

# *A New World at the Globe*

*Ann Talbot*

*Trevor Griffiths*

*Ann Talbot reviews A New World: A Life of Thomas Paine by Trevor Griffiths, which continues its run at Shakespeare's Globe in London until 9 October. She interviewed Trevor Griffiths in Spokesman 101, and also reviewed his original screenplay about Paine, entitled These are the Times. She writes for the World Socialist Web Site ([www.wsws.org](http://www.wsws.org)).*

*Trevor Griffiths' lyrics of the songs for A New World follow the review. The original music for the songs is composed by Stephen Warbeck.*

Trevor Griffiths' *A New World: A Life of Thomas Paine* brings to the stage an eighteenth century figure who made a significant contribution to both the American and French revolutions, and whose writings have continued to influence revolutionary movements ever since. Griffiths' play will introduce thousands to Thomas Paine, the man who wrote *The Rights of Man*, in defence of the French Revolution, *Common Sense*, and *The American Crisis*, which was read to Washington's troops on the eve of the battle of Trenton and marked a turning point in the War of Independence.

We follow Paine over a 30 year period, as Griffiths takes us from his emigration to America in 1774 to his death in 1809. This is a large slice of time to fit into one evening, and covers epochal events, but Griffiths deftly knits biography and history together in a play which engages both the intellect and the emotions of its audience. This is a play which takes its subject seriously, and takes its audience seriously.

Paine is often referred to as the forgotten Englishman, but he was a citizen of both America and France, and it would be more accurate to regard him as a citizen of the world. Some people are forgotten because their ideas have a diminishing relevance or because their celebrity was a superficial feature of a particular age, but Paine's ideas have not sunk into a natural and deserved oblivion. His neglect is a much more constructed phenomenon that expresses just what an uncomfortable figure he remains in a period when many of the social inequalities and forms of oppression about which he wrote still exist or have taken on new forms.

Paine was born in Thetford, Norfolk in 1737. Leaving school at the age of 12, he was apprenticed as a staymaker, and later became an excise man in Lewes, Sussex. By the time he sailed for America he was bankrupt, had no settled employment and, apparently, no prospects. What made the penniless man into Thomas Paine was the revolutionary crisis that was reaching its peak as he disembarked. Griffiths is right to choose this as the start for his play. This is the point at which Paine steps into history and, as Griffiths shows, it is even when he gets his name because a printer adds an 'e' to it in his first published article.

Print shops figure largely in *A New World*. There is the printers' shop of the *Pennsylvania Magazine* and, later, we see Paine in the Paris print shop of the revolutionary paper *La Bouche de Fer*. These are not merely background scenes, they are part of Paine's character. Arriving in Pennsylvania he is a working man, confident enough of his skill to negotiate a job for himself in this new world. In Paris we see the physical effort it takes to bring out a thrice weekly paper in the tired bodies of the revolutionaries asleep alongside their press. Griffiths gives a tangible sense of the importance of papers, pamphlets and magazines to these first modern revolutions, and of the role that Paine played as a writer in giving voice to social layers that were normally excluded from political life.

Griffiths' play is an adaptation of the screenplay he wrote for Richard Attenborough, who has long planned to film the life of Thomas Paine. Griffiths published it as *These are the Times: a Life of Thomas Paine* in 2005 (see [www.spokesmanbooks.com](http://www.spokesmanbooks.com)) when it seemed that the film would never be made. Since then it has been adapted as a BBC radio play and now for the stage. The changes Griffiths has made for the stage are far greater than those in the radio play. Not least he has had to cut one and a half hours from the text. Yet Paine the writer emerges from that process more clearly defined. In the screenplay Paine wears a wooden pen in his jacket lapel to indicate his trade. In the play the physical presence of the press on the stage makes the same statement.

For a man who spent so much of his time in the thick of often frantic activity, there is a certain loneliness and isolation about Paine. It is in part the result of a patchy and heavily biased historical record, but also probably expresses something about the nature of Paine as a writer. There are points at which Paine the writer and Griffiths the writer shade into one another. All writers must inevitably use themselves and their own experience as the basis for any character they create, but Griffiths' depiction of Paine takes on the character of a protracted examination of the writer's relationship to the dominant theme of Griffiths' own work – revolution.

John Light who plays Thomas Paine conveys this sense of containment and reserved passion with great skill. He reveals most about the inner feelings of his character in his interaction with the child characters Lotte, played by Julia Reinstein, and Will (Daniel Anthony), and the three women in Paine's life, Philly (Jade Williams), Marthe (Laura Rogers) and Carnet played by Alix Riemer.

With the children the almost child-like innocence of Paine's own character emerges. Their quest for knowledge is his. Will, a slave boy, accompanies Paine through the streets of Philadelphia as a younger equal bearing his globe from one set of lodgings to another. In one of the most powerful moments of the play Paine returns to Philadelphia to find that Will has been hung by the British. The dramatic effect is all the greater because it takes place among the standing spectators in the yard of the theatre. The Globe is a reconstruction of Shakespeare's Globe and seems to have given Griffiths possibilities in adapting his screenplay for the stage that a more conventional modern theatre could not. The actors push their way through the crowd as though the audience were participants in the scene.

The female characters each have their own story. Griffiths has created three dimensional women whose struggles provide painful insights into the impact of class society on those whom it oppresses. Paine relates to each woman as an equal, and each responds in her own way. Philly, the abused prostitute, saves his life when he is carried off the ship at Philadelphia sick with fever. Marthe makes a fair copy of *Common Sense*, but cannot accept a relationship that is not sanctioned by society. Of the three, only Carnet can respond freely to Paine. Riemer's portrayal lit up the stage.

One of the finest scenes involves the French revolutionary Danton, vividly realised by James Garnon, making a speech to the Cordeliers Club – in French – while Carnet, thinly disguised as a man, simultaneously translates for Paine. The scene conveys in seconds the elemental character of a revolution. What a film would have shown in expensive crowd scenes, Griffiths and director Dominic Dromgoole have achieved with far greater economy of resources.

Central to Griffiths' achievement is his ability to create characters who are rooted in the history of the period, but psychologically credible and moving to a modern audience. He is able to carry the audience through the historical complexities of the period without being didactic because the issues which arise are issues for the characters themselves. Paine and Jefferson (Jamie Parker) discuss the drafting of the Declaration of Independence against the background of fidgeting children. Paine and

Danton discuss the nature of revolution while the great orator dresses and applies kohl to his eyes to increase the dramatic effect of the speech he is about to make. One has the sense that these characters are grappling with these great questions of modern history for the first time. With Griffiths, history is not something that happened and about which he is going to inform us; it is something which unfolds each night at the Globe.

His achievement in adapting a work written for the highly naturalistic medium of film to the stage is considerable. He achieves it with a mastery of his art that obscures the complexity of the task. He has used song, the music is by Steven Warbeck, and extended the role of Benjamin Franklin, played to great effect by Keith Bartlett, as a narrator. Neither of these techniques seems forced. They draw the audience into an all-enveloping theatrical experience.

This year marks the bicentenary of Paine's death and Griffiths' *A New World: A Life of Thomas Paine* has for that reason alone a current relevance. But it has a more profound contemporary resonance because of the themes it addresses. Paine was writing about a society characterised by widening social inequalities. A wealthy oligarchy of City magnates and landed aristocrats had entrenched itself in Britain as the first British Empire reached its height with the defeat of France in the Seven Years War. In France the aristocracy seized the opportunity presented by the weakness of royal power to strengthen their own position and extend their control over the peasantry. These were the class forces against which Paine contended with his writings. Paine himself appears in Griffiths' play as an unassuming working man. There is none of the self-conscious theatricality of Danton about him. But Paine's writings, of which some powerful sections are voiced during the play, represent his inner core, the essence of Paine's being as a revolutionary. They have an enduring relevance and, in presenting them as he does, Griffiths has demonstrated a tenacity to his principles in a period of political reaction that is worthy of Paine himself.

In years to come those who have seen Griffiths' *A New World: A Life of Thomas Paine* will remember it as an event that had significance far beyond the confines of the theatre. Historians may note it as one of the indications that, as the effects of the recession still reverberated across the river in the City of London, the meaning of revolution was being seriously discussed once more. This is a courageous and far-sighted piece of theatre that connects to the events and concerns of our own time as well as it evokes the history of revolutionary struggles in the eighteenth century.

**Songs from**  
***A New World: A Life of Thomas Paine***  
**Shakespeare's Globe Theatre, 2009**

*Lyrics by Trevor Griffiths*  
*Original music by Stephen Warbeck*

**The Ballad of Thomas Paine**

So it's off with the old and it's on with the new  
 And it's up with the many and down with the few  
 It's goodbye to the lion, it's hello to the dove  
 For we're sailing to the city of brotherly love  
 Philadelphia's the place, '74's the year,  
 Thomas Paine's is the story and yours is the ear ...

They carried him off on a stretcher of flax  
 And they pushed him away in a cart  
 And the lass paid his diggings the while he was ill  
 For he'd won his way into her heart  
 Ma Downey's the place, winter the season,  
 Paine on his back in a struggle for reason ...

Whores, sailors and deckmen, rogues, pimps, and drunks  
 Defrocked lawyers and derelicts all stinking like skunks  
 Find refuge in Race Street at the bottom of the pit  
 And drink themselves daft as they sink in the shit.  
 Race Street's the place, '75's the year,  
 Common Sense is the issue, the crisis is near ...

So it's off with the new and it's back to the old  
 One story completed, one more to be told,  
 To England we journey and trouble ahead  
 The country in turmoil, the people in dread,  
 The French up in arms in old Liberty's name  
 Revolution the flag, the sword and the flame.

**Spring Fair's in Town**

Spring Fair's in Town  
 May the maypole stand tall  
 Let a smile melt your frown  
 Turn the world upside down  
 Let the lowly grow rich  
 And the mighty take a fall  
 Here the beggar wears the crown  
 Spring Fair's in Town.  
 But what we dare not ask for  
 Is the very thing we need;  
 In the darkness it is waiting  
 In the soil is set the seed.  
 (Whisper) Independence! Independence!

**A Call to Arms**

Come to the call, come to the call  
 Come to the call to arms  
 Fetch yer musket 'n' fetch your stave  
 Fetch yer shot and yer stones  
 Six months is all we ask of ye  
 Then it's back to yer farms  
 And it's back to yer homes  
 And it's back to yer dear wives' arms.

**Joy to the World (traditional; tune by Handel)**

Joy to the World! The Lord is come  
 Let earth receive her king  
 Let every heart prepare him room  
 And heaven and nature sing  
 And heaven and nature sing  
 And heaven, and heaven, and nature sing ...

He rules the world with truth and grace  
 And makes the nations prove  
 The glories of his righteousness  
 And wonders of his love  
 And wonders of his love  
 And wonders, wonders, of his love.

### **The Firecake Song**

No meat, no meat,  
So what do we eat?  
Flour and water  
Cooked on hot stone  
Then off to the slaughter  
Like dogs to a bone  
Firecake, no meat,  
Flour and water  
And no retreat.

### **Will is Dead**

Will is dead.  
The world turns.  
Trees leaf and bud.  
Eggs hatch.  
Sun burns  
Dry thatch.  
Will is dead  
For a loaf of bread.

### **Ça Ira (tune: traditional)**

Ah! Ça ira, ça ira, ça ira  
Les aristocrates à la lanterne!  
Ah! Ça ira, ça ira, ça ira  
Les aristocrates on les pendra!

If we don't hang 'em  
We'll crush 'em  
If we don't crush 'em  
We'll burn 'em.

Ah! Ça ira, ça ira, ça ira  
Les aristocrates à la lanterne!  
Ah! Ça ira, ça ira, ça ira  
Les aristocrates on les pendra!

And when we've strung 'em all up  
We'll stuff a spade up their arse.

**Your eyes are green as valleys**

Your eyes are green as valleys  
 Your hair like corn gone wrong  
 Your lips like shepherds' warnings  
 Your voice the turtle's song  
 O come to me my lovely  
 And no delays  
 The road ahead awaits us  
 And better days.

**The Slow Jig of Time**

So we'll sing for tomorrow,  
 If singing's no crime;  
 And what's lacking we'll borrow  
 From the slow jig of time.

Sure, the roads may be parting,  
 Given how the land lies;  
 No more gentle sweethearting,  
 No more dance to our eyes;

Still we head for tomorrow,  
 Still our reason to rhyme;  
 Where we'll sing without sorrow  
 To the sweet jig of time.

**A Hewer's Dream**

I'm a hewer of wood  
 On another man's land  
 And why he should own it  
 I'll never understand

Now a Hewer's no brains  
 As all wise folk know  
 But a Hewer can dream  
 From the dark down below

And I dream'd I was flying  
 As free as the air  
 In the sky above England  
 My country so fair



And below I heard weeping  
And screaming and pain  
And I look'd for its cause  
And saw profit and gain

And further afield  
In the cities and towns  
I saw fear I saw hunger  
I heard terrible sounds

And all across England,  
Across Scotland and Wales,  
There lay wealth beyond counting  
Weighing justice's scales.

And as I dreamed I was flying  
Free as the air  
In the skies above England  
My country so fair

Came a cry slowly lifting  
Full of purpose and power  
Tho' our blood run in rivers  
We will take this no more

And O they join'd in a union  
Of bodies and minds  
They marched on the future  
The past left behind

And the battle was quick  
And the battle was fair  
But the old world was broken  
And a new one was there

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