

# THE DIRECTORS GUILD OF GREAT BRITAIN

WITH THE ASSOCIATION OF DIRECTORS AND PRODUCERS

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## PRESS RELEASE

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From: Michael Winner, Chief Censorship Officer,  
for The Directors Guild of Great Britain

### THE DGGB TOTALLY OPPOSES THE OBSCENE PUBLICATIONS (AMENDMENT) BILL

The Directors Guild of Great Britain, a Guild comprising Directors from films, television, stage, radio, ballet, opera etc., passed, unanimously, a Motion at its Annual General Meeting in January:

"The Directors Guild of Great Britain totally rejects and opposes the Obscene Publications (Amendment) Bill and dedicates itself to fighting against it with all the energy at its disposal".

This Bill, also known as the Winston Churchill Bill, presents the most serious threat to the presentation of drama ever seen in this country.

A further statement worded by the Directors Guild is in the process of being circulated and has so far been signed by Sir Peter Hall of the National Theatre, Mr. Trevor Nunn of the Royal Shakespeare Theatre, and Mr. Kenneth Maidment on behalf of the British Film Producers Association. It is expected other interested bodies will follow. This statement says:

"We strongly object to Winston Churchill's proposed Obscene Publications (Amendment) Bill. We believe it will place, if passed, a severe and damaging obstacle to the presentation of drama in Great Britain".

Mr. Michael Grade, Controller of BBC-1 is also Chairing a Sub-Committee of the British Academy of Film & Television Arts which will strongly oppose the Bill. Somewhat late in the day, other elements of the creative community are gathering forces against this extraordinary piece of legislation.

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Originally this Amendment to the Obscene Publications Act of 1959 was announced as being simply an extension of the Obscene Publications Act to radio and television broadcasting.

The Obscene Publications Act of 1959, which has protected the Arts for many years, decrees that something must be shown to "deprave and corrupt" before it can be banned. It has been left to a jury to decide whether material is harmful to the community, and a number of prosecutions have been brought particularly against videos, some obtaining convictions, some not.

When the Winston Churchill Obscene Publications (Amendment) Bill was presented to the House for its Second Reading on 24th January it had undergone a change. It listed a number of items which would automatically be deemed to be obscene and which could not be shown in any form whatsoever if published or viewable in a place to which persons under 18 years of age have access, including the medium of television broadcasting.

These items include "cannibalism, bestiality, mutilation or vicious cruelty towards persons or animals".

The effect of this would be that a performance of King Lear would not be permissible as Gloucester's eyes are gouged out on the stage. A nature film showing animals devouring each other would not be permissible. "A Jewel In The Crown" which has a scene of torture would not be allowed. The Bill, if passed in its present form, would push hundreds of films into the "X" category which have items of this nature shown in a manner which the British Board of Film Classification have frequently placed in lighter categories because they are unclearly or only slightly shown. The ban would apply to anything presented "in action or simulated form" and therefore would apply to News and would mean, for example, that a South African Policeman hitting a South African rioter could not be shown.

John Mortimer, QC in a letter to Mr. Michael Winner, the Chief Censorship Officer of the Directors Guild of Great Britain said "This is obviously a hopeless Bill. In Section One of the 1959 Act the definition of obscenity is that which is likely to deprave and corrupt, i.e. the prosecution has to prove some harm. It is proposed that this definition won't apply to people under 18. The definition for them is just a catalogue of subjects, even if they are treated in a way which is totally harmless. So a childrens' pantomime in which comic cannibals are seen with Robinson Crusoe, say, would come under the definition ..... King Lear, Titus Andronicus, Grimm's Fairy Tales and even depictions of the Crucifixion (vicious cruelty) could be attacked under this Bill". John Mortimer goes on to write: "It seems to me that the aims of the Bill could be simply achieved by applying the provisions of the 1959 Act to radio and TV without substituting a series of nonsensical and unworkable definitions and abolishing the defence of literary or other merit for people under 18".

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The Bill passed its Second Reading in the House of Commons on 24th January by 161 votes to 31. The Prime Minister, Mrs. Thatcher, voted for the Bill.

The Bill now goes to Committee. It is liable to be changed in Committee, and the Directors Guild and other interested parties are naturally most concerned that it is changed in a manner that makes some sense of it and makes the continuation of drama properly presentable in Great Britain. Otherwise the banning of acts, regardless of how they are performed, would bring confusion and draconian censorship to almost every dramatic effort.

In the Parliamentary Debate Gwyneth Dunwoody, MP said "The Bill has been born out of prejudice and fostered by bad Law and even by bad advice".

The Directors Guild concurs with this view.

The Bill is engendered by the current hysteria about violence on British television. In this respect it is interesting to note that Japan, a country which has the most violent television in the world - where people are regularly slashed and garrotted for breakfast - has probably the lowest crime rate in the world. For example per 100,000 inhabitants Japan has 1.7 forceable rapes per year whereas the U.K. has 8.8 and West Germany 11. Robberies with violence in Japan per 100,000 inhabitants are 1.9 per year as against 44.6 in the U.K., 93.6 in France and 48.1 in West Germany! So much for the fact that television produces a violent community!

We would like to remind you of the manner in which this Bill came into being.

Sir Nicholas Bonsor, MP, a Sponsor of the present Bill, came sixth in the ballot for Private Members Bills. He announced, in November, that he would be introducing a measure to amend the definition of Obscenity in the 1959 Act. His measure would be along the lines of that proposed by Mrs. Mary Whitehouse. Later Sir Nicholas gave way on his Bill as Mr. Winston Churchill drew the first position for Private Members Bills, and a Bill was thus presented by Mr. Winston Churchill. The Daily Mail reported "Mr. Churchill's move comes after intensive lobbying at Westminster by clean up TV campaigner Mary Whitehouse".

Mrs. Whitehouse has of course issued many statements including giving her opinion about the Inner City riots in Great Britain being largely contributed to by the showing of the riots in South Africa on British television!

There is no doubt that this Bill, if passed, would be the subject of great attention from Mrs. Whitehouse and prosecutions would be bound to follow, which the Directors Guild believes would not be in the interest of the community at large.

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Whilst the Directors Guild does not believe in a "No censorship" situation, it takes the view that the Obscene Publications Act of 1959 has been a sufficient check on obscenity and, if applied to television, would place the matter with a jury, such jury having been the basis of the British system of justice and freedom for many centuries.

We believe that the addition of what one Member of Parliament called "A laundry list" of subject matter that is automatically offensive regardless of its manner of presentation would make the production of drama impossible in this country and reduce our standards of censorship to a greater level than is known in any civilised country in the world. The Directors Guild therefore strongly opposes this Bill.

For further information Mr. Michael Winner's phone numbers are 602.3725 or 602.6191.