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Jim Allen: Radical Drama Beyond *Days of Hope*

Andy Willis

Due to a desire to establish television as a serious medium, television drama has often been seen as a forum for writers, with names such as David Mercer, Dennis Potter and Trevor Griffiths identified by critics as the driving force, or *auteur*, behind the works that bear their names rather than, as in much writing about film, the director. However, while this has been so, there are also many examples of writers whose contribution to television writing has been much less celebrated, often due to their close collaboration with a high-profile director who in many critics' view remains the most influential contributor to the final piece of work. One practitioner who arguably has failed to get the critical credit he is due is Jim Allen, a writer still perhaps best known for his work with one such high-profile director, Ken Loach.

Allen, who died in 1999, was a Manchester-based, overtly socialist dramatist who worked successfully in both film and television. His writing career began in the mid-1960s when he was invited to contribute scripts for Granada Television's *Coronation Street* (1960–), and over the next thirty-plus years Allen's work would engage with and reflect many of the key shifts and changes within British television and film. His last produced script, for the feature film *Land and Freedom*, appeared in 1995. In the intervening thirty or so years, he was responsible for thirty-eight episodes of the Salford-set soap opera (1965–7, two episodes co-written with John Finch); two BBC TV *Wednesday Plays* (*The Lump*, 1967, and *The Big Flame*, 1969); a single contribution to Granada's *Saturday Night Theatre* (*In the Heel of the Hunt*, 1973); five BBC TV *Plays for Today* (*The Rank and File*, 1971; *A Choice of Evils*, 1977; *The Spongers*, 1978; *United Kingdom*, 1981; *Willie's Last Stand*, 1982); two major BBC television series (*Days of Hope*, 1975; *The Gathering Seed*, 1983); three feature films (*Hidden Agenda*, 1989; *Raining Stones*, 1993; and *Land and Freedom*, 1995),

Jim Allen: Radical Drama Beyond Days of Hope

as well as a number of other shorter works for Granada, London Weekend Television, Rediffusion and BBC2's *Thirty Minute Theatre* strand such as *The Hard Word* (1966), *The Man Beneath* (1967), *The Pub Fighter* (1968) and *Walt, King of the Dumper* (1971). As well as this, Allen also scripted the hugely controversial theatre play, *Perdition*, which was withdrawn by the Royal Court Theatre on the eve of its opening in 1987.¹ With this impressive body of work, one would suspect that Allen's contribution to British television and film would have been widely discussed and justifiably celebrated; however, in recent years, his writing seems to have become increasingly undervalued, with Allen's name often marginalised in a manner that, particularly when one reflects upon his output, should be challenged.

Allen's best known television work still remains for many *Days of Hope*, a four-part series of films broadcast by BBC TV in 1975 and set between the last years of the First World War and the General Strike of 1926. The series marked what many have seen as the highpoint of his collaboration with director Ken Loach and producer Tony Garnett and is still cited as one of the most important pieces of British television in the 1970s. As Tony Williams (2004) has put it: '*Days of Hope* still remains an enduring legacy of that lost world of radical BBC television drama that no longer exists in today's "dumbed-down" Corporation . . . the series was political dynamite then and now.' Yet, perhaps due to the enormous impact of that series, Allen's work after *Days of Hope* has not received the same amount of critical interest, this despite the fact that, as Paul Madden wrote as late as 1981: 'His future work promises to prove as provocative as ever as it sites politics amongst ordinary people and their potential capacity to transform their everyday lives' (1981: 53). Indeed, works that appeared after Madden's comment, such as *United Kingdom*, *Hidden Agenda*, *Raining Stones* and *Land and Freedom* suggest, on reflection, that he certainly was right. Furthermore, any argument, such as this one, for an acknowledgement of Jim Allen as a key British film and television writer needs to reflect on his career a little more widely.

In this article, I want to address a number of issues thrown up in relation to Allen's writing post-*Days of Hope*: first, how his career, taken as a whole, provides an interesting way of tracing the history of political television drama in the UK, in particular the seemingly central place of politically motivated socialist dramas in the 1970s and their increasing marginalisation as the 1980s progressed. Second, there are the problems thrown up by the identification of practitioners, such as Allen, with what subsequently become key works in the writing

Andy Willis

of television histories, particularly when one of the collaborators has a high critical profile. Finally, I want to begin to reclaim some of Allen's later television writing, in particular *United Kingdom*, from what I would argue is a wholly unjustified critical neglect. In order to do this, one has to overcome a major hurdle, the fact that many of Allen's most well-known works also bear the name of one of the UK's best known film-makers, Ken Loach.

'Getting over' Ken Loach

Undoubtedly, one of the main reasons for Jim Allen's critical neglect is his close collaboration and association with director Ken Loach. Indeed, in much of the writing on British television drama that does touch upon Allen's work, he is most often lumped together with director Loach and producer Tony Garnett, creating a Loach/Garnett/Allen triumvirate. This shorthand is, of course, useful as it acknowledges the creative input of more than just a director and rightly sees television drama as a collaborative endeavour. However, ultimately in the case of Allen, this is also somewhat limiting. Loach is now often labelled as primarily a *film* director, a fact reflected in the titles of two of the major English-language academic studies of his work, George McKnight's edited collection *Agent of Challenge and Defiance: The Films of Ken Loach* (1997) and Jacob Leigh's *The Cinema of Ken Loach: Art in the Service of the People* (2002), both of which have the label 'film' or 'cinema' in their title. As is usual in these cases, Loach, as film director, is credited as being the major creative force behind his work and as time has gone on and Loach has made more and more theatrically released feature films that have become better known by contemporary audiences than his television work, the contributions of his collaborators have been overlooked as of lesser importance. As Derek Paget has observed, this has meant traditional notions of film authorship, which have posited creative dominance as lying with the director, have come to the fore at the expense of the scriptwriter's contribution (1998: 158).

An example of this can be found in George McKnight's analysis of *Raining Stones* (1997: 88–92) which fails to even mention Allen's creative presence, preferring to link the work to other, non-Allen scripted, Loach television dramas and films such as *Cathy Come Home* (1966), *Family Life* (1971) and *Ladybird Ladybird* (1994). This oversight is even more startling when one considers that *Raining Stones* is set and indeed was shot in what was then Allen's home town of Middleton in Greater Manchester. Loach himself seems well aware of

Jim Allen: Radical Drama Beyond Days of Hope

this fact when he observed that Allen's participation in the film was essential:

After *Hidden Agenda* and particularly *Riff-Raff*, I felt I wanted to work with Jim on the subject that I think he knows best—the people of the area where he lives in Manchester . . . Of all the writers I know, he's the one most rooted in his own experience and I felt he would be strongest writing a contemporary story from a little anecdote dispatched, as it were, from the front line and which revealed how ordinary people were coping in that part of the North at the time. (Fuller 1998: 91)

In short, Loach's increased profile as *the* auteur of the Left has had the effect of diminishing that of one of his most important collaborators, Allen. In fact, Loach himself seems sharply aware and critical of this and has continually argued the case for the importance of Allen and his other writers to both his work and, in Allen's case, his political perspective. Loach reflected this view when he was interviewed by John Hill, stating that: 'I think writers are the most undervalued people in films, and for me it has always been a fundamental of doing any project that I work side-by-side with the writer . . . But Jim does the writing' (Hill, in McKnight 1997: 164).

However, while the director himself clearly sees the significance of the writer to the creation of his work, it might be argued that the Loach 'method' of shooting and the supposed improvisation techniques he uses with his actors has further led to the marginalisation of the writer in many people's eyes. Again, Loach has been quick to re-centre Allen's contribution to their work in this regard: 'Jim writes a certain kind of muscular, powerful dialogue very well; he's unique in the way he captures the rhythms of working-class speech.' When asked how much of the original script makes it onto the screen, he replied: 'A lot . . . Actors tend to feel they've done more than they have because when you get to the editing, you often cut back to the script' (Fuller 1998: 47). This misconception that Loach and his actors somehow create the script as they go seems to have been widely repeated in journalistic accounts of his work with many referring to his improvisational techniques and this in turn works to suggest the writer in this context is less important.

In a sense, then, in order to explore the writing career of Jim Allen, one has to acknowledge that it involves more than just his work in collaboration with Ken Loach. It is by looking at productions that Loach did not direct that one can begin to see Allen's vital input to both that work with Loach and that of other directors. This, in turn, can begin a reassessment of the importance of Jim Allen as a scriptwriter. This is perhaps nowhere more obvious than when one

Andy Willis

considers his television work in the late 1970s and early 1980s, often in collaboration with director Roland Joffé. Indeed, throughout his career, Allen worked with a number of other influential directors such as Jack Gold (*The Lump*; *Walt, King of the Dumper*), Ridley Scott (*The Hard Word*, 1966), Roy Battersby (*The Punchy and the Fairy*, 1973) and Leslie Woodhead (*In the Heel of the Hunt*), producing dramas that always maintained his clear, politically informed perspective on his characters and the worlds they inhabited. In fact, if we can remove ourselves slightly from the idea of authorship and approach Allen's work in other ways, we might gain a greater sense of the wider significance of his work. One such approach might be to consider how his career intersects with, and reacts to, some of the most significant shifts within British television and film from the 1960s to the late 1990s.

Allen in context

Taken as a whole, Jim Allen's career intersects with many of the key issues and shifts that faced left-wing writers working in television from the mid-1960s. He began writing for the popular drama *Coronation Street* but by his own account found the formula restrictive (Allen 2003: 88). One oft-repeated story suggests he offered a storyline for the soap that involved all the cast boarding a bus for a day out in the Lake District only for the bus to crash off a cliff killing all the occupants. Unsurprisingly, after this suggestion it was not long before he left Granada to pursue more politically charged projects at the BBC, at the time when its *Wednesday Play* strand became *the* place to be for serious television writers (Allen 2003: 88–9). It was within this supportive environment that Allen would begin to produce work that would soon establish him as an influential, committed political writer.

A key development during this period was his working relationship with producer Tony Garnett who had encouraged him to write about his own experiences after the pair had been put in contact by another *Coronation Street* writer, John Finch (Madden 1981: 42). Jack Gold also recalled Garnett's support when they were developing Allen's first major drama, *The Lump*, stating in an interview with *Sight and Sound* that 'before I arrived on the scene, Tony Garnett, the producer, had spent some time with Jim Allen, telling him he could write what he liked' (Madden and Wilson 1974: 135). In the increasingly politicised late 1960s, as Stephen Lacey notes:

For Garnett, Allen was that rare thing, a working-class writer, with an ear for the everyday cadences and speech patterns of working people, who

Jim Allen: Radical Drama Beyond Days of Hope

had not been educated out of his class . . . Allen was also well-connected and had the means of providing his collaborators with direct access to the contexts that he was writing about – the Labour Movement, the building trade and the docks.’ (2007: 62)

It was certainly due to Garnett’s support, both creatively and politically, that Allen was able to produce the television scripts with which he would make his initial impact: *The Lump*, *The Big Flame* and *The Rank and File*. All of these pieces, like other work of Allen’s during this period, were set firmly in the world of industry and industrial relations and involved telling stories of political struggle from the perspective of the workers.

Stuart Laing has argued that *The Lump*, *The Big Flame* and *The Rank and File*, Allen’s major single TV plays of the late 1960s and early 1970s, ‘constituted by far the most advanced televisual statements of the political and social conditions of the industrial working class made in that period’ (1986: 159). Laing’s reference to the ‘industrial’ settings of these works is significant as the later works I want to consider in a little more detail here marked a clear shift in emphasis away from such industrial workplace settings towards more community-based representation of that same working class as unemployment across the UK rapidly increased. However, despite the later, clear change in the settings and concerns of Allen’s works, for many the world of industrial disputes, union meetings and strikes would remain closely associated with his writing.

These industrially set works of the late 1960s and early 1970s were followed by the four-part series *Days of Hope*, which quickly became a much discussed and controversial work, most famously for academics in the pages of the journal *Screen*.² With this series of plays, Jim Allen became firmly established as a major writer within British television and one who sparked a range of debates about the politics and form of radical television drama in the 1970s. By 1981, Allen was seen as such a key television writer that Paul Madden’s chapter addressing his work up to that date appeared in George W. Brandt’s landmark edited collection, *British Television Drama*. However, Allen’s work of this period also, rather reductively, became synonymous with a certain visual style, approach and subject matter and few substantial critical considerations of his work followed Madden’s lead.

This rather dismissive attitude to Allen as a writer of industrial conflict and the pigeonholing of his writing style is confirmed by Ken Loach who remembers taking a script to the British Film Institute production board and it being rejected due to the fact that they ‘had

Andy Willis

an image of what Jim Allen's writing was like and superimposed that on the script' (Tulloch 1990: 160). It might be argued that it is this attitude and assumption that 'everybody knows what a Jim Allen play looks like and is about' that has meant that the breadth of plays and films that followed *Days of Hope* have failed to receive any sustained critical consideration with many of those who mention the work simply assuming they knew what it was like without looking at it in any great detail. For example, after *Days of Hope*, Allen occasionally returned to working in popular television drama, writing a number of scripts for Granada's long-running daytime programme *Crown Court* (1972–84). As one might expect, his scripts for episodes 'The Extremists' (1975), 'Tell the Truth and Shame the Devil' (1976) and 'Those in Peril' (1976) did attempt to infuse the strict format with more political stories. However, the fact that Allen worked within a more popular, even generic, format rather undermines the perspective of those who have simplistically seen Allen's writing in a more reductive, narrow way.

Indeed, the writers of television drama histories have often failed fully to acknowledge the place of Allen's later contributions to *Play for Today* in the wider shifts that were occurring in British television regarding the production of drama in the early 1980s. Producer Kenith Trodd, speaking at a celebration of Allen's work in Manchester in 2000, seemed aware of it when he stated that 'Jim's television play, *United Kingdom*, was shown in 1981, just at the beginning of the Thatcher era. It was really the last left-wing epic, before the period where most TV drama has to either have the commerciality of a movie, the softness of a soap or the pedigree of a great novel'.³ The history of *United Kingdom* would also itself indicate the hard times that left-wing writers and directors, who had established themselves in the late 1960s and 1970s, were about to experience as the television institutions seemingly began to embrace Thatcherism. The play, despite a large investment from the BBC, was only shown once and was not repeated, perhaps reflecting the unease of those in charge at the Corporation regarding such charged, left-wing political writing.

By the 1980s and with the impact of Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government on the institutions of British television starting to bite, Allen and other writers associated with the left were beginning to find commissions more difficult to secure. As Lez Cooke has observed:

In the more reactionary climate of Thatcherism, a loss of editorial freedom had political consequences and it became increasingly difficult for radical or progressive drama to get commissioned in the 1980s and

Jim Allen: Radical Drama Beyond Days of Hope

virtually impossible after *Play for Today* ended in 1984... In the new market-led broadcasting environment, the political freedoms the writers, directors and producers had enjoyed for most of the 1960s and 1970s came under threat and opportunities for alternative voices to be heard severely diminished. (2003: 140–1).

In Allen's case, a projected play about the rise of fascism was stopped, the writer felt, due to the fact that some producers were increasingly fearful for their jobs and not willing to be associated with writers with clear socialist credentials such as himself. Later, Allen would describe them as 'a league of frightened men' and recalled that:

There were things we wanted to do and couldn't do... We went to the BBC and told them we wanted to make a film on the rise of fascism in Germany. We crossed into the East before the Wall came down, talked to some old German Communist Party members, discussed the Stalinist policy which divided the German workers and let Hitler in. I was starting to write it but the project was stopped. (Slaughter 1999)

For left-wing writers like Jim Allen, television would never again provide the supportive environment that it had done previously and he, like others, would have to negotiate this new world in his writing. The 1982 *Play for Today*, *Willie's Last Stand*, perhaps reflects his negotiation of these changes. It contains a less stridently political storyline and style of writing than one might expect of the writer, telling the story of a middle-aged roofer, played by Paul Freeman, who feels he may now be past his best and so decides to go into town for one last blow out. A man who had once been secure of his place, Willie's feelings of dislocation with the world around him perhaps reflected somewhat Allen's changed relationship with the BBC in particular and television more generally.

Now working without his most significant late 1970s collaborator, Roland Joffé, director of both *The Spongers* and *United Kingdom*, Allen's last major television work came in 1983 with the loosely autobiographical six-part BBC2 series *The Gathering Seed*. Directed by Tom Clegg, someone more associated with London-based dramas like *The Sweeney* (1975–8), Allen was said to have been very disappointed with the final realisation of his work.⁴ This was perhaps due to the fact that it bears the mark of his continued negotiation with the changing political climate in television and the fact that his work no longer commanded quite the same commitment and investment it once had when he worked with the likes of Tony Garnett and

Andy Willis

Kenith Trodd. *The Gathering Seed*, broadly speaking, takes the form of a family saga. It begins in 1936 and, echoing *Days of Hope*, follows the growing politicisation of a young man, Joe Henshaw (played by David Philburn). One of the most interesting things about *The Gathering Seed* is the formal negotiation between Allen's realist drive and the attempts by the production team to create a type of TV naturalism that had more in common with the theatre than the observational styles of directors Ken Loach and Roland Joffé.

For example, Episode One contains a long scene where, shown in great detail, Bob Henshaw (played by Paul Copley) washes himself after work. The sequence is striking in its theatrical feel and the use of a studio set for the production's interiors enhances this feel. Previously, many of the major dramas that Allen had worked on were shot entirely on film, reflecting their prestigious status within institutions such as the BBC. Now, as writers of the left such as Allen were becoming more marginalised, his scripts were being realised in a much more conventional mixture of studio and location work. This clearly suggests that the later television work was somewhat compromised and while this shift made the work's visual style and form less striking, it may have been as much due to institutional constraints rather than simply the particular director attached to the project.

After the disappointment of *The Gathering Seed*, Allen did not see another of his works produced for the television screen. However, he was to reappear six years later, once again in harness with Loach, as the writer of three theatrically released feature films between 1989 and 1995: *Hidden Agenda*, *Raining Stones* and *Land and Freedom*. Between *The Gathering Seed* and *Hidden Agenda*, like many on the left, Allen had struggled to find commissions as television moved to the right and ultimately found that he could only get support for feature film work as the institutions of British television increasingly closed their doors to radical dramatists. The trajectory of the latter part of Allen's career reveals the kinds of pressures that were felt by writers whose work had in many ways helped define what committed, political television drama was in the 1960s and 1970s. The success of Allen's film scripts in the late 1980s and early 1990s suggest that this freezing out was not due to the quality of the work he was producing as a writer but the political agenda of those now in control of television's commissioning process. However, before he was eased out of television, Allen had produced some of his most impressive work.

Jim Allen: Radical Drama Beyond Days of Hope

Re-visiting Allen's later television works: The Spongers and United Kingdom

As argued earlier, one reason for the marginalisation of some of Allen's later television works is that they lacked the industrial or historical setting of the more lauded Loach/Garnett collaborations. At a time when the left generally was on the backfoot in the face of Thatcher's onslaught on the unions and when many found themselves out of work, Allen sought to express his socialist ideas in scripts that focused on ordinary people and community politics. This shift in focus reflected the downsizing of British industry that was taking place and the impact of mass unemployment on working-class communities. As Paul Madden put it, these scripts site 'politics amongst ordinary people and their potential capacity to transform their everyday lives' (1981: 53). *The Spongers* and *United Kingdom's* explorations of the nuts and bolts of community-based political organisation and Allen's continued refusal to present unrealistic 'happy endings' to his protagonists' political struggles (while always maintaining a level of class-based optimism) reveal these works to be enormously pertinent to those changing times. The ways in which they explore the left's shift away from the politics of the workplace towards that of the community reveal Allen as a writer still committed to a dramatic engagement with how socialism could offer relevant solutions to the problems facing working people. In the years that have followed their broadcast in 1978 and 1981 respectively, these community-based, more local, dramas, while often mentioned in passing, have not quite been given the detailed analysis they deserve.

Of the two works, *The Spongers* is perhaps the best known and more familiar. It was first broadcast on BBC TV in January 1978 and was Allen's first collaboration with director Roland Joffé. The play is set on a housing estate at the time of the Queen's Silver Jubilee and focuses on the daily struggle of a depressed mother, Pauline (played by Christine Hargreaves), to make ends meet without her husband to help her. Various committed community workers, social workers who are compromised by their institutions, Labour Party local councillors who are more concerned with making their budgets work than the needs of the people who elected them, all become part of the story as Pauline's life spirals downward and ends with her killing her children and herself. Downbeat but as ever with Allen ultimately always striving to be optimistic, the play moves significantly away from the industrial settings of the writer's earlier works. However, like plays such as *The Lump* and *The Rank and File*, it is very much a reaction to highly contemporary social and political issues. As with many of Jim Allen's

Andy Willis

scripts, it presents an argument about the condition of the working class and suggests how they might best act in their own interests rather than leaving decisions to those elected representatives who, as so often in Allen's writing, always let down those they are meant to speak and stand up for. *The Spongers* is constructed in a way that presents a political position and, as one would expect from Jim Allen, does not attempt to disguise this fact with any pretence of objectivity.

Stephen Lacey has argued that, as well as marking a general shift in the setting of his work, *The Spongers* also exemplified a shift in Allen's use of character. Lacey states that much of the writer's early work tended to offer audiences characters who, through their political formation, had arrived at something of a privileged position. These would tend to be those in the drama whose experiences are fused with a clear political perspective and who 'have superior knowledge of the situation, an awareness of what is happening that is denied others, and who provide the analysis that the narrative cannot represent in other ways. Regan in *The Big Flame*, Yorky in *The Lump* and Ben in *Days of Hope* are important examples' (Lacey 2007: 103). Lacey goes on to identify that Pauline, 'unlike some other Allen protagonists... is neither articulate nor in a possession of a privileged viewpoint from which she – and we – can judge and analyse her situation' (2007: 105).

In fact, it might be said that in *The Spongers* Pauline is someone who is acted upon rather than acting. The result of this is that, as her life unravels, she is unable to construct any meaningful articulation of or resistance to what is happening to both her and by extension her family. Pauline's increasing isolation is reflected by the fact that, unlike many of Allen's other more activist central characters, she is not part of or drawn towards those offering any organised political resistance. It is perhaps this lack of overt didacticism that has resulted in *The Spongers* being one of Allen's most repeated works. However, this perception of it being a less clearly political work is somewhat wide of the mark; with this play, Allen had simply shifted his analysis from the industrial floor to the community.

The changes in Allen's work of this period are further reflected in the visual style employed by Joffé. While superficially similar to that associated with Ken Loach, in *The Spongers*, Joffé, as again Lacey notes, 'extends the observational style to ever-longer takes, often in mid/long shot.' The effect is that 'the viewer is invited to observe and sympathise, but not align him/herself with her' (2007: 105). This distanciation allows for a more critical relationship between a character's actions and our assessment of and reaction to them. While this may suggest utilisation of techniques associated with more 'documentary' forms,

Jim Allen: Radical Drama Beyond Days of Hope

such a reading of the drama's observational visual style would be at odds with the highly structured narrative organisation that is utilised by Allen in the play. In *The Spongers*, sympathy for Pauline and her situation is ultimately the dominant position offered to the viewer through this very particular organisation of the narrative. This is achieved most clearly through the juxtaposition of scenes that show the decisions made by those in political power, such as the local Labour councillors, with those that reveal the day-to-day impact of these choices upon Pauline, her family and in particular her disabled daughter, Paula (Paula McDonagh). For example, a scene of a council meeting where it is decided to withdraw the funding for specialist residential education for the disabled is followed by one of Paula removed from the specialist and supportive Arkwright Home and placed in a local 'old folks' home.

This achieves what is a very difficult combination: that of both a distance from the drama's central character which is heightened by the visual style employed and, as we witness the results of political decisions and the fact that there is nothing she can do to change the decisions made in closed meetings, sympathy for her. The latter is vital as the drama arrives at its rather harrowing conclusion and Pauline kills her children and herself. Due to the narrative structure adopted by Allen, reaction to the difficult ending is one of critical distance and yet, informed by our witnessing Pauline's mental disintegration, sympathetic understanding, if not actual support, for Pauline's actions. The careful structure of the drama places the ultimate criticism not at Pauline's door, even though we have seen her kill her children in a rather premeditated way, but at those who failed to support and represent the needs of her and others like her even though, most obviously in the case of Councillor Conway (Bernard Atha), they had been elected to do so.

However, in an ending that reflects Allen's continued optimism in the working class' potential for resistance, Pauline's actions are not simply accepted and her cousin states as the bodies are being removed from the flats, 'she should have stayed and fought like the rest of us'. In Allen's writing, our sympathy and emotional reaction to events are undercut by a voice of resistance, someone telling us that the struggle must continue and offering a different, more optimistic way of reacting to the shortcomings of local and national politicians and political structures. For Allen, the end of the story is not on screen but in people's reaction to the story and their hoped-for willingness to accept the logical position that the narrative structure has led them to, that is one that sees community action and representation as an

Andy Willis

alternative to the existing structures of local government. It is this focus on local representation which is explored in greater detail in Allen's next realised collaboration with Joffé, *United Kingdom*.

This time produced by Kenith Trodd and broadcast in 1981, the play had originally been called *The Commune* when the writer was first working on the scripts in the late 1970s (Madden 1981: 54). In the initial versions, the play had once again been set on the Langley Estate in Middleton, the area that had provided the setting for *The Spongers*. However, by the time of filming, the action had shifted to Newcastle though continued interest in the politics of community remained. *United Kingdom* offers an expansive engagement with the politics of the day and running at around 140 minutes provides Allen with one of his largest canvases. The play tells the story of a group of local councillors who refuse to simply accept and implement national government-imposed rate rises and cuts to local services. Instead they argue that they were elected to protect the interests of the local community and will continue to act in a manner that reflects this fact. The conflict that ensues leads to the occupation by residents of a large housing estate and their refusal to pay increased rents. In turn, this leads to the unleashing of an authoritarian police which uses force to smash the community's resistance.

Once again, Allen chooses to explore politics at a local, community level and, in this instance, the local clearly clashes with the national in terms of both national government and the Labour Party in a way that the characters who inhabited *The Spongers* did not. This conflict is established across a number of early scenes when a radio commentator is heard outlining the situation the local council has got itself into. It is here, at the outset of the play, that we hear that a number of local councillors have stood against increases in the rates and cuts to services and have now got to deal with the national government imposing a Commissioner to take control of the running of the local council. Alongside the initial conflict established between the Commissioner and the councillors Allen inserts the local Chief Constable, James McBride (played by Colin Welland), who stands for a no tolerance, law and order platform and who, as the play moves towards its climax, will increasingly play an important role as its real representative as the state decides to re-establish its control over the area.

These early scenes of the play also present us with an optimistic group of local representatives who are clearly connected to the community they have been elected to represent. They contrast sharply with the likes of Councillor Conway from *The Spongers* as they move from public meeting to doorstep attempting to get their ideas across

Jim Allen: Radical Drama Beyond Days of Hope

and keep the community informed regarding what is going on. These scenes lead into and contrast with the arrival at the town hall of the non-elected Commissioner (Peter Copley) sent by central government to take over control and effectively send the elected council into exile. At his first press conference, he explains why he has been sent. This offers Allen the opportunity to contrast the approach of central government with his already somewhat heroic local councillors. The Commissioner, in what he terms 'a brief statement', explains at length the rationale for his presence, stating that:

The Secretary of State for the Environment has exercised the powers made available to him under the Local Government Emergency Powers Act. He has appointed me to act as Commissioner to manage the affairs of this local authority for six months from today. In this authority, the District Auditor found that the council was failing in its duty to the general body of ratepayers and he made a series of recommendations designed to restore financial order to the council's affairs. The council refuse to implement any of these recommendations, in particular they refuse to make any real reductions in services or staffing or to increase rents to an economic level. They thereupon attracted financial penalties from the Secretary of State but refused to make these up either by way of rate increases or reductions in their level of spending. This left the Council with a projected deficit of spending of at least £60 million over the current financial year and there was a real and urgent danger that local administration in the area would break down in a matter of weeks or even days. As a result, Parliament has asked to approve the Emergency Powers Act and my appointment has followed. My task is to restore orderly administration to the area and to secure the financial viability of the local council with due regard to the interests of the ratepayers and the people who are dependent upon the council's services but all within the framework of central government's economic policies.

There is no doubt in examining this lengthy piece of dialogue from the soundtrack that Allen was at pains to explore the conflict between the Tory central government's policies and those wanting to represent the needs of local communities. The Commissioner's words begin to suggest, in no uncertain terms, the extent to which the former would go to maintain control. The script for the Commissioner's speech reveals that Allen was more than capable of writing the legalese heavy language of officialdom, as well as the more emotional talk of the councillors with whom, as a left-wing writer, he had more sympathy.

The press conference that follows the Commissioner's speech is juxtaposed with a number of impassioned speeches at a public meeting

Andy Willis

where the exiled councillors continue to explain their position in a manner, unlike that of the Commissioner, which relates the issues in play to the daily experiences of the community. In a smaller work, these two positions may have been at the crux of the debate and the drama; however, as *United Kingdom* was a more ambitious and lengthy work, alongside these positions, Allen chooses to insert a third response to the events that are unfolding in the town: that of the Chief Constable McBride. His views are articulated a little later in a speech to the Home Secretary and other figures of the establishment delivered at a meeting clearly held in secret and behind closed doors. Significantly, this meeting, with its clandestine nature highlighted by the rather faceless characters present and Joffé's decision to include very few shots of faces to assist our identification, is very different to the bright public meetings taking place in the open air. These contrasting scenes—the secret meeting, the press conference and the public meeting—establish the various levels of secrecy Allen sees in relation to the actions of those involved in the politics of the play.

Ultimately, the view of the state towards local democracy and the extent to which it will go in order to maintain control is made clear through McBride's speech where he contrasts the common-place view of the 'Bobby on the beat' with his vision for a police force designed primarily to maintain law and order whatever the cost. This sequence seems to reveal most clearly Allen's view of the state and the fact that the likes of the Commissioner only serve to mask the real intentions of the ruling class. In a presentation that is at the heart of Allen's argument about the reality of the police, its approach to law and order and its future role in society, McBride states that:

... We have a Parliament that is a forum for pressure groups. We have a party political system which by its very nature prevents Parliament from taking objective decisions. We have politicians and a press which, it seems, at times wilfully misunderstands the subjects with which they deal... Gentlemen, we face an uphill task. I think that this collapse of societal values means that we are fast approaching a time when people will begin to lose confidence in those in authority, those who have the duty to lead the nation or like us preserve its order... In the future... what will be the matter of greatest concern will be the attempts to subvert the authority of the State. Acts of sedition aimed at causing problems for the State and challenging, yes challenging, the rule of democracy and law... The gap between the citizen and the police is widening... Gentlemen, it is vital that when we are faced with such disruptions, we show beyond any shadow of a doubt that we the police are in control and intend to remain in control.

Jim Allen: Radical Drama Beyond Days of Hope

With this suggestion of a willingness, ultimately, to establish a police state if need be, the battle lines for the play's drama are very much set within these early sequences. The extents to which the police are willing to go are reinforced by the fact that, not soon after McBride's speech, we see a meeting of the councillors' action committee being bugged by men we soon learn are from the police. The increased conflict between the local council and the national government means that eventually, as the play reaches its climax, McBride's vision of policing the nation, up until that point only articulated behind closed doors, is unleashed on the estate to break up the occupation.

With the script for *United Kingdom*, Allen was once again reacting to contemporary political issues. Transmitted not long after the uprisings in Toxteth in Liverpool, Handsworth in Birmingham, St Paul's in Bristol and Brixton in London, Allen presents a police force more than willing to move closer to the imposition of a police state to maintain its concept of law and order. He is also willing to lay bare the failure of the Labour Party in Parliament to support ordinary working-class communities and their struggle against Tory financial cuts on a local level. The community-driven council of *United Kingdom* in some ways predicted the struggle of left-wing enclaves within the Labour Party such as the 47 Liverpool city councillors who, between 1983 and 1987, refused, like those in Allen's fictional world, to buckle under pressure from central government.

Like Allen's council, those in Liverpool also chose to continue their commitment to public works such as the building of homes in public ownership and refused to increase rates and rents to pay for them when central government decided to 'pull the plug'.⁵ Akin to those in *United Kingdom*, the Liverpool councillors refused to accept the idea that 'public spending was bad and private spending good'. These backdrops of urban unrest and the Liverpool connection show that Allen's writing was still very capable of reflecting and engaging with contemporary politics from a clear left-wing perspective. For exactly the same reasons, he was less and less in tune with the changing landscape of British television in which institutions like the BBC were increasingly complying with the free-market policies of the Conservative government. The ability of Allen in *United Kingdom* to offer a clear analysis of the future directions of institutions such as the police force perhaps further indicates why this drama was deemed unsuitable by the BBC for a repeat showing.

The analysis offered by *United Kingdom* of community politics and the struggle of working-class people within the context of Thatcher's Britain, seems, on reflection, much more far-sighted and ultimately

Andy Willis

optimistic about the ability of people to take control of decision-making processes than some of the more critically acclaimed and widely remembered television drama of the period such as *Boys from the Blackstuff* (1982). Allen's long-time friend and collaborator Peter Kerrigan may have been a symbol of a lost political past when he played the dying George Malone in Alan Bleasdale's drama, but Allen never allowed himself to lose faith in his working-class characters' ability to continue their struggle and he refused to consign them to the realms of nostalgia. Today, it is this continued commitment to representing the experiences of working-class communities and their struggle for a better future that mark out the post-*Days of Hope* Jim Allen plays most strongly. Alongside this, the fact that they were produced at a time of great change within the institutions of British television makes them of even more interest for those reconsidering this period of broadcasting history and of the struggle for radical voices to continue to be heard.

Notes

1. More information can be found regarding *Perdition* and its aborted Royal Court run in Hayward (2004: 188–92).
2. Much of the work that constitutes this *Days of Hope* debate can be found collected in Bennett *et al.* (1981).
3. Trodd was speaking at a Jim Allen tribute event at Manchester's Cornerhouse, 7 October 2000.
4. Allen's disappointment with *The Gathering Seed* was indicated by his daughter Grace in a discussion at the Jim Allen tribute event at Manchester's Cornerhouse, 7 October 2000.
5. Further details about the struggle of the Liverpool councillors can be found at <http://www.liverpool47.org>.

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Jim Allen: Radical Drama Beyond Days of Hope

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