

Left-wing British film and television producer Tony Garnett dead at 83

Our reporter
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The highly respected film and television producer, writer and director Tony Garnett died on January 12 after a short illness, aged 83.

Garnett was born Anthony Edward Lewis on April 3, 1936, into a working-class family in Birmingham. His mother died when he was just five years old, of septicaemia two days after a backstreet abortion during the Second World War. His father, a munitions worker, committed suicide 19 days later.

Garnett's career spanned 50 years, but he is identified above all with one of the most significant and creative periods in the history of television drama in the UK.

Originally an actor, he appeared in television's *The Boys* (1962) and *Z Cars* (1962) and played several small parts in *An Age of Kings* (1960), the BBC's influential production of Shakespeare's history plays.

He moved behind the camera when he was hired as an assistant story editor at the BBC working on *The Wednesday Play*, which ran from October 1964 to May 1970 and aired more than 170 plays.

This famed series, which addressed social issues before an audience of millions, included the likes of *Up the Junction* (1965, about abortion), *Cathy Come Home* (1966, about homelessness), *The Lump* (1967, about casualised labour in the building industry), *In Two Minds* (1971, about mental illness as a social problem) and *The Big Flame* (1969, about a workers' revolt on the docks), all produced by Garnett. During this period he began long associations with writer Jim Allen (see WSWS comments here and here), dramatist David Mercer and, most notably, director Ken Loach.

His producing credits include Loach's *Kes* (1969), *After a Lifetime* (1971), *Family Life* (1971—the film version of *In Two Minds*), *Days of Hope* (1975), *The Price of Coal* (1977) and *Black Jack* (1978), as well as Roy Battersby's *The Body* (1970), Mike Leigh's *Hard Labour* (1973), Julien Temple's *Earth Girls Are Easy* (1985), Roland Joffe's *Fat Man and Little Boy* (1989) and Hettie Macdonald's *Beautiful Thing* (1996).

Garnett came into contact with Gerry Healy and the Socialist Labour League, the British Trotskyists, in the late 1960s. Although he never joined the Trotskyist movement, he was instrumental in organising discussions among actors, writers and directors, including Loach, Mercer, Roy Battersby and Corin and Vanessa Redgrave, that led to important gains within these circles. Playwright Trevor Griffiths depicted those meetings in his play, *The Party* (1973).

In 2013, the British Film Institute (BFI) held a retrospective of his work, "Seeing Red." The BFI described Garnett as one of television's "most influential figures," who "produced and fostered a succession of provocative, radical and sometimes incendiary dramas."

At the time of the BFI event, *World Socialist Web Site* reporters interviewed Garnett and asked him a number of questions about his life and career, and in particular the political and artistic conceptions that had informed his work.

The interview is published below:

"The [BFI] retrospective took a lot out of me emotionally," Garnett first

explained. "Your whole life comes back. You watch films, see young talented people on screen and realise they are dead. All the old battles come back. What you were doing with your life then. Who you were with. Who was breaking your heart and whose heart you were breaking."

WSWS: How was it possible for someone from your social background to make the transition fairly rapidly to a respected producer at the BBC?

Tony Garnett: My generation was the luckiest working class generation in the history of this country. We were the only complete generation that was well-fed as children.

A small number were picked to go to grammar school and a tinier number to university.

I received a state scholarship in the late 1950s worth over £300 a year—you could live very well in London on that. Doors opened. In the early 1960s, the whole atmosphere was one of "working class possibility"—even though for most of the working class there was no such possibility.

I came from a working-class family, from the "aristocracy of labour"—machine tool makers, master plasterers, bricklayers, car mechanics. I ended up at the BBC, and that is a big cultural shift. You are from one class, but not of another. There are feelings of guilt and betrayal. At 21, I was earning more money than my old man could ever dream of.

The tension inside me made me question things a lot more. Being *déclassé*, in fact, makes you interested in class. It's not that you can choose your class so much as you can choose your class allegiance. I'm from the working class, but am now a middle-class professional and I have been for decades.

You know you are leading a double life. But from the early 1960s it was easier. The BBC was changing in response to the cultural changes in the country. The BBC helps to create culture, but also responds to it. Its income was increasing every year as more people bought televisions and there was a move to colour.

BBC Director General Hugh Carlton Greene realised that "Auntie" [the BBC] had to take off her corset and put on a mini-skirt. There was big opposition to that, but he had the authority to push it through. One of the consequences was that rough kids—like me, Roger Smith and John McGrath—became some of the lucky few scholarship boys that were allowed to go into the BBC. A window opened.

I first started working on *The Wednesday Play* anthology in 1964. Smith, James MacTaggart and myself put together about 34 feature-length simple dramas.

WSWS: Your work is regarded as overtly political. How did your political views evolve and how did they inform your work?

TG: This was the time that the Labour Party was in office under Harold Wilson and the Beatles were at the top of the charts. It was a time of ferment.

My politics had been developing gradually. I'd developed an attitude towards Stalinism early on because my first father-in-law was a member of the Communist Party. I used to argue with him while I was still at

school, because I didn't like what I was hearing. I hadn't heard of Trotsky, but I was suspicious of aspects of the CP, although I had respect for some people in it.

I was 20 at the time of the CPSU [Communist Party of the Soviet Union] 20th party congress in 1956, where [Soviet Premier Nikita] Khrushchev made his "Secret Speech," detailing some of Stalin's crimes. My father-in-law wouldn't believe a word of it. But it had a big impact on me.

I was involved in trade unions, and in the 1960s I was on the executive of the Association of Cinematograph Television and Allied Technicians (ACTT). I was reading Marx. I was a leftie rebel without much knowledge.

But with Wilson in government in 1964 and 1966, I was getting disillusioned. We produced *Cathy Come Home*, about a young family made homeless, and in 1965 *Up the Junction*, about a backstreet abortion. These were full of anger at individual people's predicaments. *Cathy* is a reformist, angry piece.

I'm a storyteller, and I appeal to people's feelings as well as their minds. But I was getting more political as I became disillusioned with Labour. It had exposed reformism to me and I knew what wasn't right, but I didn't know what was right.

By the late 1960s, by luck, I met Jim Allen [a former member of the Socialist Labour League]. This was a breakthrough because he had a voice and he knew the characters he was writing about as he lived and worked with them. He was a rough, crude writer but his voice was what I wanted.

Through Jim I met dockers in Liverpool and working class people involved in big strikes. I was researching *The Big Flame*, and I wanted to get it right. That's when I met Gerry Healy. I didn't know him personally or much about Trotskyism, but he had the background information I needed and he seemed to be the only person who made sense of anything.

I was very impressed by the information Healy gave me and his analysis. When I met him, I had already started holding meetings at my place every Friday evening. There was a lot of disillusionment, and these were open meetings, for anyone who thought of themselves as left. There were a lot of people I knew who were pissed off with the Labour government. You could see the Labour Party and trade union bureaucracy were betraying.

I held the meetings for ages, and then others took over. Leaders and supporters of all the main left political tendencies participated. Tariq Ali came for a couple of weeks, then stormed out saying he wasn't going to talk to salon socialists. That was especially funny because he was from a bourgeois family in Pakistan.

Healy turned up, and within three or four weeks he completely dominated the meeting. Many of the representatives of other tendencies stopped coming. There was no doubt that Healy's position was far superior to theirs. He was a better and more relentless debater than any of them...and he terrified them. They just didn't dare come back. It was really interesting to watch.

Within eight to ten weeks, he was recruiting members. Quite a number of my friends joined including Roger Smith, Roy Battersby and a whole number of actors. I didn't join. ... Politics for me starts with love. We're dependent on others. A socialist culture is the only one that can allow us to live with each other in peace, encourage each other's creativity, making life worth living. The alternative that's put to us is a society where everyone competes and doesn't cooperate, where everyone wants to get an advantage over others economically and socially and is utterly indifferent to other people's suffering. What kind of human being would prefer that? How can anyone actually say they wish to live in a society based on exploitation?

I don't know how we get there. I have tried to tell the truth about the world and get the biggest platform to tell it on. How that translates into practical politics is difficult. You have an answer that I have not been able

to accept. I don't have an answer, except keep connecting with people—keep reminding them of how others are.

In 1974, there was a potentially revolutionary situation in Britain. If you had had at that time a strong enough revolutionary socialist movement and leadership, there could have been a chance. ... Ken Loach, Jim Allen and I did *Days of Hope*, which followed three people, relatives, between the First World War in 1916 to the betrayal of the General Strike in 1926. Really, we were saying if we don't learn from history, it will happen again. But the film didn't have any effect, because it did happen again.

It was a flawed film, as they all are, but it was the most ambitious politically. The research was difficult. We had to get everything right because I knew we would be attacked. I had back-up documents prepared. Most of the attacks came from the Labour Party and the Trades Union Congress.

The Price of Coal [1977] and *Spongers* [1978] were produced at the end of the Labour government and the run-up to Margaret Thatcher's coming to power in 1979. Labour at that time was drowning. It had no answer to the problems of society. Prime Minister Jim Callaghan was drifting to the right and, together with a section of the trade union bureaucracy, was in open conflict with working people. Inflation was high, so there were strikes to compensate. What the ruling class needed was a government who said "No, you can't have it," beat the workers down and make them unemployed. Callaghan wasn't capable, so they had to get someone who was, Thatcher.

WSWS: At the end of the 1970s you left Britain to work in the United States. What was behind that decision?

TG: Things got more difficult. From 1975-76 onwards the opportunities were starting to close down. There were many battles, it was exhausting and it wore me down. For a number of years, our contracts at the BBC didn't come through or there were long delays. ... At the time there were questions in the House of Lords accusing the BBC of being a hive of "communists." This was under the Labour government.

In the late 1970s I finally left for the United States. I was exhausted doing four films a year, fighting the BBC and trying to get money. I was the only one producing such work and everyone wanted a piece of me. Also, I was getting very disillusioned politically. I couldn't see a way out, what to do next or what sort of political film to do.

I knew I had to get refreshed—somewhere that was English-speaking and made films. In the 1960s there had been a really interesting independent film movement in the US and I thought if I could find my way into the interstices of that maybe I could find new challenges. Plus being 5,000 or 6,000 miles away, I might get a better view of what was happening here.

Instead I walked into the Reagan era and the independent cinema movement had collapsed. Hollywood only wanted special effects, "shoot-em-up" films with guys shooting foreigners. But I learnt a lot and surviving over there equipped me for coming back.

WSWS: In what way?

TG: There was a change in the atmosphere in the BBC—the idea of "Managers should have the right to manage." A similar thing happened in the universities, the National Health Service and other institutions. It creates a very tight pyramid with lots of layers of supervisory management telling you what you may and may not do.

So the type of producer from my time, from the 1960s, has been abolished. Producers in the 1960s were trusted. You were given certain freedoms and allowed to pick the talent. There were constraints of course, but now the essential role of producer has gone further up the management chain—to the sixth floor, where there are senior executives who have never produced anything in their lives.

If you look at the BBC, by and large it makes programmes about one borough in London—Westminster—for the benefit of those living in two or three others—Notting Hill and Islington. The rest of the country doesn't exist except when two or three young producers will go to Doncaster or

Newcastle, say, as though they were visiting anthropologists, and come back with an “amusing story” about the habits of the natives or a shocking story about how badly they behave.

WSWS: What of the present situation confronting workers and artists?

TG: Thatcher said in retirement that her greatest achievement was New Labour. If workers could clearly see the role of the unions, and that Labour is a conservative party, the scales would fall from their eyes. It would be a confusing mess for a while, but it would have possibilities. It’s certainly not what the bourgeoisie want. They want Labour and the TUC to continue their role of confusing the working class.

I keep telling people this is not a recession like before. It’s not about demand and wiggling the interest rates. This is a big one. As the rich are getting richer, the rest of the population sees its living standards eroding. The US figures are staggering. Here too. Their system cannot survive like that.

How do we take advantage? In my world, I find it hard to see anything developing artistically through Hollywood or television. It is very expensive and the grip on it is very tight. There is no room for manoeuvre. If I was in my twenties, I would not be working in the cinema or in broadcast television.

I would be looking at the new technologies. They are disruptive and a problem in capitalist society for professionals in music, publishing and now in the screen industry. But it is a most wonderful opportunity and in a socialist society it would just be embraced.

The barriers to telling stories on a screen have more or less disappeared. When I first started the cost was immense. There were expensive complicated cameras needing highly skilled professionals, using film that had to be processed in a lab. Then you had to hire a theatre to even see the film. A few corporations owned everything, so only a few privileged few were allowed access, and could only produce what the corporations permitted.

Now a kid can get a second-hand digital camera and point and shoot. Of course, some will get more interesting pictures than others. You can then edit the film on a laptop and bang it on a server for millions of people to experience forever. ... If I were in my twenties now I would be working exclusively on the Internet, particularly because of its creative and political freedom, but also because I don’t know how to do it. I would be doing it and failing and learning and doing it and failing and learning again.

That’s why they want to close down the Internet if they can. Politicians don’t like allowing people to communicate anonymously with each other. They want to restrain freedom. ... But still for a while there is a window of opportunity and freedom. They monitor you, but don’t yet stop you. That will come, of course. You are so wise and smart be working on the Internet with the *World Socialist Web Site*. It’s where people ought to be, where creative people and political people ought to be.

I always thought film was a social activity. It’s not like writing a novel. It’s a socially creative achievement. There is a lot of individualistic nonsense talked about filmmaking.

The French *auteur* theory says it’s the director. The Americans say it’s the producer. It is silly and misleading. It is everyone creating the film. Financially, it can be an individual because the real power of movies is always the money. The studio or broadcaster might delegate that power to a star. If the star brings money they can decide who is cast, etc. Sometimes it’s the director. It’s rarely the screenwriter, because they are undervalued in cinema and TV. But if anything remains of these films that is commendable it is an achievement of all involved.

The main artistic influence on me was the neo-realist cinema of Italy after the war—such as *Bicycle Thieves*. The humanity of it, the way it was filmed, on the streets, hand held. Also some Eastern European cinema, especially Polish and Czech—*Closely Observed Trains*. Then technically there is Raoul Coutard’s camera work in *Breathless*. There is a freedom, a

casualness in the way it was shot.

Another influence was Joan Littlewood, of Theatre Workshop, Stratford East [*Oh, What a Lovely War!* and other works]. A great theatre director. Her work had such energy. We wanted to do a film together, but it never happened. She said, believe in people, everybody is a genius.

I’m flattered if people say that my work is agitprop. If that’s what they think, then we have achieved something. Great art that disguises art is the true art. George Orwell said good writing style is like looking through a mirror. I have spent my life finding colleagues, working with colleagues, so we can all—writing, shooting, directing, acting—tell the story without drawing attention to ourselves.

I used to have arguments in the 1960s, until I got bored, with people who wrote for cineaste magazines. They said my work was reactionary and I wasn’t a true socialist because I was saying something within a bourgeois form—a 19th century form of realism-naturalism—and that the truly revolutionary thing to do would be to deconstruct that form in order to make people think more originally about the world. They would quote Bertolt Brecht.

My reply was that network TV was the national theatre of the air and that’s where people were. The form is what they feel comfortable with. If I used more experimental forms, no one would watch. So I advised them to carry on making their films for a handful of cineastes to discuss and I will make my films to influence 10 million people.

WSWS: You stopped working as a producer and are now a novelist. What caused that change, and how much of a change is it?

TG: By the end of the 1990s I had spent 40 years or more working on screen and the novelty had worn off. Also, I wanted to give it up rather than it give me up. It was a very exhausting business and I was tired. I also wanted not just the time but also room in my head to write the novels that were rattling around inside me—to listen to the characters and write down what they were doing.

I am on my third novel. Writing is a completely different activity, but it’s a continuation of the same thing. I tell stories and there are all sorts of ways of telling them. It’s all I know how to do. A lot of the time I told stories hoping to persuade or reach into people’s heads. At the very least to say look, this is how it seems to us. This is what we think about it. What do you think?

There’s something magical about a story that is enacted, a drama, because there is an emotional link between the audience and the character or the actor playing the character. If you’re watching a drama, particularly if it is good, you’re actually feeling what it’s like to be that other person. That traffic creates empathy, something magical. That is vital for our understanding of each other intellectually and emotionally.

But the range of drama is so narrow now and it’s a great pity. Because a society that is not empathetic is a society in deep trouble. The only people who lack empathy are psychopaths. Capitalism is sympathetic soil in which psychopathy can grow.

Art for art’s sake is meaningless. I want to affect people. I don’t even like the word art, as now it has too many individualistic associations. Art comes from artefact, artisan. Art and skill, art and craftsmanship—they were the same thing. It was only in the last century that the artist became this refined, posh creature somewhat separate from all of us. I want to hack that out.

I come from a family of artisans—that’s what they did. I used to say to students you may go out of here and win an award and start to think you are very important. You are not important. But what you do is important. Because you are a story teller and society can’t live without story tellers.

History is a story. That’s why we fight over history. We make sense of ourselves, the world and ourselves in the world through the struggle to tell the truth through stories. Facts have to be contextualised to become the truth. And that truth is a struggle that is constantly fought over. It is not given. And telling stories helps to create debate about that truth.

That is why working people should tell their stories. Truth is a class issue. I would appeal to all your readers, especially to young ones, to make their own political films; shoot interviews, especially with older comrades, and dare to express themselves on the screen. Filmmaking is for everybody.



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