

NL2 - The Time of His Life: Making the Burgess Variations

By [Kevin Jackson](#)

On 28 November 1966, Anthony Burgess was given the accolade which comes, sooner or later, to every British subject who has achieved the appropriate level of distinction or notoriety: he was invited to appear on the long-running BBC radio programme "Desert Island Discs", in those days hosted (if I'm not mistaken) by its creator Roy Plomley. For the benefit of those readers unfamiliar with this pillar of Anglo-Saxon culture, I should perhaps explain the show's simple but satisfying format. Every week, a guest is invited to imagine him- or herself magically transported to a remote but presumably agreeably tropical island, where the facilities will include a fully working record player (its source of power an eternal mystery) and eight pieces of specially requested music. There will also be a small bookshelf, containing the King James Bible and the complete works of Shakespeare, plus one other volume of the guest's choice; and a single luxury item.

For the record, as it were, here are Anthony Burgess's chosen discs: Purcell, "Rejoice in the Lord Alway" (Alfred Deller/Deller Consort/Oriana Concert Orchestra/Deller); Bach, Goldberg Variations No 13 (George Malcolm, harpsichord); Elgar, Symphony No.1 in A flat major (Philharmonia Orchestra/Barbirolli), Wagner, "Walter's Trial Song" from *Die Meistersinger* (Sandor Konya/Berlin Philharmonic/Kraus), Debussy, "Fêtes" (Orchestre de la Suisse Romande/Ansermet); Lambert, "The Rio Grande" (Philharmonia Orchestra /Lambert); Walton, Symphony No.1 in B flat minor (Philharmonia Orchestra/Walton); Vaughan Williams, "On Wenlock Edge" (Alexander Young/Sebastian String Quartet). His book choice was *Finnegans Wake* (not too hard to guess; that, or *Ulysses* would be the obvious selections) and his luxury "music manuscript paper, pencils and an India-rubber" (also not that hard to guess).

I mention this musical list not only because it was one of the more interesting minor discoveries that we made in the early days of pre-production on *The Burgess Variations*, or because it may one day be the germ of a Ph.D. thesis, but because I, like thousands of others who will guiltily admit to liking the old show, have often played the game of wondering which pieces of music I would plump for, and particularly which book would best complement the Bard and King James as my insular reading. The answer varies, but in recent years I have often found myself mentally confiding to Sue Lawley (who has inherited the late Mr Plomley's chair and microphone) that I

would like my island equipped with a copy of
You've Had Your Time
, by Anthony Burgess.

There are many reasons for this choice, not least that the book is (of course) wonderfully funny and enjoyable; but, as I shall explain to Ms. Lawley, the most compelling reason for wanting that book on my island is that I should like to have something to remind me of the life I had left behind in England - the life of the jobbing freelance writer, with all its interests and anxieties and rages and weird working hours -- and it seems to me that there is no book half so acute and evocative on the subject of what it is actually like to be a professional writer, whether as exalted as Anthony Burgess or as marginal as... well, me. The deadlines, the fifteen simultaneous projects to be kept spinning in the air, the obtuse or sneering reviews (and, let me tell you, the ones you receive are often just as bad), the countless time-wasting proposals for radio or television programmes that die the second they are put in front of the channel controller... It's all there, every last gory detail of the Life of Writing, put down for posterity in Burgess's uniquely compelling prose and I know, God help me, how much I would miss it when wading in my private lagoon.

But there are other, more immediate reasons why I find myself thinking of *You Had Your Time* as I type these words rapidly in the early hours of a wet Monday morning, nervously aware that I am stretching my editor's proposed deadline to snapping point. When he asked me to provide a short sketch about the process of making

The Burgess Variations

, I agreed readily enough, confident that there was plenty of suitable material in the large buff-coloured notebook I had kept throughout the months of production. Alas: I just opened that notebook a few minutes ago and found, instead of the carefully dated journal and ready-cooked anecdotes, a few pages of barely comprehensible scribbles ("Fine lady" = "Fiennes lady"; "Jacques Tati's

Playtime

" and "i. e. not a toy" are among the more lucid jottings), followed by reproving blankness.

In short, I find myself obliged to reconstruct 20 months or so of work and play relying pretty much on memory alone, and am appalled to find how many of the key moments and encounters, let alone their nuances, have grown faded and mangled beyond recovery. Yet another good cause, then, for being so awed by Burgess, who could recall with such piquant vividness and apparent ease the flavour of his life for the past seven decades. Much as I would have liked this article to read as a small *hommage* to *You've Had Your Time*, then, I'm afraid it's really just a strip cartoon version of some of the times we had. It falls into three main panels:

Act One: Pre-Production

The first entry in my patchy production diary reads "2/3 May 1998: compile chronology of Burgess's life," This document, largely gutted from *Little Wilson and Big God* and *You've Had Your Time*

proves even more useful than expected when it comes to giving the programme its basic shape, (Old British Army maxim: "Time spent in reconnaissance is seldom wasted,") Much of the early work on the film is done in the basement flat of my old friend David Thompson, who is to produce and direct -- and who, indeed, managed to persuade the BBC to revive the idea of a major Burgess documentary, which had originally been mooted not long after the author's death in 1993. David stresses that we need to come up with some kind of device to keep us from falling into the dull and dutiful chronological jog-trot of some other arts documentaries we could both mention. (Neither David nor I can now quite remember when the musical conceit of "theme and variations" first came up -- and in either case, we will happily admit to the inspiration of a fine Canadian film about Glenn Gould, constructed after Bach's

Goldberg Variations

. Perhaps that

Desert Island Discs

list had something to do with it, too.)

For the next few months, our agreeable task consists of two main forms of research. The first is simply watching and listening to hour after hour of Burgess's contributions to radio and television from the early sixties onwards. Since there is no footage of the first forty-odd years of Burgess's life, and hardly any photographs (destroyed by the damp and insect life of the tropics, readers will recall), one of the challenges for us will be to create the impression or illusion or such footage. Fortunately, Burgess often discussed his early days, and on a number of occasions went back to his old haunts from Manchester to Malaya with camera crews in tow, so we have something to be going on with.

The other research is a matter of finding the people who knew Burgess at various stages of his life. The index pages of his autobiographies are a big help; so is the industry and diligence of our researcher, Jane Bywaters (only with us for a limited time, as she will shortly be whipped back to another department as the researcher for a series of films about blondes). Sheer luck plays a part, too. I've happened to meet the publisher Richard Cohen a year or so earlier at the memorial service of a mutual friend, and know that he has some good anecdotes and better insights to offer from his time as Burgess's editor. A chance remark by the lodger at my London flat puts me on the trail of another publisher, David Burnett, who in his salad days at Heinemann was often designated to go drinking with Burgess and his terrifying first wife, Lynne.

Over the next few weeks, David Thompson and I do some rather more discreet drinking of our

own, as we spend our extremely slender hospitality budget on taking potential contributors out to lunch. One of them, the poet, translator and publisher James Michie begins by telling us about the time when Lynne, with little or no prior warning, leaned over and bit his ear (he enjoyed submitting the expenses claim for the plaster he bought to patch it up) and ends by refusing to be filmed on the grounds that he is not sufficiently telegenic. Another, the classicist Peter Green -- who does eventually contribute to the film, and very wittily too -- regales us with fascinating stories not only about Burgess but about his academic research into Greek and Roman magic. Had he ever been tempted to try them out, I ask. Oh yes, he replies, and they worked: he once put a curse on a boat, which sank in harbour...

Our list of telephone numbers swells to the size of a small directory; we have an on-again-off-again arrangement with Gore Vidal for an interview at his Italian house; David has to keep one eye on his other main project (a film about Rogers and Hart), and I make radio programmes about the likes of Holderlin and Camoes, file articles to *The Independent*, finish writing one book and worry about finishing another. Eventually, it is time to start filming. Since the budget has been cut from its original £260,000 to £196,000 (and my own fee halved in the process;

sic semper

) we only have 16 days of shooting and must use them carefully.

Act Two: Production

Filming comes in two main phases, since David has to disappear to New York for several months to polish off Rogers and Hart, though he manages to squeeze in some interviews for the Variations there, notably with Erica Jong, (It's just as well that David conducts this particular interview, since there's a faint chance that Ms Jong still bears a grudge about an insufficiently reverent profile I wrote for a magazine a few years ago). David is also on his own for filming interviews in Banbury and Adderbury, since I am laid up for a couple of weeks with excruciating pains in my lower back -- brought on, I like to tell him from time to time, by helping David transport some bulky files from his office to his flat.

For the most part, the interviewing goes smoothly and well, with David's flat doing service as a studio. We film the veteran TV director Christopher Burstall here, watching the *Monitor* film he and Burgess made about Joyce and reminiscing about their collaboration; and, once the crew have set up a short set of tracks, we film Professor Anthony Clare, listening intently to the searching interview he did with Burgess for the Radio 4 programme

In the Psychiatrist's Chair

-- David has come up with a witty "reveal" shot, in which the camera gradually shows that the inhabitant of the facing chair is not Burgess himself but a bulky ree1-to-reel tape recorder.

Our other interviews are mainly conducted at the homes of novelists - A.S. Byatt, William Boyd, Nigel Williams -- or in carefully chosen locations. We hire a screening room at the British Film Institute as a suitably cinematic venue for our encounter with Jean-Jacques Annaud, the director of *Quest for Fire*, who proves to be a dream interviewee: funny, richly anecdotal, and a lively mimic. Since the BFI is just around the corner from Fitzrovia, where Burgess and his first wife spent so many hours and pounds drinking, we are well placed for our meeting with David Burnett, who we've asked to yarn away about boozy Fitzrovia nights while propping up a bar. Though a far more diffident performer than M. Annaud, David also has some good stories to tell, and is one of the few people to have some moderately friendly words to say for Lynne, even though she apparently goosed him late one night as they walked through a church yard. David speaks fondly, too, of a Christmas he spent with them, when Burgess read a seasonal passage from Dickens.

Our long-postponed encounter with Gore Vidal is not quite such plain sailing. He's finally agreed, for a sum I shan't disclose here, to bestow his world-weariness on us at his hotel room near the American Embassy. I am daunted by the prospect of being verbally Gored, to put it mildly, and then disappointed: Vidal must have been on television so many times now that he simply switches on the autopilot, and he seems to regard me and the crew as a pack of ignorant fools. (I can't protest on my own behalf, but this is grossly unfair on the others.) I realise that I ought to try to coax something slightly less perfunctory from the great man, and find my chance when Vidal ends a sentence by referring to Burgess as a *Magister Ludi*.

"Not a good novel", I reply, since I recall that *Magister Ludi* is the American title of a book by Hermann Hesse, much loved in hippie circles, and known to British readers as *The Glass Bead Game*

. Vidal refocuses his eyes on me, mildly surprised at my presumption in venturing an opinion of my own. Within a second or so he has caught the reference and lobbed it neatly back: "I am not my Hesse's keeper." "Bravo", I grovel, and the interview resumes at a slightly more animated pace. When we look back at the rushes, weeks later, Vidal is (as we should have known) fine, and David ends up using one of his sound-bites at the very beginning of the first film.

Since our budget no longer stretches to the global odyssey we'd originally fantasised about (Malaya! Brunei! Malta! Rome! New York!), our only extended trip has been trimmed down to a long weekend in Angers. It's a busy but enjoyable jaunt. While David and the crew take shots of the nascent Burgess study centre in the University compound, I while away several happy hours browsing through the book collection that Liana Burgess has rescued from their Maltese house and donated to the Centre. I discover all manner of delights, including the scruffy exercise book which contains Burgess's first autodidactic ventures into Russian, and -- a great thrill, this -- the typescript of an article about *The Anatomy of Melancholy* for which I've been searching vainly for months.

We also meet, break bread and file interviews with Liana Burgess and Ben Forkner, neither of whom need further introduction here (especially since Professor Forkner has already made an uncredited appearance in my opening paragraphs as the supernaturally patient editor). Nor is there much need to account for the rest of the weekend, since a good part of it - including the private piano recital of Burgess's fugues -- ended up in the completed programme. It would be churlish, though, not to put on record our gratitude for the many and varied acts of hospitality we enjoyed in Angers.

By now, save for a last-minute interview-cum-music lesson with Paul Phillips, the American conductor and composer who is currently dedicated to bringing Burgess's music to a wider public (and who rashly suggests to me that we should collaborate on a musical; I promise not to hold him to this when he has second thoughts), the shooting is over, it is time for editing.

Act Three, Post-Production

Our budget allows for eight weeks of editing, which if you haven't ever made a film may sound a lot but, believe me, isn't. On many of the other films I've been hired to write, I've tended to have very much a hands-on role in the editing process, but David prefers to keep me at (mixed anatomical metaphor coming up) arm's length in the early stages. My main job for now is to go through Burgess's fiction to find the passages which will fit into the pattern that's evolving.

I suggest to David that we should approach the actor John Sessions to read our extracts, not only because he is a brilliant mimic and exceptionally literate, but because I know him to be a major Burgess fan. Back in the early 1990s, when I was the editor of a cultural review programme on Channel 4 television, I had asked Sessions to discuss *You've Had Your Time* and he had been splendid. A call to his agent reveals that Sessions is busy acting in the BBC's much-vaunted drama series

Gormenghast

, adapted from the novels by Mervyn Peake (which Burgess admired: I seem to recall that he wrote an introduction for the Penguin Modern Classics edition of

Titus Groan

). When he hears about the Burgess film, though, Sessions is so keen to take part that he makes a gap in his work schedule and cheerfully accepts the rather trifling sum we can pay him. His performance is, as I had predicted, excellent.

Soon, the film is in good enough shape to show to our Executive Producer, Roger Thompson (no relation), who nods encouragingly and says that he will back us in any difficulties we may

run into -- this latter remark being a nod to our growing anxiety about whether we will be allowed to show clips from *A Clockwork Orange* under the standard legal clause which says that such extracts are permissible for the purposes of serious criticism. The BBC lawyer seems fairly sanguine about it all, but we continue to fret until the moment of broadcast, especially when we hear that Warners have plans to re-release the film early in 2000.

Plenty of directors say that editing is the most creatively fascinating part of film-making, and by and large - leaving aside the moments when you howl with anxiety or moan in despair - this seems to me a fair observation. I've long been amazed at how images can be transformed by being cut in a certain rhythm, or set against particular words or music, and this sense comes back to me again and again during the later stages of editing, especially when I see how some rather dull and grimy shots of Manchester (inherited from a French programme about Burgess as part of a co-production deal in which we had no part) become lyrically melancholic with the appropriate orchestral setting.

Thus far, I have been careful not to make too much of David Thompson's directorial talents, and I'll stick to that discreet policy with this single exception; his choice of music for *The Burgess Variations* is quite inspired: Purcell's *King Arthur*, Elgar's "Sospiri", Holst's "St. Paul's Suite", Mozart's "Adagio for Glass Harmonica", Britten's *The Prince of the Pagodas* (for the Malayan section), Vaughan Williams's Tuba Concerto (for flatulent Mr Enderby) and, of course, the thirteenth "Goldberg" variation. I wish we could issue the soundtrack on CD.

By the time it comes to write and record my commentary, the programme is so coherently structured that the task is all but effortless. The last hurdle to be jumped is to gain Mrs. Burgess's approval. She comes, she sees, she approves -- with certain small qualifications and suggestions that she doesn't insist on our implementing. We spend the last shreds of our hospitality budget on lunch, and go away to other projects; David to a new film about Poulenc, me to cut the text of my new book down to acceptable lengths. Now we just have to wait for the controller of BBC2 to decide when she's going to show it. Our dread is that it will be dumped out in the early hours of the morning alongside the Open University programmes.

But our luck is in: she sees the first film, likes it and -- some months later -- says that it will be ideal for the BBC's Christmas schedules. Neither David nor I quite believe this, since those schedules are notoriously subject to change right up to the last minute, and we remain sceptical until the *Radio Times* goes to press and the timing -- barring the outbreak of global

thermonuclear war or the death of the Queen Mother -- is set in stone.

Christmas 1999 proves to be a sort of unannounced David Thompson festival: while the man himself goes on a well-earned holiday to Cyprus, the BBC screens, in rapid succession, his Poulenc film, his Rogers and Hart film and the two parts of *The Burgess Variations*. Not having looked at the tape for many months, I am able to watch with a reasonably fresh eye, asking myself "would I be enjoying this if a stranger had made it?", and for the most part thinking that I probably would.

The response is, on the whole, warm. On his return from Cyprus, David is able to read lots of cards, letters, e-mails and post-its all saying how good they thought it was, and hears that it was well spoken of in the BBC's internal review board. The press coverage is varied, from a rave in the *Scotsman* so ecstatic that I can't bring myself to quote it, to a slam in the *Guardian*, who thought it was all so much schedule filler, and objected to the nasty things that wicked old Catholic man said about poor Protestants. The nationally up-market Sundays ran decidedly odd reviews, broadly favourable to the films but flip and condescending about Burgess's hair and clothes. Apart from the

Scotsman

, not one of them mentions the film's structure; why did we bother?

Still, no real complaints on my part, either then or now, on this late January morning as the sun is coming up and my final paragraph heaves into sight. As so often, the most telling responses to the film came from unexpected quarters. A week or so after Christmas I was in my local darkroom printing up some photographs, and fell into chatting with one of the other regulars, a lady of fifty or so who does something in graphic design or illustration or some such.

She asked me if I'd seen that programme about Anthony Burgess over Christmas: "What an amazing man. I had no idea he had done so many things." I wish I could say that I was modest enough not to reveal that I had anything to do with the programme, but I'm afraid that I owned up, and accepted her compliments. The writer's life is an uncertain one, but it has its small rewards now and then.

*Kevin Jackson is a freelance writer and broadcaster based in London and Cambridge. He is the author of, among other books, *The Language of Cinema* (1998), *Invisible Forms* (1999) and *A Ruskin Alphabet* (2000) -- this last (admittedly a fairly slim volume) being written at breakneck speed in the six days before filing his article on *The Burgess Variations*, since his working life is even more chaotic than that piece suggests. He has been deriving instruction and delight from the writings of Anthony Burgess for almost thirty years.*

