

BY DAVID WEBB

Writing in 'The Freethinker' in May 1982 on the debacle of Mary Whitehouse's Old Bailey prosecution of Michael Bogdanov, the National Theatre director of "The Pomansin Britain", I commented on the lack of critical acclaim the play had attracted, which I thought was rather unfair to its author, Howard Brenton. With regard to "Iranian Nights", however, a play which Mr. Brenton has written with Tariq Ali as "a pinprick for free speech", as he describes it in a foreword to the play, and, hopefully, "a pinprick to clear the air", the critics' apparent approval of it as a piece of theatre, appears to me to have let Mr. Brenton, and Mr. Ali, off very lightly. Perhaps that was inevitable, given the chilling post-Rushdie death-edict climate in which it has been so courageously and so quickly written, performed and staged by the Royal Court Theatre in Chelsea. 148

True "The Times" Irving Wardle wrote that "It is not a well-organized play" and in "The Independent" Alex Renton called it a "loose collection of jokes, ideas and anecdotes". For me it fell between two stools. One moment it appeared as an extended satirical revue sketch, whilst the next as a serious, pseudo-academic attempt "to explore the nature of tyranny, Britain's own responsibility for creating intolerance and the schisms within the Muslim community", as Michael Billington so described it in "The Guardian". It was too long and drawn out to succeed as the first, and too short and superficial as the second. But then, I've never liked 'one-acters' and actors are well-known for being notoriously bad judges of plays anyway. 124

The performances of the three-handed cast were also treated by the critics with surprising kindness, I thought. That, too, may have been the result of unconscious admiration of their guts in appearing in the play at all, especially since two of the original actors cast had dropped out because of fears for their safety. I, of course, share that admiration but I'm afraid that it cannot obscure all criticism of Nabil Shaban's vocally ill-equipped performance of the 'Caliph'/'Father', but which, again surprisingly, Michael Billington thought "effective" and Alex Renton "excellent". 92

Because of my own intense anger over the Khomeini-Rushdie affair, and, after the initial, almost formal, establishment condemnations and protestations, the setting-in of, in Irving Wardle's words, "the normalization process" where "politicians start seeing both sides of the question", I would have preferred a much more direct 49

onslaught against the religious ruthlessness of a supposedly "Holy Man" and the cruelty and nonsensicality of Islamic fundamentalism alongside other equally repugnant religious creeds. Perhaps that would be inviting the wrath, not only of already incited Muslims, but also of the Mary Whitehouse-style mafias, ever eager and willing to pounce on the exponents of free expression whenever and wherever they dare to expose themselves.

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Tempered down outrage though "Iranian Nights" may have expressed, it was still sufficiently forthright to require the Royal Court Theatre being turned into a fortress, for all bags to be searched on entry and for police to be on duty outside. Further down the King's Road a Penguin Bookshop permanently parades a security guard at its entrance and uniformed police guard the Penguin Publishing HQ in Kensington. Two other London bookshops have been fire-bombed and nowhere, now, is "The Satanic Verses" openly displayed - except, commendably bravely, by the National Secular Society's London offices - and even here, I gather, the police advised them against it.

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Yet what, positively, is being done by the law enforcement agencies to combat this maniacal behaviour?

On 22nd February, in a letter to Allan Green, Q.C., the Director of Public Prosecutions, I sent a list of nine named persons who have publicly, either through the press, radio or television, clearly infringed the criminal law of incitement to murder by affirming that Khomeini's death sentence on Rushdie was right, that it should be carried out and that they would be prepared to do it. I asked the DPP if he intended to institute criminal proceedings against them and if not, why not? He did not reply. I wrote again on 15th March and this time one of his staff wrote a 'fob-off' letter which in no way answered my questions. I have written yet again and, at the time of going to press, I still wait to hear what he proposes to do. Nothing, I suspect. As far as I know, no-one has yet been brought before a court for any Rushdie-related offence, and it seems increasingly likely that the DPP has been instructed by the Attorney General not to pursue such matters. The double standards employed are a disgrace. If you or I were to announce such life-threatening intentions against, for example, the Prime Minister, we would be rounded up and dealt with before you could say 'Sinn Fein'.

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So far there have been no demonstrations outside the Royal Court Theatre. Ironi-



ally that may be a bad sign, for it is just the sort of indication of "the normalization process" which ~~will~~ the DPP will use to help justify his policy of not properly pursuing these known criminals through to legal prosecution. Meantime - and for a long time, it seems - tough luck, Mr. Rushdie!

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David Webb,  
April 1989

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