

James Graham Interview

first published in 2006

It's a good time to be James Graham. With his new play *Eden's Empire* opening next week at the Finborough Theatre and the script rolling off Methuen's presses as we speak, the writer is in buoyant mood when I catch up with him after rehearsals.

The new play portrays Anthony Eden, before, during and after Suez, as a flawed yet sympathetic character. The writing is vivid, perceptive and warm in a way not normally associated with political drama. Both the subject matter and the maturity with which it is handled suggest an older writer, and it is difficult to match the text to the untroubled and energetic young man for whom this is the second significant biographical stage work (the first, examining Einstein's complex relationship with the atomic bomb, premiered at the Finborough last year).

Graham is conscious of his youth but not bowed by it and talks happily of working with an older cast, a description he immediately corrects to 'experienced'.

He is still rubbing his eyes from the pell-mell journey that plucked him from the exhausting obscurity of 'spending £100 on printing every time you send a script out' to having his *Albert's Boy* script produced, securing an agent, winning a Pearson bursary and becoming Writer-in-Residence at the Finborough. The last achievement has done much to reassure him; 'before that I would be embarrassed to tell people I was a writer because they'd always ask "Where do you work?" "What have you written that I might have seen?" Now I'm a bit more on the map.'

The parallels between yesteryear's Suez and today's Iraq are all too clear in Graham's script and I ask him which came first; was he drawn to Suez and only later noted the similarities or was he casting around for a metaphor for today's crisis? 'A bit of both', he concedes; whilst feeling strongly about contemporary politics he was reluctant to wade in with yet another drama about Iraq. Surveying the panoply of new writing on the subject he admits to a frisson from plays such as David Hare's *Stuff Happens* – 'you leave the National Theatre and see the Houses of Parliament across the river and think "yes; theatre is attacking the Establishment,"' – but argues 'we're all so immersed in that subject now we learn nothing new'.

'I do get very excited by the Tricycle plays,' he says when I ask him about the documentary-style productions for which the Kilburn theatre is famous, 'but I want to do something else – I want to get at a different kind of truth, an emotional truth.' For Graham, 'the root of all politics is a human story', and his view is that the human insights are best arrived at via a less forensic approach, taking the essence of the story but allowing himself to dominate the material rather than vice versa.

'Theatre can't just be journalism,' he argues, 'it can do more than that.' Instead, Graham has adopted a more cryptic approach and in so doing

discovered a deeper, more tragic truth. 'It makes you wonder,' he sighs, 'do these politicians read the history books? Because it's all there; the past mistakes.'

Graham sees the Suez Crisis as 'the end of one period of history and the start of a new one'. 'It's a blind spot in history for our generation' he suggests, conceding that many of his peers glaze over when he mentions it. But his fascination is unapologetic, claiming the story probes 'what it is to be British, with our superiority complex... identity, nationalism, the death of Empire; I didn't have to manufacture anything – it was all there.'

Eden himself comes across ambiguously in the play and I ask what Graham's own feelings are now towards the man, having lived with him for a year. 'Like all tragic heroes he brought about much of his downfall himself,' he observes, 'but I still felt a great sympathy for him. I can't blame him, partly because I care so much about him... whether it's loyalty or even friendship I don't know.'

Graham still has an uncomplicated delight in the process of seeing a script become a play and, in contrast to the perceptions he knows will abound about his academic-sounding premise, never forgets the duty of theatre to entertain. He talks excitedly of 'having people in a room listening to what I've got to say. And,' he adds, 'if they laugh as well even better.'

Kieron Barry