suspected, owing to the fear of the likely reaction of employers in the region), Trodd succeeded in persuading the new Head of Plays at the BBC, Christopher Morahan, to buy the script for the *Play for Today* slot. However, mainly owing to a dispute over the use of a freelance cameraman, the production did not go ahead right away. Instead, Battersby and Trodd opted to collaborate on another *Play for Today*, *The Operation* (BBC1, 26 February 1973), written by Roger Smith.<sup>24</sup> This gave Battersby the opportunity to work with the BBC cameraman, Peter Bartlett, with whom he then went on to shoot *Leeds United!* However, this production too was set to run into controversy.

Dealing with a crooked property developer, David Adler (played by the former James Bond George Lazenby), intent upon redeveloping his home town's historic centre, the play is less concerned with the workings of the property market than the central character's self-interested pursuit of money, power and sex. As a result, the play focuses heavily on David's sexual obsession with Diane (Maureen Shaw), the wife of a local shopkeeper, Ted (Maurice Roëves), that ultimately leads to his death at Ted's hands while engaging in Nazi role-play with Diane. The play is also explicit about the methods of bribery and blackmail that David uses to achieve his ambitions and includes one notorious scene in which a planning official receives oral sex from a prostitute while David takes incriminating photographs. Given the way in which the programme interweaves money-making and sex, it was perhaps to be expected that a number of complaints would follow, including one from Mary Whitehouse who contacted both the Chairman of the Board of Governors and the Director-General. What was more surprising, however, was the readiness of the BBC itself to disown its own production. Christopher Morahan, who had previously agreed with the Head of the Drama Group, Shaun Sutton, that the

programme should be shown, defended the play as a 'sincere attempt to question the values of a society which envies wealth, craves it, and barely questions the methods whereby it is acquired'.<sup>25</sup> However, Huw Wheldon, now Television Managing Director, took the view that the play should not have been broadcast and he upbraided both Morahan and Sutton for failing to refer the matter upwards.<sup>26</sup> His view was shared by the Director-General who circulated a draft letter of apology at the next meeting of the Board of Governors.<sup>27</sup> When the BBC General Advisory Council also joined the criticism of the programme, Battersby and Smith were moved to write to *The Times*, 11 April 1973, to complain that pressure groups were exercising undue influence upon the BBC and were succeeding in curbing the 'expression of views that do not conform with a prevailing right-wing ideology'. As Morahan had previously argued, when defending the right of the play to be broadcast, the production had made manifest 'a chasm between viewers who want plays to support conservative values in society . . . and those who want to do plays which question these values'.<sup>28</sup> In the case of *The Operation*, this 'chasm' primarily reflected a division over standards of 'taste and decency'; in the case of *Leeds United!*, however, the clash was much more directly about political world-view and outlook.

### Leeds United!: 'Does it help?'

*Leeds United!* was based on the unofficial strike of Leeds clothing workers that took place in February 1970. Based on a claim for 'an extra bob an hour', the strike was notable for the speed with which it spread through Leeds and south Yorkshire (eventually involving over 25,000 workers), and also for the fact that the strikers were mainly women whose claim was not just for a pay rise but for equal pay as well. Colin Welland was particularly drawn to the project by the involvement of his mother-in-law. As he explained:

She was a little forty-eight year old Irish woman working in a clothing factory in Leeds. All her life, she, and these women, her fellow workers had never said 'Boo' to a goose. And all of a sudden, when they asked for a rise and are offered 5p an hour more, they regard it as an insult and go on unofficial strike. They closed the city of Leeds down. They produced their own newspaper. It was a wonderful display of natural power, workers' power. (Welland 2007)

It was this sense of the power of rank and file workers that the production sets out to communicate. From the beginning, it was conceived of as a political 'epic' that would emulate the work of

Eisenstein, Pabst and Pontercorvo (whose film *The Battle of Algiers* Welland cited as a specific inspiration). The scale of the production, involving several weeks of location shooting and a huge cast, meant that it became one of the most expensive one-off dramas ever mounted by the BBC, running to three times the cost of the average *Play for Today* and almost double the cost of *The Operation*. As Alasdair Milne, the Director of Programmes, Television, observed, somewhat waspishly, at a meeting of the Board of Governors, the 'whole production had been rather like Concorde' insofar as 'it would have cost as much to stop as it would to go on to the end'.<sup>29</sup> However, by the standards of British cinema at the time, the programme's production cost of £150,000 was relatively modest, particularly given the scale and ambition evident in many of the scenes. This was particularly so of the numerous crowd scenes in the film, which included the restaging of a mass meeting in Leeds Town Hall, involving hundreds of volunteer extras, that was filmed with the use of multiple cameras.

Although the first part of the play is concerned with delineating the background to the strike and the outburst of collective energy to which it leads (revealed in the various scenes of the strikers marching from factory to factory to marshal support for the initial walk-out), it is also concerned to diagnose the circumstances in which the strike ended without a clear victory. As Welland has noted, his mother-in-law had only returned to work reluctantly and without a full understanding of why the strike had ended in the way in which it had. Promising to investigate, he came to the conclusion that the return to work had been the result of 'a conspiracy between the Union, the Employers and the Communist Party' who all possessed different, but ultimately shared, reasons for wanting the strike to end (Welland 2007). The sense of betrayal of the rank and file that permeates the latter part of the play is given its strongest expression in the character of Harry Gridley, played by local club entertainer Bert Gaunt, a charismatic shop steward who initially encourages the strike but later helps to undermine it when he comes to believe that the time is right to 'compromise'.

The play's heady brew of collective revolt and personal treacheries certainly had its admirers. These included Clive James who, in the *Observer*, 3 November 1974, praised the production's 'elemental force' and argued that, if the BBC retained 'the capacity to commission and screen a play as serious as this', then it 'would be justified in asking for the licence fee to be doubled'. However, the play also had many detractors. The *Daily Mail*, 1 November 1974, was quick to report the complaints of the Clothing Manufacturers Federation, which described the production as 'inept, inaccurate and insolent'.

The National Union of Tailors and Garment Workers didn't care for it either and, given the role played by a member of the Communist Party, the *Morning Star*, 2 November 1974, denounced the piece as a work of 'political distortion'.<sup>30</sup> According to the *Daily Mail*, 2 November 1974, even some of the strikers were reported to be unhappy given the amount of bad language that the play contained.<sup>31</sup> The BBC initially responded by hosting a special half-hour discussion (*In Vision*, BBC2, 1 November 1974), chaired by William Hardcastle, on the day after transmission. This brought together representatives from the employers, unions and strikers to debate the issues with Ken Trodd (but not Battersby whom the BBC did not wish to appear). Behind the scenes, the production was also discussed by BBC management who aired doubts as to whether the programme should have been produced and transmitted in the first place.

As has been seen, the controversy surrounding *Some Women* had concerned the apparent mixing of fact and fiction while the dispute over *Hit Suddenly Hit* had involved issues of impartiality and balance. In the case of *Leeds United!*, the internal BBC debate involved elements of both. Thus, when the production came to be discussed at a meeting of the Board of Governors, the Director-General suggested it raised 'two principal issues': 'did the play ... make it sufficiently clear that it was fiction and not documentary?' and 'was it legitimate for playwrights to write loaded plays?'<sup>32</sup> There was, of course, no question that the play did make use of techniques associated with documentary. These included the use of stills and unspecified voice-overs (that helped to explain the background to the dispute), direct address to the camera (as if the character is responding to an unseen interviewer's questioning), and a degree of recreation of how events had been filmed by news cameras (as in the case of the mass meeting at Woodhouse Moor which, as *In Vision* revealed, bore elements of similarity to the BBC's own *Look North* footage). However, while the play makes use of documentary tropes, it does not attempt to maintain a consistent simulation of documentary style but employs a range of film-making techniques. Indeed, the production might be said to signal its departure from documentary from the very outset, when, in homage to Pabst, it employs elaborate camera movements and semi-expressionist lightning to show one of the clothing workers, Annie (Josie Lane), on her way to the bus stop to go to work.

Given that the production also avoids using real names, the BBC appears to have accepted that the play could not be mistaken for a documentary in the way it believed *Some Women* might have been. In fact, Huw Wheldon, who had been responsible for the initial ban on

the earlier work, assured the Board that he had insisted that there be 'no deceit' in the making of the film, and had forbidden 'the use of real persons' voices' even 'when the people on the screen were acting their parts'.<sup>33</sup> However, because the production was based on historical events and because it did, at least in part, make use of devices associated with documentary, it proved impossible to escape becoming drawn into arguments about 'balance' that would not normally have been extended to drama.

This was, in fact, an issue that had been gathering momentum since the making of *The Big Flame* which, like *Leeds United!*, had been inspired by actual events (the Liverpool dock strike of 1967). Although there were concerns about its 'documentary' elements, the BBC management eventually decided that the play's fictional status was sufficiently clear to permit it to be transmitted. The incoming Director-General, Charles Curran, however, remained anxious about its political tendentiousness and, in a letter to the Chairman, Lord Hill, argued that it constituted 'a play of political advocacy' that had successfully evaded the Corporation's general 'obligation to balance'. If *The Big Flame* had been a documentary, he suggested, it would not have been shown. It therefore followed that the BBC should not be 'entitled to assume without question' that a drama, capable of producing a similar political 'effect', should be broadcast 'simply because it falls under a different technical classification in television'.<sup>34</sup>

This was an issue to which the BBC returned in the wake of *Leeds United!* As a member of the BBC's Governors observed, if the play was 'wholly fictitious', it was 'very good'; if it was a 'documentary', it was 'too close to the event and very heavily loaded'.<sup>35</sup> Thus, even though *Leeds United!* was accepted to be a drama, the overtness of its political themes, and its partisanship in siding with the rank and file against the union leaders and employers, meant it became exposed to concerns arising from the BBC's commitment to 'balance'. This was particularly so given the prevailing economic and political climate. The early 1970s had witnessed an increasing politicisation of industrial relations, particularly in the wake of the election of Edward Heath's Conservative government in 1970. This culminated in the confrontation between the government and the National Union of Mineworkers that led to the general election of February 1974 which the Conservatives lost. As Ian Trethowan, the BBC's Director-General between 1977 and 1982 (and himself a Conservative), commented later:

[t]he industrial and social tensions of Heath's last two years inevitably caused strain within the BBC ... During Heath's confrontations with

the unions, particularly in the final few months, we began to hear the argument that the BBC should concern itself with the 'national interest'. At least some of the union leaders were clearly bent on undermining our democracy, it was said, and the BBC should not give them too much access to the air. (1984: 143)

The play was, of course, filmed during the last days of the Heath government and edited in the months between the two elections of 1974. During this period the relationship between the government and the unions remained an issue of acute sensitivity and there were indications that the BBC was reluctant to broadcast the programme at this time. When *Leeds United!* was eventually transmitted (over a year after it first went into production), the sense of unease that the play provoked was expressed by the Vice-Chairman of the Board of Governors, Lady Plowden, who questioned whether the BBC should be broadcasting plays that might 'exacerbate tensions' in the current 'industrial and political climate'. Even if *Leeds United!* was a good piece of work, she suggested, it was still right to ask, 'Does it help?'<sup>36</sup> In this respect, the transmission of *Leeds United!* not only prompted a debate about the BBC's commitment to the maintenance of political 'balance' but also the obligations imposed upon a public-service broadcaster at a time of supposed 'national' crisis.

Nevertheless, despite his reservations about politically committed drama, and its defiance of what he took to be both 'balance' and the 'national interest', the Director-General, Charles Curran, did not believe that all work of this kind should be banned. He felt that the matter was less one of principle than of frequency and that measures should be taken to ensure that very few such plays were produced. As he summed up his position for the Board of Governors, 'plays like "Leeds-United!" should be only occasional, and made with care'.<sup>37</sup> However, this was an ambivalent formulation as there were also those within the BBC who believed that the programme had not, in fact, been produced with sufficient 'care'. Thus, in his weighing-up of the BBC's involvement in the production of 'dramatic work of a politically or socially tendentious nature', Alasdair Milne took the view that it was right for the Corporation to make room for 'people of genuine talent', such as Ken Loach and Tony Garnett, but that it ought to be less tolerant of those whom he held to be 'less talented but more obstreperous', a category in which he appeared to include the makers of *Leeds United!* This was a programme, he suggested, where 'the editorial arguments and niceties got out of hand', before venturing the rather ominous prediction that it was unlikely that there would be

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'any more of these'.<sup>38</sup> This might be said to have amounted to more than an idle threat. As previously noted, Milne's paper on 'politically committed' plays was written in response to the revival of Board of Governors' anxieties concerning plays of this type following the transmission of *Days of Hope* (1975), and there does seem to have been a growing determination within the BBC to reduce the number of plays with a 'left-wing bias'. Ken Trodd himself was convinced that there was 'a murky but undoubtedly existing attempt to purge the BBC of some of the "Lefties"' and tells the story of how his own rolling contract with the BBC was not renewed, apparently because he had been confused with Battersby (quoted in Cook 1998: 98).

Although Trodd did continue to work for the BBC, Battersby fared less well and, after *Leeds United!*, he directed only one short play for the BBC, *Post Mortem* (BBC2, 6 March 1975), until the mid 1980s. Battersby was, of course, open about his membership of the Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP) and, as a result, appears to have been viewed with particular concern. As was subsequently revealed, MI5 were involved in the vetting of BBC staff and undoubtedly regarded him as a 'security risk'.<sup>39</sup> According to Hollingsworth and Norton-Taylor (1988: 116), Christopher Morahan successfully resisted MI5 objections to Battersby's employment on *The Operation* and *Leeds United!* However, in the wake of *Leeds United!*, and the growing alarm within the upper echelons of the BBC about the effect of left-wing plays upon its reputation, the opportunities for Battersby to obtain employment diminished. Faced with limited job prospects, Battersby then opted to devote himself to full-time work for the WRP. However, even after he had long since left the party, there was still resistance within the BBC to his employment, and it was only following the intervention of the then Head of Drama, Jonathan Powell, that the producer Stephen Gilbert was able to employ him to direct Farrukh Dhondy's innovative British-Asian drama, *King of the Ghetto* (BBC2, May 1986).

### *Conclusion: Room for the revolutionaries?*

In a self-published book on British television, *The Uses of Broadcasting in Britain*, the anonymous author, 'Gary' (1977: 50), felt that, at a time when the postwar political 'consensus' could be seen to be collapsing, it was legitimate to ask whether there might be 'room for the revolutionaries' within contemporary television to offer 'radical critiques of society'.<sup>40</sup> Roy Battersby's experience of working for the BBC in the late 1960s and early 1970s provides something of



an answer to this question. It is clear that the BBC management and Governors were perturbed by the upsurge of political drama (and emergence of 'politicised' practitioners) during this period. However, it is also evident that the talent of those involved, and the quality of the work that they produced, made it difficult to clamp down on the production of this work (especially on the part of those commissioning it). The 'solution', for management, therefore, appeared to be that, as long as such work was relatively infrequent, it could be tolerated and would stand testimony both to the BBC's liberalism and political independence. This 'solution', however, came under considerable strain during the 1974–5 period owing to the intensification of political and industrial conflicts within British society more generally, the increasing timidity of BBC managers in the face of the uncertainties surrounding the future of broadcasting (partly owing to the establishment of the Annan committee on the future of broadcasting in 1974), and the increasing strength of the attacks upon the BBC for its transmission of such work. As the controversies surrounding Roy Battersby's work indicate, the arguments over 'radical' television drama involved a degree of shift away from concerns with morality, and the blurring of boundaries between 'fact' and 'fiction', towards a preoccupation with political 'balance'. It was, of course, the position of the makers of 'radical' drama, and its defenders, that 'balance' did not operate within an individual programme but across the schedule and that left-wing plays could, therefore, be seen to 'balance' the overwhelmingly conservative character of the majority of TV programmes. However, this, in effect, constituted a challenge to the very terms upon which 'balance' was presumed to operate. As Stuart Hall (1972: 13) argued at around this time, the idea of 'balance' normally applies to 'the legitimate mass parties in the parliamentary system' and, therefore, becomes 'trickier when groups outside the consensus participate, since the grounds of conflict then become the terrain of political legitimacy itself'. Thus, while, by the BBC's own reckoning, 'political' plays constituted a small minority of all drama output, never mind overall programming, this was, nevertheless, an acceptable, and even desirable, 'imbalance' given that the political positions canvassed by productions such as *Leeds United!* and *Days of Hope* were deemed to fall outside the political 'consensus' and, therefore, supposedly 'legitimate' political debate. This does not, of course, mean that 'polemical' plays of this kind did not continue to be made. However, given the way in which they became an overt topic of debate both within and beyond the BBC, they, and those responsible for making them, certainly became more carefully patrolled.

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### Notes

1. "Committed" Plays in Television, Note by Director of Programmes, Television', 17 October 1975, BBCWAC R1/111/12.
2. The growth of enthusiasm for the SLL/WRP amongst television workers may partly be traced to the series of meetings, beginning in 1968, hosted by Tony Garnett to which various representatives of left-wing groups, including the SLL leader, Gerry Healy, were invited to speak. It was these meetings that inspired Trevor Griffiths' play, *The Party* (1973), in which the character of John Tagg (played by Laurence Olivier at the National Theatre) was loosely modelled on Healy. Healy subsequently faced a spectacular fall from grace in the wake of allegations of bullying and sexual abuse of women party members.
3. Minutes of the BBC Board of Governors, 7 November 1974, BBCWAC R1/42/2.
4. This paper began life as a lecture, 'From *The Big Flame* to *Leeds United!*', delivered at the BFI Southbank, 19 November 2009, as part of the 'United Kingdom! Radical Television Drama Before and During Thatcher' season (which I co-programmed). As *The Big Flame* is discussed in some detail in my book on Ken Loach (Hill 2011), this revised version of my paper concentrates on Battersby's work.
5. Memo from Head of Plays, Drama, Television to H.D.G.Tel., 12 June 1967, BBCWAC T47/176/1.
6. Memo from Kenith Trodd, Story Editor, *The Wednesday Play*, to H.P.D.Tel., 21 July 1967, BBCWAC T47/176/1.
7. Letter from Huw Wheldon, Controller of Programmes, Television to Tony Garnett, 29 May 1968, BBCWAC T47/176/1. In his assessment of the programme, Wheldon seems relatively impervious to the aesthetics of the programme, which could hardly be said to be straightforwardly those of documentary.
8. Letter from Paul Fox to Tony Parker, 14 March 1969, BBCWAC T47/176/1.
9. 'Keeping Faith with the Viewer', *Radio Times*, 16 January 1969, p. 4.
10. 'Keeping Faith with the Viewer; A letter to the editor', *Radio Times*, 13 February 1969, p. 2. Both the original essay and letter of reply are reprinted in full in Petley (1997) which discusses them in the context of the debates that have historically attached to the work of Ken Loach.
11. Although called *Five Women*, Tony Parker's original book in fact consists of interviews with six women, ending with an appendix dealing with a seventeen-year-old Millie who has ended up in prison despite having committed no crime. The original television version includes Millie but dispenses with the first interviewee, 'Carol Dean'. It also alters the order of the interviews as they appear in the book which, as Parker (1965: 15) indicates, had been planned to chart 'different points on the scale of experience of imprisonment'.
12. Memo from Executive Producer, *Omnibus* to H.F.G.Tel., 16 April 1969, BBCWAC T47/176/1.
13. Minutes of a meeting of the General Advisory Council, 22 October 1975, BBCWAC R78/2507/1.
14. Letter from Tony Garnett to Huw Wheldon (C.P.Tel.), 6 June 1968, BBCWAC T47/176/1. In this respect, Garnett was not only disputing the firmness of the claimed distinction between drama and documentary but also the presumed association of documentary with 'truth' and of drama with 'fiction'.

15. Efforts to obtain a viewing copy through both the BBC and the BFI have so far proved fruitless suggesting that, despite the historic importance of the footage that the programme contained, the print has been destroyed.
16. This quotation is from the transcript of the 'final mix' held in the BBC written archives, BBCWAC T14/3093/1.
17. Many of the presentations appear in written form in Cooper (1968). Hewison (1986: 134–9) provides a useful account of the event, noting some of the conflicting attitudes towards violence to which the event gave rise (some of which might be said to have carried over into Battersby's film).
18. Memo from Head of Science and Features, Television to Roy Battersby, 23 April 1968, BBCWAC T14/3093/1.
19. Letter from Head of Features Group, Television to Roy Battersby, 9 September 1968, BBCWAC T47/177/1.
20. Memo from Head of Features Group, Television, to Head of Science and Features, Television, 29 August 1968, BBCWAC T47/177/1.
21. Letter from Roy Battersby to Aubrey Singer, Head of Features Group, Television, 16 September 1968, BBCWAC T47/177/1.
22. Letter from Roy Battersby to Max Morgan-Witts, 9 October 1968, BBCWAC T14/3093/1.
23. Letter from Head of Features Group, Television to Roy Battersby, 9 September 1968, BBCWAC T47/177/1.
24. Roger Smith was one of the key figures in the development of BBC television drama during the 1960s, working as story editor on a number of series including *Studio 4* (1962), *Teletales* (1963–4), *First Night* (1963–4) and *The Wednesday Play* (for which he recruited Tony Garnett as an assistant story editor). Like Battersby, he became a member of the SLL/WRP.
25. Memo from Head of Plays, Drama, Television, to J. A. Norris, Assistant Secretary, 6 March 1973, BBCWAC R78/2647/1.
26. Memo from M.D.Tel. to D.G., 20 March 1973, R78/2647/1.
27. 'Draft standard reply by the Director-General to complaints about "The Operation"', BBCWAC R78/2647/1. Rather oddly, the programme's criticism of the central character's fetishistic fascination with money and power (to the extent of dressing him up as a Nazi) does not appear to have registered with all of the play's opponents who attacked its alleged amorality. As a result, the BBC's letter of reply felt the need to spell out that the 'writer's aim' was 'to condemn and not to condone the corrupt world of his imagining'.
28. Memo from Head of Plays to J. A. Norris, BBCWAC R78/2647/1. The programme was invested with an added dimension when a sex scandal involving Lord Lambton and Earl Jellicoe hit the headlines barely two months later. Given that two of the scenes in the play – involving photography and the use of a two-way mirror – bore a degree of resemblance to the way in which a *News of the World* photographer had obtained pictures of Lambton and a prostitute, there has been some speculation that the programme may also have been a political embarrassment to the government. It is, however, difficult to identify who exactly would have been aware of Lambton's activities at the time of the play's transmission (see Sandbrook 2011: 468–71 for an account of the scandal).
29. Meeting of the Board of Governors, 21 November 1974, BBCWAC R1/42/2.
30. While the play does clearly concur with the WRP's analysis of a 'crisis of leadership' within the Labour movement, its 'anti-Stalinist' polemics against the Communist Party does seem to strike an unnecessarily sectarian note. Although

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Welland insisted that his account of events was firmly rooted in research, the play struggles to invest the CP shop steward's treachery with political and psychological plausibility. Thus, while the production deliberately keeps the number of domestic scenes to a minimum in order to highlight actions in the public sphere, its analysis of the strike's collapse depends, nonetheless, on the insertion of a dramatically unconvincing scene at the official's home in which he denounces the women strikers as 'animals' to his wife. For a discussion of the political ideas of the SLL/WRP during this period, and their appeal to those in the 'entertainment world', see Shipley (1976: 79–91).

31. An edited version of an interview I conducted with Roy Battersby and Ken Trodd at the BFI Southbank, 25 November 2009, in which the issue of 'bad language' is discussed, may be found at <http://www.bfi.org.uk/live/series/448>.
32. Meeting of the Board of Governors, 7 November 1974, BBCWAC R1/42/2.
33. Ibid.
34. Memo from C. J. Curran to the Chairman, 21 February 1969, BBCWAC R78/2327/1.
35. Meeting of the Board of Governors, 7 November 1974, BBCWAC R1/42/2.
36. Meeting of the Board of Governors, 21 November 1974, BBCWAC R1/42/2.
37. Ibid.
38. "Committed" Plays in Television, Note by Director of Programmes, Television', 17 October 1975, BBCWAC R1/111/12. Milne had, in fact, been drawn into a protracted dispute over the use of a freelance editor on the production when the matter was 'referred upwards' to him.
39. Although MI5's labelling of those involved in the production of radical television drama as security risks appears to have been primarily political in character, the extent of hostility to the WRP's activities within the security services was revealed in September 1975 when the police raided a WRP education centre in Derbyshire on the grounds that the party was a military-style organisation that possessed arms. Six members of the WRP, including Battersby and the party's most famous members Corin and Vanessa Redgrave, subsequently took a legal case for libel against the *Observer* for its publication of an article about the organisation that had coincided with the raid. Although the jury found that the plaintiffs had been libelled, they were not awarded damages on the grounds that their reputation had not been materially injured (a judgement that seems to suggest that, such was the perceived public stock of the WRP, that it could not fall any lower) (*The Times*, 10 November 1978, p. 2).
40. In a story itself eloquent of the times, the volume was apparently commissioned by a left-wing publisher but subsequently rejected as 'political ghetto-writing'. The author then opted to self-publish a limited run of a spirit-duplicated version available through subscription.

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