London’s Burning


Sammy and Rose Get Laid is a big step onward from Hanif Kureishi and Stephen Frear’s earlier film My Beautiful Laundrette. The later film again uses comedy and the edge between social realism and surrealism to explore contradictions between and within race, class, gender and sexuality, and is both more complex and more self-conscious than its predecessor.

While both films use the social fabric in part as a backdrop, in Sammy and Rose Get Laid, there is an acute self-consciousness of the voyeurism involved in this kind of endeavour.

Stephen Frears, the director, describes the film as having “A much better script. Mind you, I’ve no idea if it is such a charming metaphor.” My Beautiful Laundrette revolves around “laundering” — of dirty money, dirty politics, violence, whitewashing, racial hatred and difference. But it’s difficult to find such a central symbol in Sammy and Rose Get Laid. The centrality of fucking seems too satirical to be described as a metaphor. Rather, it is at once a confronting visual focus (for the characters watching each other and the audience watching the movie) and the means of displacing other concerns.

In one scene Rosie walks in old-fashioned and stylish hat and coat through the riot-torn London streets at night to meet her lover, an image which captures the tremendous courage and the awful self-centredness of her sexual radicalism. Having accused her husband Sammy of turning his back on reality by staying at home on a night of such political significance, Rosie goes out to “affirm the human spirit” in a very different manner to angry and grieving Black people who are avenging the police murder of a black woman. (Later in the film, Rosie has an affair with that woman’s foster son, Danny.) The film connects these diverse struggles (against racism, against moral sanctions on female sexuality) and questions Rosie’s romantic priorities.

It is, in fact, her father-in-law, Rafi, the Pakistani statesman with a reputation for brutal tactics who, inspired by the flaming portrait of Virginia Woolf (!), goes out onto the streets to see what is actually happening, reluctantly followed by a coked-out Sammy. And so it is that the relationship that develops between Rafi and Danny has more basis in reality than that which develops between Rosie and Danny. No relationship is exempt from irony, however — Danny follows Rafi to ask him, the torturer, how he should choose between non-violence and violence.

It is typical of the film that any attempt to place or evaluate one of its characters will be thwarted by some contradictory aspect. Their multifaceted nature is reflected in the actors’ feelings about their roles, the
possible differences in interpretation. Frances Barber, who plays Rosie, sees her as "a very sympathetic character", "strong and determined" but caught in a "maelstrom" of events. Without this partisan view, I doubt she would have been able to play Rosie with the supreme confidence the part appears to demand. Yet, for all Rosie's strong points, she does not escape the critical eye of the camera. She, a white woman, sexually objectifies Danny, a young black man. He, on the other hand, deflects objectification.

Roland Gift, who plays Danny, describes how he, Kureishi and Frears all have subtly different interpretations of the part. "It's just opinions you form about people and their experience of Danny is different to mine." Even Anna, the white North American photographer who embodies voyeuristic lack of commitment (a shot here at mainstream US filmmaking?) is allowed her moment of grandeur when she dangles Sammy dangerously above the water and demands commitment from him.

Rafi is perhaps most complex of all, and through him the film engages with the anguish, necessity and risks of trying to do something in a complex and imperfect world. A ruling class Pakistani, he has fought white imperialism and racism, yet imprisoned and tortured the workers of his own country in the name of democracy. Strongly committed to family values, he has deserted his young son in the pursuit of power. Incurably romantic (is this his connection with Rosie?), he has for years abandoned the woman he loves in order to embrace a Pakistani identity and marry within his own culture.

Rafi's brutality is never condoned. At the same time we are not allowed to forget that white imperialism and racism played a major role in fostering his Machiavellian attitude to politics. The film at times allows him great stature and dignity while, at other times, he is reduced to a comic or pathetic, feeble and confused old man. His self-consciousness, in the shape of an inescapable conscience, is more fully and frighteningly dramatised than that of any other character in the film.

Through its self-conscious and sometimes surrealistic form, Sammy and Rosie Get Laid evokes a complexity of characterisation and situation without denying the inherent contradictions of a pretended objectivity. It thus reapproaches what used to be called "the universal" without glossing over difference, or privileging a particular cultural viewpoint. It emphasises, rather than denies, the active role of the audience/reader in creating the experience of the film.

As an audience, we are aware of watching; often we are watching characters watching other characters (for instance, Rafi's fascination/revulsion with the blatant sexuality of the two black lesbians, Vivia and Rani, which will have diverse effects on different members of an audience). The film poses but offers no answer to the question of how to move beyond the spectator role without losing one's perspective into an activism that is neither narrow nor brutal.

**Glasnost Snapshots**


W riting a book on perestroika and glasnost is a hazardous occupation. Things are changing so rapidly in the USSR that anything written today will almost certainly be outdated a month later.

Readers of _Moscow News_, that extraordinary window on Soviet life, know this only too well. Each week its journalists push the limits of glasnost to previously unsuspected limits.

Anthony Barnett arrived in Moscow on a private visit in June 1987 with co-author Nella Bielski, a Soviet citizen living in Paris. The shock waves of Chernobyl were still echoing through the corridors of power. Coming so soon after Gorbachev had launched glasnost on a cynical public, Chernobyl was a critical test. Glasnost was slow to move into gear. In the meantime, the Moscow joke machine took over. "It is proof of the advance of socialism that we have had the world's greatest accident ..."

Up to a point, glasnost passed the Chernobyl test. The picture of utter incompetence and the "crude", phallic vainglory of enormous triumphs" (Barnett) were exposed — but the responsibility was placed with scapegoats. And the Ukrainian party empire headed by Shcherbitsky, a Brezhnev appointee and Politburo member, remains.

Chernobyl's fallout, however, continues — in more ways than one. Recently, in _Moscow News_, Professor Popov, a champion of radical perestroika, wrote of a distant relative who was diagnosed with radiation sickness. Even now, no strict monitoring of foodstuffs for radiation levels takes place.

Barnett is best when his journalistic instincts get free rein. His piece on the "Russian economic miracle" is consciously ironic: the miracle is that _anything_ works. Quoting Pravda, he gives the
example of new, expensive refrigerated railway stock. Many of
the carriages go back and forth empty, “transporting air”. “Their
efforts are measured according to kilometres covered by the carriages...
The more kilometres the carriages mark up, the bigger the bonus...”

Paradoxically, then, for Barnett the USSR is the most unplanned society in the world, despite the enormous volume of plans “organising” society from the top down to the last nuts and bolts of each factory. Waste, cynicism, corruption — all are natural products of such a system. Such planning means, in the end, no planning, as opposed to the very real planning through indirect state intervention that takes place even in Mrs. Thatcher’s England.

Barnett likens the Soviet Communist Party (CPSU) to the British Establishment. It is not a party as we understand the term, but rather it “embodies the country's social, political and economic order”, through the nomenklatura system. The CPSU is “the combined Houses of Congress and the White House, along with all the Department of State. Western-style regimes do not offer their people a choice between alternative political orders, even if they offer some choice within their given system”.

But he does not use this last argument, as it has often been used in the past, to excite the Soviet system. On the contrary, Barnett sees perestroika and glasnost developing towards the “civil society” of the West and, implicitly, a more complex system of rule. This may not mean the existence of competing political parties as such, but certainly it will involve what was once called “right of tendency”.

Already, in Estonia, a “People’s Front” has been formed, bringing together CPSU members and non-members on a platform of support for radical perestroika. The poet Yevtushenko, in a recent Moscow News writes of the need for such a front nationally and, during the recent Soviet Party Conference, spoke to a demonstration called to the same end.

More generally, the independent political clubs provide room for “dissidents” and party members backing radical perestroika, alike. There are thus, already, (at least) two “parties” in the CPSU.

Barnett sees as critical the development of a “civil society” — the autonomous social and political culture outside the official structures. The concept of civil society has a long tradition in marxist thought but, significantly, the editor of Moscow News and his interpreter, interviewed by Barnett, did not know the Russian translation. Only now is Gramsci’s thought being studied by the most radical supporters of perestroika.

In the West, Barnett notes, “A political space exists outside state processes and parties, a space in which “public opinion” can play its own role and have its own influence.”

In the Soviet Union, however, it is still (in Gramsci’s phrase) primordial and gelatinous. The development of a healthy civil society is vital to Gorbachev’s ability to enlist practical popular support for his reforms.

But there is a very long road to travel yet before the embryonic civil society developing under glasnost becomes anything but a shadow of what has developed in the liberal democracies of capitalist Europe.

All this happens in an atmosphere of crisis and “revolution”. Gorbachev’s economic reforms (self-financing, the cost-accounting of enterprises) are being sabotaged by the centralised plan and by a bureaucracy which exploits the latter’s legal status. Prices remain so out of line with real costs that any cost-accounting is a miracle of invention. “You can’t cross an abyss in two steps,” Barnett quotes a saying doing the rounds in Moscow. “We are standing before an abyss.” The Soviet leadership has little choice when the Soviet infant mortality rate is 53rd in the world — at the level of “developing” countries.

Democratisation is an essential part of the process, despite the dreams of some Soviet technocrats that economic reform can be achieved by a “strong leader”. Simple fact: the Soviet office worker rarely has access to a photocopier. Any control is strictly guarded — after all, someone may run of a samizdat on one! The answer increasingly is: What if they do? What’s the problem? The cost of not having photocopics at one’s right hand is immense. Remember carbon paper?

Personal computers are “dangerous” too, if your main concern is unauthorised publications. PC technology and use is woeful by western standards. Even at such a basic level the cost of squeezing out dissent is enormous.

Barnett is ultimately optimistic about glasnost and perestroika’s prospects because he sees no alternative to the USSR to sink further behind, economically and militarily, into the position of a second-rate power. He is also optimistic because, despite everything, there is a socialist tradition, the sad remnants of October 1917. But he also recognises the dangers: “some already see Solzhenitsyn as the Russian Ayatollah”, waiting in exile to lead the forces of Russian primaeval orthodoxy and chauvinism, now appearing in the cracks opened by glasnost.

One often hears socialists in Australia say that perestroika and glasnost will make the spread of socialist ideas here easier. Barnett’s book suggests that the opposite is so.

The Soviets are now exposing all the problems of “really existing socialism”. It is not a pretty picture.

In the realm of social provision even the most critical socialists had thought the USSR was ahead of the West. The facts suggest the contrary. Of course, glasnost and perestroika do help lessen anti-Soviet phobias and open the way to further disarmament. But that is not the same as presenting a positive image of “socialism”. Perhaps in a decade or so, the buds of perestroika may bear fruit in the west. But the crimes of Stalin and Brezhnev will remain millstones around the necks of western socialists for many years to come. If perestroika means more socialism, as Gorbachev claims, then we must ensure that the essence of socialism here is more democracy.
Redressing History


What's the difference between Nellie Melba and Kitty Gallagher? Melba was a famous Australian opera singer, while Kitty was an obscure Irish patriot who led an uprising against the English in 1798. The young Kitty was transported to New South Wales where, during her turbulent life, she drove a bullock team and fought off attacks by bushrangers with flintlock muskets.

But Gallagher's contribution to Australian women's history is no less significant than Melba's. This anthology of 200 Australian women puts Gallagher and other unknown women who battled against tremendous odds into the history books that have been traditionally written by men.

Women's Redress Press is a feminist publisher with the grassroots and academic networks necessary for such a comprehensive collection of women's biographies. An earlier incarnation of Redress Press foundered on the contradictions between female practices and self-imposed male structures, but it's the lives of previously hidden or forgotten women which are there, but it's the lives of previously hidden or forgotten women which surprise and delight the reader.

A short entry under the name of Bill Smith shows how far the women's struggle has come in recent years. Female jockeys were not given recognition by the Australian Jockey Club until 1974, so Wilhelmina Smith became Bill Smith, hid her femaleness behind a barrage of foul language and an odd habit of refusing to change with other jockeys. Small, tough and singleminded, she won the St. Leger Quest in 1902, the Jockey Club Derby in 1903 and the Victorian Oaks in 1909-10. How would the Australian Jockey Club have coped with the discovery? We'll never know.

And there's the long forgotten struggle of Mary Lee, suffragist and trade unionist, whose untiring efforts led to the parliamentary vote for women in South Australia in 1894.

In these days of the Movement to Ordain Women, how many people know that, in 1927, Winifred Kiek was the first woman to be ordained in any church in Australia? Kiek, a Congregationalist, campaigned for peace and for legal rights for women.

Students of the fight for equal pay can learn from the biography of Muriel Heagney who devoted her life to the labour movement and died in poverty at the age of ninety. When women formed the Women and Girls Printing Trades Union, Mel Cashman joined and lost her job. Doris Beeby was another relatively unknown trade union activist who was in the forefront of the struggle for better conditions for women.

Sad's, Rosaleen Norton, painter, writer and witch is left out, while the queen of Sydney bohemia, Dulcie Deamer, does not rate an entry. And while literary women are usually over-represented in such collections, it seems strange to find an entry on Charlotte Sargent of Sargent's Pies fame.

The anthology traces a common thread of Aboriginal women like Louisa Briggs who led a protest in Victoria against the abolition of Aboriginal reserves in 1876, and Pearl Gibbs who organised strikes among Aboriginal pea pickers at Nowra, NSW in the early 1930s.

I showed my review copy to a friend who lives next door to the house Bessie Guthrie rented in Glebe, in Sydney's inner-west. Sue Bellamy's entry describes how abused and homeless children found their way into Bessie's backyard in the 1950s when she ran what amounted to a half-way house in her own home. In 1939 Bessie established Viking Press, publishing anti-war material and poetry mainly by women. When Bessie died in 1977, a small plaque was placed on the front wall of her house. It's gone now and the house is being renovated by the Department of Housing. My friend who lives next door to the house has asked the department to replace it. They have assured her they will.

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Social Volcano: Sugar Workers in the Philippines, by Larry Jagan and John Cunnington. London 1987, War on Want. $4.95 paperback.

The island of Negros in the Philippines is known to Australians as the place of Father Brian Gore's arrest and imprisonment. This report documents the causes and nature of the social unrest which led to the charges against him. It describes a region where the entire economy is dependent upon one crop — sugar — with so much concentration of the land in the hands of the feudal hacienda owners that 98.5 percent of the population is totally landless. How that has come about, and what is now happening to the people of the island as a result of declining international markets and the incompetence and corruption of the Marcos regime is graphically portrayed. So also is the struggle of the National Federation of Sugar Workers to build co-operative farming ventures. Extensively illustrated and tersely written, Social Volcano shows how deeply the Filipinos need radical social change and how unlikely it is to come through yet more government by the landowners.


Every year in every corner of Australia, people are writing histories of their locality or region. Most are comfortable celebrations of the achievements of friends, neighbours, and fellow citizens. Some, however, try to go beyond uncritical myth-making. Peter Gardner's account of the career of Angus McMillan, the "founder" of Gippsland, falls into the second category. His introduction says "perhaps in this Bicentennial year it is appropriate that at least some works such as this show some of the darker side of what is euphemistically called white settlement". This he has done with care and determination, presenting a description of McMillan's role in the murder and expropriation of Gippsland's Aborigi nal population that draws on every available source. Perhaps some of the local controversies are covered in excessive detail, but he provides an important model of what local history can and should be.


Despite the title, the causes, nature and consequences of Australia's own indebtedness take up only part of this study. Most of it looks at the international situation, with case studies of several African and Asian countries, and at the structure and policies of the international financial institutions like the IMF and World Bank. It then proceeds to a series of recommendations, mainly centring on the role the Australian government could play in pushing for debt reform through its membership of various international organisations and institutions. It is not a radical document, but it does advance some important arguments about the nature of today's international economic order, and it does provide some interesting and important information about the comparative size and composition of Australia's foreign debt.

Disarming Poverty: Disarmament for Development in Asia-Pacific, edited by Janet Hunt. Canberra 1987, Australian Council for Overseas Aid. $5.00 paperback.

This pamphlet, one of the ACFOA series of Development Dossiers, looks at the relationship between militarism and economic development (or lack of it). Richard Tanter, Ted Wheelwright, Lyuba Zarsky and a number of others have contributed chapters on various aspects of the regional arms race and its effects, or case studies of particular countries, including Vietnam, Indonesia and Kampuchea. Effects on democratic rights, on the growth of trade unionism, and international alliances are all examined. The essay on Australia's arms exports to the Third World is particularly topical at the moment, given the recent decision of the Australian government. How far can we ignore moral and political implications for the sake of boosting our economy through military exports, and how much do they work to preserve First World domination of the region? The pamphlet provides some clues.

Available from ACFOA. Box 1562, Canberra 2601.


Looking at an exhibition catalogue can be a frustrating experience, especially for people who have not had an opportunity to see the actual display. However, this catalogue is worth obtaining both for the reproductions it provides of some of the exhibition, and for a quite substantial essay on the history of May Day in Melbourne by Charlie Fox. As anyone who has looked for information about Australian celebrations of May Day will know, like so many other parts of labour history, there is almost nothing available. This booklet is a step towards filling the gap. It also provides a short biography of Sam Merrifield, from whose collection most of the material is drawn, and a description of the collection.

Ken Norling