

A working class rebel against the bourgeois left, he is no champion of the Scouse underclass but is tied to the Catholic values of his Liverpool youth. **Hugh Hebert** profiles Alan Bleasdale

# The manacled mutineer

**W**HEN a June election loomed it seemed as though Alan Bleasdale's new serial GBH might run into the kind of Rent-an-MP rhubarb that bedevilled his last big television work, *The Monocled Mutineer*. In the first episode of GBH which goes out next week a city council election is won by an emotionally handicapped, father-worshipping Labour thug raging on the end of strings held by extremists. Pressure on Channel 4 to hold back the £5.5 million series till after polling would have been predictable. The difference is that this time, the pressure could have come from the Left — the Right should love at least the first couple of episodes.

Bleasdale has maintained that he is not a directly political writer. Yet since *Boys From The Blackstuff* a decade ago, the temptation has been to see him as the celebrator of an endangered Scouse underclass, mugged on the way to the dole office. The easy assumption was that he played on the Left wing, but the television work has never really justified that. Bleasdale himself will cite, for instance, the scene in the first episode of *Boys From The Blackstuff*, where one of the characters says to Snowy, the pocket sized card-carrying revolutionary of the group, "You're the only member of the WRP with a working class accent!" But the sneer at the WRP and the implicit approval of Snowy confirm the sense that Bleasdale is suspicious of people who don't share his own working class cultural background.

Some of the more grotesque attempts to pigeonhole his politics came during the row over *The Monocled Mutineer*, his first world war serial. "Despite being described in the Daily Mail as a Marxist millionaire working for Russia, I've always questioned the far Left almost as much as I've questioned the Right. I know where I am, and where I am is mildly Left of centre. I didn't vote till I was 38 (he is 45). I regret that now, but I was not a political beast. When my friends were marching on the American Embassy in 1968, I was doing quarter mile sprints and playing outside left." His ambition before he compromised by teaching English and PE, was to play professional football. "I had a certain arrogant contempt for politics and politicians — not all of them, of course, not people like Michael Foot. If I had heroes he'd be one of them."

"It's power, and magnetism, and consequences that interest me more than the politics . . . The power that is in people and how you use it, and how you are used by other people." That is the core of GBH, which has Robert Lindsay as the unscrupulous leader

of the Labour council and Michael Palin as the gentle socialist teacher thrown by accident into brutal conflict with him.

The second easy misreading of Bleasdale is to see him as a naturalistic writer, the steady-eyed chronicler of bleak and blighted lives that are redeemed only by the solidarity and humour of the Giro classes. Even in *Blackstuff*, there are anti-naturalistic scenes, like some of those with Bernard Hill's Yosser, and a sequence with Jean Boht as the woman

in charge of the dole office. She plays a bizarre game with her clients, a mix of flirting politeness and velvet-gloved pleasure in her social power. Michael Wearing, who produced the series, says it was that third episode — where the focus shifts to the women — when they realised they had a hit on their hands. Bleasdale maintains that he finally sold the series to Wearing on the basis of a joke he had been nursing for more than five years. In one scene a despairing Yosser goes to confession.

"I'm desperate, father."

"Call me Dan, my son."

"All right — I'm desperate, Dan."

He was a successful regional stage playwright and creator of *Scully*, a hugely popular Liverpool commercial radio series about a sub-delinquent teenager and football freak. The *Blackstuff* series made Bleasdale a network television force. He was born in Liverpool in 1946 and still lives there with his wife and three children, and his father "in the East Wing". This is a crack at the Marxist millionaire sneer. His claim is that he keeps just one year ahead of the taxman.

His grandfather was killed in the first world war before Alan's father was born; one of the sources of the fierce anti-war sentiments of *Monocled Mutineer*, and of the patriarchal obsession of the city boss in GBH. Alan's father, a foreman at an oil refinery remains a key heroic figure for his only child.

A lot of Bleasdale's work is imbued with a powerful sense of mortality that you might trace to his Catholic upbringing. But he believes it goes even further back. "I can distinctly remember being in me cot. The old joke is that I didn't get out of it till I was 17." One of those memories as a toddler, before the church got hold of him, is of going out into the countryside with his parents and thinking: Soon those cows will be dead, and so will my mum and dad, and so will I.

He went to teacher training college and taught English and PE at a comprehensive and, in the early 1970s, for four years in the South Pacific islands,

where the pay was better. Just before he and his wife Julie left for Tarawa with their newborn child, Bleasdale walked into Radio City in Liverpool and dumped a batch of short stories about the 16 year old tearaway called *Scully*. Seven days before their departure, he got a call to go into Radio City and record some of the stories. When they got to their South Sea island, eight miles long and 80 yards wide, where heat stopped school at lunch time, he wrote the first *Scully* novel.

In its anti-naturalistic phase his writing can go over the top, though that is deliberate. Jim O'Brien directed *The Monocled Mutineer* (1986): "There's no doubt that going too far is part of what Alan does very well, pushing a particular situation to its absolute extreme where tragedy turns into farce; that is very much what he is about. And that is in a sense extremely dangerous, and sometimes it doesn't work — but I think it's what makes him exciting . . . He takes a naturalistic idea and pushes it as far as it will go, and then a bit further."

**B**LEASDALE is a large bearded figure who looks as though he could command a stage, though his manner is anything but stagy. (Ironically, he has never had a big stage hit in London — the nearest was his Elvis Presley musical *Are You Lonesome Tonight?*) His emotional threshold can seem surprisingly low, he can grow misty eyed over his passionate feelings about family and the performance of the group of actors for whom he most often writes.

If his writing has a fault it's an over-easy access to sympathy, even pity, for his characters; even the villains. There is always the pain of defeated aspirations. "No one escapes in my work." He sounds genuinely sorry about that. What saves him from sentimentality then is the grittiness of the jokes.

He has had a punishing year being both writer of GBH and one of the producers — with Verity Lambert and David Jones — most of it away from home on location and in Lon-

don. Till then his longest absence from his family had been three weeks in the Soviet Union to research a film for Roland Joffe. He went by train, to the astonishment of the Hollywood bunch, because he won't fly. Joffe suggested a story about an enclave of Russia that had never been touched by communism, and was now faced with perestroika. But Bleasdale could find nothing to sustain the idea. He came back with a script based on what he found in the desolate Khrushchev slums outside the tourist ambit of Moscow. He has never heard a word from the film company since.

His scripts are always way over length, he regards them as the lot of what he wants to say and the basis for hard bargaining. The draft for the seven episodes of GBH was 835 pages long, delivered to his fellow producers Lambert and Jones in the autumn of 1989.

Bleasdale says: "We took 235 pages out in a week. I was seriously considering murdering both of them by the Wednesday night."



DRAWING: PAUL HAMLIN