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*A Higher Education* - A polemic (for a change)

The Radio 4 comedy-drama *A Higher Education* was written in 1999 to present a satire of a dysfunctional and cash-strapped university (*Northfield*) led by the egotistical and amoral Head of Drama *Don Crookfield* (Rik Mayall). Harassed staff attempt to deal with a missing student, apparently held hostage by a seemingly crazed, politically-motivated ‘maverick’ lecturer *Roy Pointer* (Philip Glenister). *Don* suspects that *Roy*’s action might be a protest against the budget cuts. Senior Lecturer *Sophie Sexton* (Helen Lederer) knows *Pointer*’s true motivation as she is secretly complicit in his action – namely to topple the anti-arty *Dean* (Judi Earl). It must be emphasised that the fictitious *Northfield University* was not based on any one HE institution, but was an amalgam of many.

The play has been repeated numerous times on BBC Radio and as recently as March 10th 2015 (Radio 4 Extra). It is wonderful to hear a quality comedy cast in full swagger – my old mate from Manchester University, Rik Mayall has rarely been in finer bombastic form. I am also delighted to hear the reaction of listeners who engage with the play and, as they tell me, relate to its contemporary relevance.

However, for those of us passionately engaged in the provision of Higher Education today, the play also represents a sad reflection on the fact that many of the challenging issues presented in the play of 1999 appear to have changed little in 16 years. According to many colleagues in the arts’ and humanities’ field, the climate has become stormier not sunnier. Indeed this mirrors a sense of growing anxiety in the sector as, ‘the perceived “crisis of the humanities” seems to be deepening and the pace of change in the culture of universities is rapidly increasing.’ (**Professor Peter Burian reviewing** Humanities in the Twenty-first Century: Beyond utility and markets (2013) Eds: Belfiore, Eleonora and Upchurch, Anna. Palgrave Macmillan**).**

**I believe that Alex Preston was more accurate in his assessment when, writing in The Guardian newspaper (29 March 2015), he entitled his article: ‘The War Against Humanities at Britain’s Universities’**

So what would Head of Department *Don Crookfield* say today?

#### *Don: ‘The best interests of the student are at the heart of everything we do here at Northfield. So chum, what grade do you want?’*

#### The continuing debate about the ‘worth and value’ of university arts’ provision is a central theme of the play. The *Dean*’s attempt to close the Drama department is primarily based on prejudice and ignorance. As a failed and bitter ex-scientist, she simply does not understand or want to understand the *value* of the outcomes where ‘a course that encourages students to explore each others genitals while reciting George Bernard Shaw badly cannot justify an Honours degree.’

#### *Don:* *‘Don’t knock it Dean. Dramatic Studies - gateway to the stars. Everyone wants their fifteen minutes of fame. At Northfield we offer them a full twenty’.*

The climate of fear and loathing the *Dean* engenders towards the ‘lesser’ subjects she leads but chooses not to understand has resonance with many colleagues today who are similarly under the command and control of middle-managers more interested in regulation than the value of the education they fail to understand. In concert with the all-pervasive mind-set of the Research Excellence Framework (REF) they also demand to know, ‘what is the ‘auditable’ Impact, Reach and Significance of your work?’

*The Dean:* ‘*Why can’t students stage something with real impact? Something with a script? Something really challenging and iconoclastic?* *Something like Alan Ayckbourn?*

Even if somebody (anybody) could properly define Impact, Reach and Significance or accurately measure their efficacy for arts’ practice outcomes, in reality does anyone outside the humanities’ community really care or value arts’ education enough? The last UK coalition government certainly didn’t, despite the findings of the 2015 Warwick Commission report on the Future of Cultural Value indicating that the cultural industries contribute some £77bn (equivalent to 5%) in ‘value added’ to the British economy.

The Conservative-Liberal Democratic coalition reduced funding for degree coursesin arts and humanities at England's universitiesin favour of science and technology subjects. As evidence of the government’s antipathy, Education Secretary Nicky Morgan advised in November 2014 against studying arts subjects because doing so limits career choices and ‘too many young people are making choices aged 15 which will hold them back for the rest of their lives.’ (www.telegraph.co.uk/Education/Education News 10 November 2014)

*Don:* ‘*Held me back - the Jag hasn’t had a full service for five years now.*

Cash-strapped arts’ departments; unrealistic funding models; top-down administration; suffocating micro-management; double-think fear of expressing opinion - all these issues formed the back-drop to the 1999 play and they remain the *mise-en-scène*of H.E. today.

However, ‘maverick’ lecturer *Roy Pointer*’s radical act of revolt was aimed not simply against an anti-arty boss but against the sausage-factory culture the *Dean* represented - that is the numbers-driven approach to Higher Education. This, with the introduction of UK tuition fees in September 1998 (and their rise of up to £9,000 per year in 2012) signalled the naissance and inexorable escalation of the client-culture ethos over the last 17 years…

*Don: ‘And what classification of degree would Madame favour?*

…manipulated league tables…

*Don: ‘The NSS simply doesn’t acknowledge our five-star sauna facilities’*

…and reduced staff-student contact time, especially in ‘research-led’ departments…

*Don: ‘No class is cancelled. I’m away conducting essential research:’ The Performativity of Cigar Rolling on the Thigh…’Course I’m in Cuba.*

In the attempt to counter student complaints that rose by a tenth to more than 20,000 in 2012-13 (www.telegraph.co.uk/Education/University education 3 Jun 2014), the strategy employed by middle-management, for they too are under the über-directive of ‘attain target or die’, is to introduce even more compliance regulations for academics to observe. This ignores the evidence that more rules usually results in less time for the core activity of communicating effectively with students and therefore increases dissatisfaction. Ergo, the escalating spiral of the complaint-compliance-complaint culture.

*Don: ‘Moi? Sexist? Never. I have all the time in the world for you darling. Just send me an email about how much you want to forget about this complaint.*

Staff need less tick-box forms and more time for students. It is the very essence of arts’ subjects, especially those with practical outcomes, that they can be gloriously messy, ephemeral and un-recordable, particularly when judged against science-subject or REF criteria. But the profound, soul-enhancing effects of the process of making art, let alone the magical spectator-creator connections of the final reveal, those emotions can last a life-time. How’s that for Impact? What score for Reach and Significance? But life-changing art has little value in the commodity market-place that is now Brand H.E.

As *Roy* *Pointer* concludes in the play:

*Roy: 'Why' is out. 'How' is in: "How much profit per head?" "How are the entry*

*targets?" "How many units have you processed today? Processed like mushy peas.*

*We teach much more but educate you less.*

Sadly, this 1999 observation still appears to be the reality of 2015. As Professor of American Literature at the University of East Anglia Sarah Churchwell put it in the Alex Preston article, this is the political fixation on ‘…the marketisation of education and the university system.’

*A Higher Education* concludes that concerned lecturers like *Roy* and *Sophie* challenging top-down, market-driven hierarchical structures which stifle innovation and creativity - these dissenters should be celebrated not reviled. They are labelled as ‘maverick’ so as to marginalise, disarm and contain them. Surely history confirms that the most important of cultural and political movements, especially in the arts and humanities, have always upset the rigid apple-cart of stasis and mediocrity? Maybe we need less *Dons* and more *Roys?*

*Don: ‘As long as Roy cuts off that pony-tail’*

I was in contact with Rik Mayall shortly before his sudden and shocking death in June 2014about the possibility of creating a contemporary sequel to *A Higher Education*. It is humorous and at the same time depressing to reveal that the updated sequel we were planning to stage was not so very different to the original.

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