

Butterworth's Jerusalem: the full English

Comments

Share this page

- Share
- Facebook
- Twitter

Post categories: Economic policy, Politics, Social cohesion, Theatre

Paul Mason | 16:47 UK time, Friday, 18 December 2009

*[Back in July I promised to write a blog about Jez Butterworth's play **Jerusalem**. Here, finally, it is.]*

"This, Wesley, is a historic day," says a middle aged drunken traveller, posed at the front of his caravan with various no-hopers, low-lifes, teenage runaways and misfits from semi-rural England..."For today I Rooster Byron and my band of educationally subnormal outcasts shall swoop and raze your poxy village to dust. In a thousand years Englanders will awake this day and bow their heads and wonder at the genius, guts and guile of the Flintock Rebellion..."

It's just one glorious speech out of many from Jez Butterworth's play Jerusalem, staged at the Royal Court Theatre this summer with Mark Rylance in the role of Johnny "Rooster" Byron, and set to be revived early in 2010.

Butterworth's play achieves two things: in Rooster he has created one of the most compelling, complex and iconic characters in modern British theatre; at the same time he has managed to capture an era in British political and social life at the very moment of its ending.

Jerusalem was five years in the writing and depicts the life of a poor-ish, prospectless, rave-addicted, casual drug using, unskilled social group that is absolutely central to the society we live in, but which the media barely notices exists. It captures their reality better than any soap opera and their dreams better than any tawdry Saturday night talent show.

Life for such people is about to get very tough. Indeed, the economic data tells us that the UK's "flexible labour market" has already been the key to avoiding mass unemployment. The real life Daveys, Lees and Tanyas have gone on short time, taken

pay cuts, slept on floors at their mates' houses, worked for no wages (in what our parents' generation used to call overtime).

They have scabbled around the bargain shelves of major supermarkets, shopped in the pound shops, borrowed from doorstep lenders and bunged their electrical goods into Britain's booming pawnbroking sector. As we go into 2010, they will now be faced with an economic "recovery" in which public services are cut, benefits are very likely frozen or slashed, credit is in short supply and all political parties implore them to "help themselves" and become "social entrepreneurs".

The sociology of Jerusalem is interesting: Rooster is a drug-dealer and fairground daredevil rider, a kind of anti-social entrepreneur. In real life he would be drawing some kind of benefit. Of the three young male foils to Rooster, Lee is "a pisshead and a wizzhead" about to emigrate to Australia; Ginger is an unemployed plasterer with delusions of being a DJ; Davey is a slaughterman. The West End theatre reviewers tended to describe this demographic as a "bucolic underclass", "wastrels", "waifs and strays".

But the power of the play lies in the fact that Rooster's band of outcasts are not at all marginal to real life in Britain. They are only marginal to the "real life" portrayed on soap operas and the slick, unreal drama series that British TV specialises in making - and of course to the pop tribute shows and star vehicles that clutter the West End.

Jerusalem then, is real. The plasterer, the DJ, the weekend drug dealer, the ex-squaddie looking to work abroad, the bored slaughterman - are mainstream figures in the real English workforce and down the real English pub: two million ecstasy tablets are taken in Britain every week; one in eight young people are not in work, education or training; 15% of all households claim in-work benefits.

Also real is the effing and blinding which seems to have uniformly discomfited the mainstream theatre critics: the swear wordcount in Jerusalem is acutally low compared to reality, and the swearing is generally genial, compared to reality where it is often aggressive, racist and violent. This, then, is the real English spoken by something close to the majority of real people: it's an indictment of the state of theatre (also, while I am at it, English literature, which has recently become dominated by surreal narratives told in a kind of quasi-poetry) that the language of Jerusalem is seems so challenging to theatregoers and critics alike. For this alone Jerusalem will go down as one of the great plays of the decade.

But Jerusalem's greatness is that it is also hyper-real. In *Rooster Byron* the playwright has created a character who both embodies, understands and rebels against everything that is wrong with this real England. (I am deliberately not writing here about Mark Rylance's superb rendition of Byron, because I think the play is even bigger than the performance).

A relentless fantasist and purveyor of tall stories to his mates, Rooster is also the protector of runaway kids abused by their parents, a serial rebel against the planning department of Kennet and Avon council, the local bogeyman whose anti-social behaviour can fill the local church hall with outraged Rotarians ("You get a cup of tea. Flapjack. Then they all sit down on foldy chairs and go beserk."). He is also a force of nature: Falstaff and Henry V in the same body, the original Green Man of pagan folklore whose face vomiting vegetation can be found on the corbels of early medieval churches all over England.

And he embodies magic. At the centre of the play, which is dark in ways impossible to discuss without revealing the plot, is the ambiguity between Rooster's tall tale telling (I will call it that because this is a BBC blog but you know the word I am thinking of) and the tantalising question of whether or not he really has magical powers. Is the 90ft tall giant who once gave Rooster an earring in the shape of a golden drum on Salisbury Plain, and who will one day be Rooster's own personal close protection guy in showdown with Kennet and Avon Council, real or imaginary?

By placing this unreal, magical, flawed, wounded, complex character onstage amid an unflinching portrayal of real life in low-skill, low-pay, low-horizon England ("When I leave Wiltshire, my ears pop," says one character) Butterworth asks layer upon layer of questions about the society we live in.

And the biggest one is this: what would happen if this happy go lucky world of cheap booze, semi-employment, casual sex, Saturday night raves etc were one day disrupted by something serious. What if the music stopped, the benefit office closed its doors and the caravan got dragged away by the council.

The coming fiscal crunch has made this a relevant question. Because Butterworth's characters are captured at the end of an era of debt-fuelled consumption, cheap credit and amoralistic drift. When we sit in London and say: the Greeks' lifestyle can't go on; or Latvia is living above its means; or Dubai was a dream built on sand, Butterworth's play shows us there are equally telling observations to be made about British society in the era of Shopacheck and whizz at £3 a tab.

And what still stuns me is how new and raw and original and terrifying life in semi-rural working class Britain seems when viewed through the experience of Rooster and his mates. And the very low chances of escaping it.

As whizzhead Lee explains to slaughterman Davey:

"Ever since I've known you, come Tuesday you ain't never got a pound for a saveloy. You're broke...You are a sad, fat povvo what thinks he's Alan Sugar. You're going to live your whole life with the same ****ing people, going to the same s*** pubs, kill two million cows and die a sad fat povvo."

Davey, capturing the spirit that has sustained the downtrodden English bloke from Agincourt to Helmand replies:

"Sounds unimproveable".

Jez Butterworth's "Jerusalem" is published by Nick Hern Books in association with the Royal Court Theatre. The Royal Court production reopens at London's Apollo Theatre in January.

Review of Paul Mason's review blog
'Butterworth's Jerusalem: the full English'

In groups, identify examples of the following in order to show how the different contexts shape the text and demand particular language features.

Context/ features	Examples
<p>Purpose to Inform (on the play itself and on the economic background) Proper nouns/ dates/ statistics</p> <p>Adjectives</p> <p>Listing</p> <p>More formal, technical, sophisticated lexis</p> <p>Detailed, long sentences</p> <p>Purpose to Engage and Entertain Intriguing intro</p> <p>Figurative language</p> <p>Short sentences mimicking spoken voice</p> <p>Colloquial lexis and phrases</p> <p>Puns, humour</p> <p>Purpose to Persuade Rhetorical features (rule of three; antithesis; parallels; rhetorical questions)</p> <p>Emotive connotations</p>	

(positive or negative)

Irony

Use of the future construction.

Audience of those interested in theatre

Technical terms and semantic field linked to drama and theatre.

Audience of those who know Mason's work as economic journalist.

Technical terms and semantic field linked to economics, social policy.

Genre Features

Review

Present tense

Information about times, places, organisations at the end of the review

Long, descriptive noun phrases

Blog

Computer generated time and dates

Addresses audience that referring to the fact that it is a blog in a direct, conversational way in framing section.

One or two slips in accuracy because of rapid composition or lack of professional editing.