



"I'd like to see the world and look after children": the Butlins Miss Holiday Princess, 1979  
Courtesy: Butlins Archive

1963. She was, however, less sure about a trip to the Continent. Also on display is a judge's card. A maximum of 20 points was available in each of four categories: daywear, swimwear, evening dress and, most importantly, the interview. In 1981, contestants were asked: "Science fiction, feature films and TV serials are giving an insight into the world of the future. How do you visualise the lifestyle of our descendants in the 21st century?" I wonder how Jordan would cope with that one.

But, by the mid-1970s, beauty contests had a whiff of seediness and desperation about them – a stench strong enough to penetrate through all that Elnett and Charlie. This was largely the result of a sudden pincer attack by disapproving outsiders. In the left corner was the Women's Liberation Movement, whose shouty protests reached a climax with the throwing of flour bombs at the 1970 Miss World contest, which was held at the Royal Albert Hall and hosted by Bob Hope. In the right corner, predictably, were the tabloids. In 1976, Don Short, show business editor of the *Daily Mail*, published a juicy little book called *Miss World: the naked truth*. This volume gave details of the winners who had "ended up in a mental hospital after contem-

plating suicide; caused a sensation at a Variety club by turning up in a skin-tight dress with no underwear; was seduced by a playboy who says: 'I cannot settle for second best'. Needless to say, the two sides could not understand one another at all. "Exactly who – and what – is Women's Lib?" boomed the *Daily Sketch* headline beside a picture of Bob Hope disguised as a bap.

"We were clear among ourselves that we weren't demonstrating against the women who were participating in the contest," says Sally Alexander, one of the protesters. "But we did feel very strongly that for women to be judged just by their physical appearance . . . did symbolise the way in which women were seen either as sex objects or as domestic drudges, and we wanted to widen horizons for women." Doggedly, they kept at it. "We are

not beautiful, we are not ugly, we are angry," announced their posters. But this work took a while. It was not until 1988 that ITV stopped broadcasting Miss World; and the Miss She competition, launched in 1955 to promote the glossy magazine of the same name (this eventually mutated into Miss Ultra Glow and, finally, Miss Alberto Balsam), ran until 1989.

This seems incredible to me: that while I was at university, grumbling about Mrs T and trying hard to avoid paying the poll tax, there were women out there whose shampoo was their chief inspiration. Then again, I think I look on Alberto Balsam rather more kindly than I do on Botox, silicone and the facial trait that is widely known as trout pout. Have women come so far after all? What "Beauty Queens" does, cleverly, is to suggest that the answer to the question is almost certainly "no". Look carefully and, at the very end of the exhibition, just beside Galen Loughran's spoiled cossie, you will find a typed list of rules and regulations for the Miss Morecambe competition. "No artificial aids, padding or attachments are permitted," says the notice. "All costumes are subject to examination." Oh, if you ask me, it was a more innocent age and, at least at the level of the body, a far kinder one.

*"Beauty Queens: smiles, swimsuits and sabotage" is at the Women's Library, Old Castle Street, London E1 (020 7320 2222) until 28 August*

### documentary

## An obligation to truth

**DD GUTTENPLAN** reflects on his friendship and final interview with Edward Said

**S**o how did a nice Jewish boy from Brooklyn come to make a film about Edward Said? In November 1974, when Yasser Arafat came to New York to speak at the United Nations, I was a freshman at Columbia. While Arafat, dressed in keffiyeh and fatigues, told the General Assembly, "I have come bearing an olive branch and a freedom fighter's gun. Do not let the olive branch fall from my hand," on the sidewalks outside, a crowd of demonstrators, most of them Jewish, chanted: "Arafat, go home." I was in that crowd.

Two years later I was still at university. I was interested in the overlap between philosophy and literary criticism and wanted to go and see Roland Barthes in Paris. (I also wanted to loaf in cafés, drink endless *grandes crèmes* and generally make the most of being 19 years old and abroad.) But I was broke.

My adviser suggested my grant application would be much more successful if it was endorsed by his friend Edward Said, at the time the only tenured member of Columbia's English department on speaking terms with French theory. All I knew about Said was that he was a Conrad scholar and the author of *Beginnings*, a book I was struggling to read. When I met Said in his office he quickly divined that my interest in structuralist theory was, ▶

► well, rather theoretical. Far from being shocked, he seemed amused, and agreed to sponsor my research.

"How did you come to be interested in Barthes," he asked, "and what is your family background?" As I didn't have a good answer to the first question, I answered the second. "My father," I said with what I thought was great wit, "runs the Reading, Pennsylvania branch of the International Zionist Conspiracy." At the time, my father was the director of the Jewish Welfare Federation of Reading and spent most of his days raising money for Israel. Said gave me an odd look but said nothing. And off I went to Paris. When I returned to New York the following year I wrote up my research on Barthes for Said, who gave me an A, explaining that "as an intellectual, you have an obligation to the truth even when it doesn't fit your preconceptions", and that by this measure my work had room for improvement.

*Orientalism*, a book that changed the way we read culture – our own and that of "others" – was still a year in the future. At the time, it was possible to be ignorant of Said's membership of the Palestine National Council – indeed, of his very identity as an Arab – even for those more observant than me. What was unmistakable about him was his generosity, his seriousness and his sense of responsibility: "you have an obligation".

I don't know whether it is true to say we ever became close friends. In my senior year Said and his friend Michael Rosenthal (my adviser) taught a seminar together on European novels. One of the books we read was Giuseppe di Lampedusa's *The Leopard*, a novel shot through with nostalgia for Sicily's vanished aristocratic order. Outraged at being forced to take this egregious piece of elitist self-pity seriously, I wondered whether the assignment was a kind of a joke – an example of reactionary fiction. It took me years to understand why Lampedusa's evocation of loss spoke so strongly to Said. I think the first conversation we had about literature that did not turn into an argument was when I came back from graduate study in England. What had I been reading? he asked. "A lot of Henry James," I replied. He nodded non-committally. And Thomas Carlyle. I had just written an essay on Carlyle



Taking a stand: Edward Said

and John Ruskin. Said stopped walking. "Carlyle. I hate that fucker," he said, launching into a mini-tirade.

I saw Said only intermittently over the next several years. But we often spoke on the phone, which in his hands was a virtuoso instrument. His appetite for gossip and scandal, particularly among the literati, was enormous. During these years he also became the west's most visible Palestinian. He started writing music criticism for the *Nation*. When we lived in Brooklyn my wife and I would occasionally meet Edward and his wife Mariam at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, or walking afterwards down Atlantic Avenue for a late supper at the Tripoli, an Arab restaurant. You had only to see the way all the staff, from the maitre d' to the dishwashers, came over to greet him to get a sense of what he meant to the world outside the US.

We hardly ever talked about politics. I remember getting an invitation to a breakfast he was organising for Arafat and thinking that I would probably go – although in the end the State Department refused to grant the PLO chairman a visa. Ironically, it was not long afterward that we had our last real argument, over the Oslo Accord, which filled me with hope but which Edward condemned as a betrayal of Palestinian aspirations that was doomed to fail. I don't think he took much pleasure in being proved right.

The news that Edward had been diagnosed with leukaemia was devastating, but then he just carried on, and demanded that you carry on, and so you did. Once when I went to visit just after he had returned from a round of chemotherapy, he looked drained. But the next time I saw him he seemed miraculously restored. I began to believe that even if his cancer was incurable, Edward would wrestle it to a standstill.

So I was shocked, and worried, when he told me in the summer of 2002 that his immune system had collapsed. The worst part,

he said, was how cut off he felt. He couldn't go anywhere. He couldn't see anyone. That was when I suggested taping a series of interviews. The idea, at least on the surface, was to produce a kind of proxy, so that if he had to cancel a speech at the last minute for health reasons, he could send along the tape instead. But it would also be a chance to say what he wanted about the topics that mattered most – his work as a critic, his love of music, his childhood and, always, Palestine – without having to be tied down by any specific occasion or audience.

When Edward said he would like to do it I asked Charles Glass, a mutual friend and reporter for ABC News, if he would ask the questions. We filmed in Cambridge, in November 2002, over a period of three days. For me, those days were a great gift. Mike Dibb, who directed, had

worked with Edward years earlier, and the atmosphere he created on set resulted in a portrait of extraordinary intimacy. It is a very spare film: no tricks, no gimmicks, no cutaways—just incandescent conversation. We recorded six hours and edited it down to slightly less than two.

When we were first roughing out what we wanted to cover I came across a passage in *Beginnings* on the tricky business of interviewing writers, who can, after all, speak for themselves in their work. “The only sort of interview that one could, if forced to, defend would be where the author is asked to articulate what he cannot write.” That passage, which turned out to be a quotation from Roland Barthes, and which so completely sums up what we were trying to do, now sits at the beginning of the film we made.

Did we succeed? You’ll have to see it for yourself to decide.

Edward Said: the last interview is showing until 22 July at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, The Mall, London SW1 (020 7930 3647)

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## art

### Paradise lost

**RICHARD CORK** discovers that gardens can be both idyllic retreats and places of menace

**N**o nation is more besotted with gardens than us, so it was inevitable that Tate Britain would get around to mounting a major show called “Art of the Garden”. Images of horticultural prowess are legion in British painting. And some artists have taken this love affair to an ambitious extreme by turning their gardens into highly considered artworks. As such, I went along to the Tate expecting an orgy of flourishing flowers and foliage, celebrating an infatuation with fecundity.

Mercifully, however, the exhibition is ►

## notebook **rosie millard**

Sitting for my Courtauld exams has made me feel like a nervous A-level student all over again



**F**orget Oil of Olay. In order to feel really young again, go on a

college course. Last week was the grand finale of my studies in art history at the Courtauld Institute, at which, observant readers may have noticed, I have been plugging away for the past year. And indeed, when the final exams came round, verily there was the queasy stomach of the A-level student.

Yet history of art 2004-style is very different from when I was revising it for A-level back in the mid-1980s. There are certain things you are not meant to say in the 21st century. For example, it’s the Arnolfini Double Portrait now, in the National Gallery, not the Arnolfini Wedding. The Renaissance did not start with a bang in Tuscany, but was a gradual, pan-European event that could just as easily have started in the 12th century. The Dark Ages were not at all dark, but kept the light of classicism aloft until Michelangelo et al arrived on the scene. Vasari was a bit parochial, and the *Mona Lisa* might not have happened without art from the Netherlands to show Leonardo da Vinci the way.

The Courtauld offers students a chance to revise all these fondly held beliefs, and many more. Progress, moreover, is demonstrated not as a Marxist notion of thesis/antithesis, but more as a kind of aesthetic relay race through the ages.

Sadly, once in the exam hall, the old spirit of revolution/counter-revolution reappeared with venom. I suppose it is very tricky to write a decent question paper without having a bit of dialectic to jump off. I might be very wrong about this, might have

completely misunderstood the aim of the examiners and will fail the course horribly. It’s always a possibility.

Anyway, the highlight of the week was the famous Survey Exam, wherein we hapless graduands sat in the darkened Kenneth Clark Lecture

Theatre for three hours of slides that purported to “survey” 2,500 years of art masterpieces, largely from the west. For the most part, the show was a double act, with slides coming up every 22 minutes in contrasting pairs, A and B. The game was to identify, date and compare A with B.

We kicked off with a weedy, Byzantine-esque fresco depicting the Deposition (the A team), with Giotto’s magnificent Deposition on slide B. So what could you do? In the olden days, you would have simply said that slide A was pants, and slide B was where the future lay. But because we now know that approach is frowned upon, at the Courtauld anyway, this was no good. One was left constructing a somewhat specious argument which suggested that although slide A was really rather wonderful, slide B actually had the edge.

On we went, down through the centuries, with Durham v Laon Cathedrals, Perugino v Bellini, Rubens v Caravaggio. All were on pretty equal terms. All, that is, except for (the Victorian moralist) Frith v (the radical impressionist) Monet, both of whom painted great station interiors—Frith’s Paddington all women in bonnets, Monet’s Gare St Lazare all light and steam. Frankly, here, one had to say that slide B left slide A standing.

I’m awaiting my results, but I’m not too worried. A week beforehand, one of the lecturers gave us a rather jolly pep talk. “Every year,” he said, “an inordinate amount of rubbish gets written in this examination. Usually everyone manages to pass.”