

Critic's Prize: Burgess's Acceptance Speech for Kubrick's A Clockwork Orange

Listen to Burgess's voice! [The Sardi Speech \(mp3\)](#) (MP3 file, 3,66 MB)

1. Presentation of the Sardi Speech by Liana Burgess

I wasn't present, but when Anthony came back from Minneapolis and New York, he was still talking effervescently about the trick that the Minneapolis Theatre, Tyron Guthrie, that is, and Warner Bros. had played on him. He was then involved with a project that he had much at heart, but of whose outcome he was doubtful: this was a translation on to the stage of his rhyming version of *Cyrano de Bergerac*, but this time it was to be a musical of it, and the venture was creating endless problems since Christopher Plummer, great actor though he was, should have played the lead the previous year in the 'straight' theatrical version, and didn't because he was otherwise engaged and a substitute had to be found. Anyway, he was no great singer or easy, as a singer, to get along with. But now he was to play the lead in the musical version of the play and sing the lyrics written by Anthony to the music of a delightful Welshman, Michael Lewis, who had, however, no sense of English prosody, stressing an article as if it were a word, as I, an Italian, would do: example:

'Le donne, i cavalier, l'armi, gli amori, le cortesie, le audaci imprese io canto che furo al tempo che passaro i Mori d'Africa il mare e tanto si die vanto. ...'

(This is the opening of the Muslim Moors' occupation of Europe, if anybody is interested, sung by Ludovico Ariosto): LE, I, L'A, GLI, LE, LE I, IL.

A very serious problem arose: the lyrics already written by Anthony had to be scratched and he now had to rewrite them to this music. So, instead of having a musician setting the lyrics to music according to the Broadway tradition, we had a writer setting the music to lyrics; rewriting lyrics that would 'fit'.

I think that the year was 1971, the month January, when Anthony discovered that he was contractually obliged to go to Minneapolis to assist in the production, and that the producer Richard Gregson, the one formerly married to Natalie Wood, of *West Side Story* glory, had no intention of relenting from exacting his rights. Anthony was unwilling to go because he feared the cold, after all his years spent in the tropics, and Minneapolis in January was a place where impulsive dogs yelped when they lifted a leg because their urine froze midway, and one dog was, in Anthony's words, 'ligatured to the wall by an icicle.'

For reason still not clear to me, Anthony, in order to show his independence, paid his own air fare, out of his own pocket, only to discover at the Roman airport that he was to travel first class, as arranged by Warner Brothers, who later had his cheque returned, and to land in New York at Kennedy airport, because they, The Brothers, --under Kubrick's instructions most likely,-- wanted to boost with the presence of an eminent writer and the great Malcolm McDowell the film *A Clockwork Orange* which had just opened in New York.

With things in Minneapolis coming to a sort of deadlock and the producer fighting with the director (until the title appeared in *Variety* announcing: 'Another director bites the dust', and we knew where we stood and that the producer, that is, had gained the upper hand), Anthony announced to the producer, Gregson, that he was going to go to New York or would resign altogether from being involved with the musical.

Permission was granted: a Miss Solomon of the Tyrone Guthrie staff saw Anthony off at the Minneapolis-St Paul International Airport, bound for La Guardia. "At La Guardia," says Anthony,

"it was she who awaited me. I nearly collapsed. Then all was explained --the charming Misses Solomons were identical twins, and the one at the New York end worked for Warner Brothers while the other was on the Tyron Guthrie staff... Warner Brothers put me up at the Algonquin Hotel" (of the Round Table and The New Yorker prestigious literary figures fame) "and Malcolm McDowell into the Pierre." Anthony went with McDowell to a public show of *A Clockwork Orange* and various interviews, while "Kubrick went on paring his nails in Borehamwood". Episodes of violence occurred which were blamed on Malcolm McDowell and Anthony. (See *You've Had Your Time* pp. 252 ff. London: Heinemann, 1990)

"Kubrick" [to quote Anthony] "went on paring his nails, even when it was announced that he was to be given two New York Critics' awards. I had to collect those at Sardi's restaurant and deliver a speech of thanks. Kubrick telephoned to say what I was to say. I said something rather different."

The something rather different is what we are going to hear now.

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2. Burgess's Speech

Ladies and gentlemen, I don't know whether you are entitled to call me a colleague. I was a film critic many years ago. Indeed, I was a film critic on the oldest European newspaper *The Gibraltar Chronicle*

, which in 1943-44, when I worked for it, was the only non-fascist newspaper in continental Europe, even though it was run by the British army. We soldiers in this fortress had been informed, through Washington, by your great, dead president, President Roosevelt, that we had a duty to perform, and that was to protect the Rock. On behalf of a very large American insurance company... We were told that if we let this rock fall into fascist hands, the future of the American civilisation would be in jeopardy. And as an earnest of this American civilisation that was in jeopardy, we were allowed to see many American B films. It was my... It was my task to criticize these films, or praise them. I was rather bored with the job, and went to very few of them and ended up by inventing my own films, my own cinemas. The Rock is a very cavernous

place, and there may be the odd cinema lurking somewhere in St Michael's cave in the water, not like anybody had had actually ever been to, but thought they might someday. You know, I was fired from this job, and never did film criticism again.

In 1966, which was my *Annus Mirabilis*, for the benefit of any drama critics who may be present, a wonderful year. I had many jobs: I was drama critic for

The Spectator

, and simultaneously I was opera critic for

Queen

, a great... great heterosexual magazine. I was television critic for a magazine, ironically called, *The Listener*

. And I was food and wine critic for a left-wing paper that eventually folded up. It was generally recognised that I couldn't do all these jobs efficiently at the same time; and I noticed one night at a particular theater during the first act there were other critics who'd been deputed by their newspapers to sit behind me and see if I genuinely walked out after the first act. My normal procedure was to see one act of a play, the second act of an opera, and have some food and wine afterwards. It was assumed by everybody that I would never get up early enough to see films, so I never became a film critic.

Now as for my connections with the cinema, this is equally tenuous: my father was a cinema pianist. He played in those days which most of you are too young to remember, when there was no sound track, and the accompaniment had to be provided by an orchestra in the evenings, by pianists during the day for matinees. My father never saw any films before he accompanied them. He did it all by ear, memory, instinct, intuition, and he had a very much foreshortened view when he accompanied. He told me on one occasion that he worked in a cinema for six months, where the piano didn't work above middle C, so all the music was somewhat Wagnerian. He was fired from this job because, without his knowing it, the film he was looking up at one afternoon, foreshortened, was a religious film; and he saw what looked like a scene of great festivity among men proceeding, and he started playing "Hail, hail, the gang's all here!" This turned out, of course, to be the Last Supper. I'm sorry I've been allowed a blasphemous note to intrude; but this is, after all, a New York Sunday!

If I... If I continue just for a second with a blasphemy, I suppose my own relationship with this film is that of primal creator with ultimate interpretor, which finds its most megalomaniacal, if I may use the term, or a most mythical metaphor in, say, the relationship between God and Cecil B. DeMille, or maybe the other way round. God wrote a marvellous book, best-seller --marvellous title called *The Old Testament*. I don't think he's ever received a penny's royalties for it; but God is a spirit, and I am merely a consumer of spirits. In my case, rather than God's, this masterpiece, which I think will make a lot of money, is somewhat different. As far as Kubrick is concerned, I knew little about him. I was told over the telephone that Stanley Kubrick wished

to make my book *A Clockwork Orange* into a film; and I would get no money from it. Well, I said: I'm not ignorant, I know this already; you needn't tell me! But he said: "Would you rather he made it and get no money, or somebody else make it?" Well, I had a vision of Ken Russell making it, so I said I was prepared to pay Kubrick to make the film. It turned out to my surprise that Kubrick didn't actually need the money at the time. Kubrick reappeared in my life, or very nearly (he hadn't really appeared at all, had he?) He reappeared by name, very nearly, when I was in Australia. And I was summoned to London to see Kubrick because of two lines in the book. He wasn't sure whether it was a copyright or not, whether they were quotations of an existing song, or whether I had actually written them. So I rushed from Australia to New Zealand, to Hawaii, San Francisco, New York, eventually I ended up in London and appeared for lunch at that old English tavern called Trader Vick's. After a couple of old English noddings of mai-tai, Kubrick did not turn up.

Then Kubrick used the Australian vernacular and nearly gave birth to a set of diesel engines, when he discovered that the British edition of the book was different from the American edition. Indeed, the American edition, if anyone is interested, has twenty chapters, whereas the British edition has twenty-one. There's a cartoon in the British *Daily Express* which shows a man and a woman leaving the cinema, having seen Kubrick's film, and saying: George, dear, I do hope they don't make *Son of A*

Clockwork Orange

. Well, this is no joke because chapter 21, in the British edition, is precisely that: it's the account of the son of

A Clockwork Orange

, and anybody who wishes to make this movie as a follow up is welcome to see me afterwards.

Well, as you know he doesn't travel, God --I mean, *Kubrick* doesn't travel, and he is stuck there in Boreham Wood, about two miles from Pinewood Studios outside London, and if I may use again a dramatic allusion, it was no question of Boreham Wood coming to Dunsinane, Duncie is here. So all I can say now is that I know you're a little droogie, a little malenky droogie back there in Boreham Wood, we'll shmeck down to his very keeshkas or even his yarbels, and then I'll place this horrorshow peguylok into his rookers.

On his behalf, ladies and gentlemen, I say thank you for your generosity, on his and my behalf I say thank you for your perspicacity, on my own behalf, my fellow writers, I say thank you for your hospitality .

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