ARTS

D.J. TAYLOR

LOCAL HEROES

In the mid-Sixties a singer emerged who, with his novelty songs delivered in a strong East Anglian accent, has come to symbolise how regional accents and customs became subsumed in mass culture in the twentieth century

The distinction between popular culture and mass culture is not made enough of by social historians. According to Richard Hoggart, writing well over 50 years ago, the first is a series of social arrangements created by the people and for the people beyond the net of extraneous influence, while the other is an intrusive colonisation imposed from above, usually for commercial gain. The difference between the two, consequently, is as marked as the gap between the stage of a working men's club and a Hollywood blockbuster, or between elegy and nostalgia, and made all starker by the fact that, by Hoggart's definition, "popular culture" has all but ceased to exist, or, when it does survive, has to do so in highly artificial conditions, like the pantomime or the Punch and Judy show.

And if a genuine popular culture has been very nearly extinguished by television and the multiplex and the Estuary accent, what about its local variant – the customs and vocal peculiarities native to particular parts of Britain? As a boy, growing up in the Norfolk of the early 1970s, I was certainly aware that such a thing either existed or had only recently begun to fall apart. It could be found in *The Rabbit Skin Cap*, George Baldry's deeply unsentimental account of a late-Victorian farm labourer's childhood; in outlandish dialect phrases intermittently let fly by my father across the tea table; and in visits to Carrow Road, home of Norwich City FC, where ironic old men in cloth caps would occasionally urge the players to "Give it to Varco!" (This turned out to be the legendary Percy Varco, last seen playing for the club in about 1929.)

Above all, the remnants of a fugitive and fast-disappearing East Anglian culture – intent, communal, self-sustaining – turned up on our annual Whit Monday trip to Framlingham (always known as "Fram") to visit its gala (always pronounced "gayla") and have tea with the Stiffs, my grandmother's cousin Aunt May and her husband, Ernie. They belonged to a part of the demographic that no longer exists, the agricultural working class (May had worked in service, Ernie ended up stoking the boiler at the local public school).

Aunt May! Uncle Ernie! Aunt Bess, May's live-in sister, who, instructed by her doctor to go to bed at 9.30, would do so even if her favourite TV programme ended five minutes later. Where did they go, and what happened to the world they presided over? In fact, the social fragmentation that had marked the 1960s, when their children began to move away, was already turning into diaspora. May and Ernie's descendants are accountants and schoolteachers now, and there are no more gala days at Fram. In much the same way, Norfolk dialect is increasingly the preserve of societies got up to promote it, and the crowds at Carrow Road chant obscenities just like everyone else.

Occasionally there emerges a figure who is able to symbolise this gap between what has fallen away and what is taking its place. My own candidate would be Allan Smethurst (1927-2000) the "Singing Postman", whose signature tune "Have You Got a Light, Boy?" (pronounced "Hev yew gotta loight, boy?") is still remembered by fans of left-field 1960s pop. A bona fide employee of the GPO, who performed in peaked cap and uniform, Smethurst's plaintive, country-and-western-inflected numbers – they had titles like "Following the Binder Round" and "A Miss From Diss" – had him filed as a satirist by trend-spotting journalists. In fact, they are entirely straightforward laments to lost love and a rural landscape that was disappearing even as he wrote about it: the marshland cockle-harvesting of "Stiffkey Blues" or the pub entertainments of "They're Orl Playing Dommies ["dominoes"] in the Bar".

The point, perhaps, about the Singing Postman – a shy, introverted character who lapsed into alcoholism and spent the last 20 years of his life quartered in a Salvation Army hostel – was that he was self-created, bred by the culture he had grown in, utterly unable to deal with the demands of Sixties showbiz. The difference between what he represented and the kind of local culture that followed in his wake was made remorselessly clear a decade and a half later with the unveiling of a local BBC radio station. My father, on board in the role of bowls correspondent, offered satirical accounts of the tribe of smock-wearing ancients with such noms de plume as "The Buttercup Boy" and "Sid the Ratcatcher" who began to haunt its corridors – people, he proposed, who didn't in the least exemplify bygone local culture but thought they had an idea of what it looked like.

In his heyday: Allan Smethurst, the Singing Postman

And yet, now and again, in an environment colonised by interloping Londoners and jerry-built houses, where the only thing that moves over a wheatfield in summer is a combine harvester, something occasionally stirs. Through most of August, my local newspaper, the *Eastern Daily Press*, was aflame with a correspondence about samphire (otherwise known as "poor man's asparagus", the edible seaweed found in coastal areas), how you cooked it and, more important, how you pronounced it. Professor Peter Trudgill, author of the definitive *The Norfolk Dialect*, was brought in to confirm that the correct pronunciation is "samfer" (boil for 15 minutes, by the way, or alternatively fry in butter). It was a small victory for the ghosts of Aunt May and Uncle Ernie in their Framlingham bungalow, my father mock-humorously enquiring "Ha' your fa got a dicker, bor?" (translation: "does your father own a donkey, my friend?"), the old men yelling for Varco and the Singing Postman's tremulous smile – all the things that, in however marginal a way, make us what we are and will not be swept away by the mass culture's bulldozing tide.

Country and Eastern: In Search of the Singing Postman *will be broadcast on BBC Radio 4 on 7 September.*

'The slithering fall and rise motif, beginning low and eventually consuming the whole orchestra, hooked every listener', PAGE 34

CINEMA

Pale reflection

Certified Copy

DIRECTOR: ABBAS KIAROSTAMI

Whatever the publicity may suggest, this is not a romantic comedy. It is an English-language film by the Iranian director Abbas Kiarostami. It may have a picturesque Tuscan setting and lyrical passages, it may at times induce gasps of surprise or amusement but it is intended to be an enigma.

Juliette Binoche won the best actress award this year at Cannes for her role as a woman, with an understandably recalcitrant teenager in tow, who attends a talk by a British author (William Shimell) celebrated for his theories on art – ideas that seem to spread, almost too easily, into observations about life. She passes something to the moderator of the session and the next thing we know, the author is making his way down the steps to her antique shop. She seems star struck, a little nervous and eager to please. He is guarded but intrigued. Soon she is asking him to sign multiple copies of his book and driving him on a tour of the area.

The hilltop town they visit is beautiful and the two protagonists are witty and attractive. Their conversation ranges across happiness, love and perspectives on art, mood versus technique and other variations around the matter of his book, namely the value of the copy relative to the original.

The film plays into the seductive charm of fleeting encounters, when conversation and even emotional intimacy can seem easiest with someone you've barely met. Films excel at this – from Noël Coward's *Brief Encounter* (1945) to Richard Linklater's *Before Sunrise* (1995) – playing on the instant familiarity that huge screen images give the audience. Like the protagonists themselves in these films, we too are getting to know them in that cafe or wandering through night-time Vienna.

Yet, there is also something worrying about this particular encounter. She in particular has moments of almost dangerous volatility, oscillating between enthusiasm and sudden resentful outbursts. He looks doubtful, as if handling some kind of unknown explosive, but then again, he seems suddenly to relax and take pleasure in her company. In a coffee bar, the proprietor mistakes them for a married couple and Binoche's character plays along. Is she delusional? Manipulative?

Kiarostami's Iranian films have long played on the idea of perspective. Initial assumptions about the characters' predicament are overturned by later information. He made an entire film, *Close-Up* (1990), based closely on the real trial of a man who successfully persuaded a family that he was film-maker Mohsen Makhmalbaf and that they were the subject of his new work. Maybe, you wonder, that film would have been just as good as the real thing, so sincere was the impostor's intention. In other films, like *A Taste of Cherry* (1997), Kiarostami has pulled back from the most dramatic of endings to reveal the camera and crew capturing the film. How does that change our reading?

Mismatch of realities: Juliette Binoche and William Shimell in *Certified Copy*

In *Certified Copy*, there is a moment when we see a couple – he has his back to the camera – apparently involved in a dispute. He is remonstrating with the woman in a forceful "Why do you always ...?" vein while she stands, passively, gazing up at him. Then he turns and we can see he is talking into a mobile-phone headset, possibly to an argumentative child. The conversation ends and he and the woman walk away together in sympathy.

That man is played by veteran screenwriter Jean-Claude Carrière, who worked with Buñuel on several of his best-known films including *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* (1972). The weakness of *Certified Copy* is that the dialogue, written by Kiarostami and Caroline Eliacheff, does not here live up to the ideas. There is too much of it, or rather, there is not enough that is sharp and pertinent. There is also a mismatch (although this may be intentional) in the acting. Binoche is as expressive yet puzzling as ever; opposite her, though, Shimell, who is not an actor but an opera singer, a baritone renowned for his Don Giovanni, can sometimes feel underpowered. His casting works brilliantly for naturalism in the opening scenes but later, paradoxically, it seems stagey. Maybe Kiarostami wants to remind us of the play-acting inherent in this piece: sadly, as a film intended to provoke reflection, this Tuscan episode seems a paler version of an original Iranian Kiarostami.
Francine Stock

TELEVISION

Of human bondage

I Am Slave

CHANNEL 4

Channel 4 this week showed a short series of programmes about slavery in modern Britain, inspired by estimates that there are as many as 5,000 people here who have been trafficked into the country. Most are women forced into prostitution, but others are employed as unpaid domestic labour. *I Am Slave* (30 August) was a drama on that theme.

It began in the Nuba Mountains of Sudan, where two men are taking part in a wrestling match in front of an enthusiastic crowd of villagers. Then it switched to the immigration desk at Heathrow, where Malia (Wunmi Mosaku), a silent and bewildered African girl, is being brought into the country. Next we see her in the kitchen of a London house, being given instructions on her duties, which are never-ending. But she is no ordinary live-in maid: her employer takes her passport and tells her she is never to open the front door without permission.

Incarcerated as a domestic servant in north London, Malia (Wunmi Mosaku) yearns for freedom

As her life in London becomes ever harsher, flashbacks show how Malia came to be in this predicament. Her doting father, Bah (Isaach De Bankolé), one of the wrestlers in the open-

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(Contined from page 33.)
ing scene, tells her a bedtime story; but that night the village is subject to a terrifying attack by armed men, who set light to it and abduct several of the children, including Malia, who is then 12. While her father walks across the country looking for her, she is taken to Khartoum, where she is inspected at a kind of impromptu slave market ("Show me your tongue") and acquired by a Sudanese Arab family. They put her in a dingy outhouse and set her to work. Her father, meanwhile, has extended his search to the city, where he takes work as a dustman. Years pass, but he does not give up, haunted by the heartbreaking idea that he should have been able to protect her. One day, she sees him through a window as he is doing his rounds, but despite her desperate efforts to attract his attention, he passes by. But the scene she has caused is too much for her employer, who sends her to London to work for a cousin.

Interspersed with episodes from her past are the events of her life in Britain. She briefly escapes, but is brought back by Said (Igal Naor), the family's driver. Her employer, Haleema (Lubna Azabal), tells her that if she ever speaks to anyone outside the house, "my husband will have your family killed". Then Haleema's brother tries to grope her, an incident that leads to further persecution: she is banned from any contact with the family's children and locked in her room for a week, with the light bulb removed. It is her lowest point: we see her cutting her hand with a knife and trying the blade against her wrists.

She has, though, formed a halting friendship with Said. He questions her and finds out the truth about her predicament. He urges her to go to the police, but stops short of offering her practical help; he wants to keep his job. In the end she is rescued by a young African man she calls out to in the street. "I am a slave," she tells him. "They keep me as a slave." As she leaves, her employer threatens and intimidates her, then resorts to moral blackmail (her husband, she says, will beat her if Malia runs away). But the girl goes anyway, and there is a happy ending.

The two stories, of Malia and her father, were skilfully interwoven by writer Jeremy Brock. The direction, by Gabriel Range, made much of the visual and emotional contrast between the warmth of Africa and the chill of London in winter. But aside from Malia, the characters were sketches. The two women who employ, abuse and imprison Malia were so similar in their shrill cruelty that I initially thought they were one and the same. But the film was carried by a compelling central performance from Mosaku, who was, for long stretches, silent and in virtual darkness. Her isolation and loneliness were palpable, but her spirit was unbroken.

John Morrish

MUSIC

Romantic leads

Proms 52, 55, 56, 57

THE ROYAL ALBERT HALL, LONDON

The Minnesota Orchestra is the sole American representative at this summer's Proms, having been tempted across with two concerts and the honour of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. Since appointing Finnish conductor Osmo Vänskä in its centenary season 2003, the orchestra has proved itself irresistible in the core classical repertoire, its cycle of Beethoven symphonies earning a Grammy nomination for the Ninth, which, live in the London it was written for, had a powerful effect last Saturday, 28 August (Prom 57).

Vänskä was at his most expressive, isolating the dance even in the slow movement and soliciting the prominence of individual instruments with a pointed finger or a goal-scorer's nod. The slithering fall and rise motif rounding off the first movement, beginning low and eventually consuming the whole orchestra, hooked every listener. One felt the nerves of the aurally and visually exposed timpanist, whose part in the scherzo everyone knows, his crisp early-music-born battery demonstrating better than anything this orchestra's synthesis of modern interpretation with the lessons of the authentic movement. This was the first symphony to use trombones, but they were of course overshadowed by the other symphonic debutants, the singers, in this case the BBC Symphony Chorus, singing without copies, a now habitual feat by top choirs which surely proves what a golden age of music-making we are living through. The *Choral* Symphony was once considered a tough task even with the scores. The soloists, soprano Helena Juntunen, mezzo Charlotte Hellekant – one in silver, one in gold frock – tenor Eric Cutler, and bass Neal Davies were on stage

Alisa Weilerstein, whose performance of Shostakovich' s Cello Concerto No. 1 'created an eerie spell over the hall'

throughout in a welcome reversal of the trend to have them appear only when required. They were an awesome quartet led by Juntunen whose rare ability to sing both high and loud with the sweetest tone was an inspiration as she led the way to romanticism like Liberty leading the people. In Berg's Violin Concerto, coupled with Beethoven, soloist Gil Shaham cast doubt into the mix through the work's strange ambivalence, its atonality straining against the imposition of a Bach chorale in its second half, calling us back to reason through the storm.

Unfortunately, when the Minnesota actually arrived at romanticism the previous evening in Bruckner's Fourth, the *Romantic* (Prom 56), the performance was rather understated, stuck, as it were, in classicism. The expected breadth and power were lacking, the lengthy finale's anticipated fortissimo no more forte than in previous movements. One longed for the smothering embrace of strings and bursting swell of brass but it was as if they had entranced themselves in the dreamy restraint of Barber's *Music for a Scene from Shelley* which opened the concert. The horns at least were led by a star player, Michael Gast, who played without blemish in Shostakovich's Cello Concerto No. 1 where he duetted with the soloist for long stretches. For her part, Alisa Weilerstein played with urgent aggression in the outer movements and bitter sorrow in the inner, the passage on harmonics creating an eerie spell over the hall.

From even further abroad came the Sydney Symphony under the direction of Vladimir Ashkenazy on 24 August (Prom 52). Its single concert was a disappointment marred by brass glitches and a feeling that orchestra and conductor were constantly working against each other. This was not helped by Ashkenazy's jerky beat which failed to suggest the music's flow, or by his tight hugging and doubled-up, stomach-ache gestures which hampered rather than release the genie. The delayed waltz beat in Strauss' *Rosenkavalier* Suite sounded more like reluctance than a tipping over into flight and the slow bass introduction to Scriabin's *Divine Poem* (Symphony No. 3) set a sluggish seal on the evening.

The concert was, however, blessed with the presence of Hélène Grimaud, soloist in Ravel's Piano Concerto, whose weighty, exciting touch defied her sylph-like appearance and her Gershwin-influenced, syncopated jazz chords cut across music's conventions with the disdain of a Left Bank intellectual. The clarinet, piercing the ensemble in the finale, seemed almost to be uttering oaths against the piano's breathless flapper dance.

Jazz influenced by rock rather than classical was the essence of Jamie Cullum's late-night concert on 26 August (Prom 55). My son expressed a wish to attend, which gave me an excuse. Neither of us liked being enjoined to clap along much but we both admired Cullum's songwriting fluency, his funky treatment of the standards and his energy. He leapt off the Steinway once, but then he calls himself a singer, not a pianist.

Rick Jones