

REVIEWS

Robbing a bank is no crime compared to owning one

This exhibition on punishment is no torment, says
Michael Lavalette

THE PEOPLE'S History Museum in Manchester is currently hosting an exhibition on Crime and Punishment in Britain, 1800-2000. It is certainly worth visiting both the museum and the exhibition.

The phrase "law and order" is so widely used that it suggests that there is some common and shared understanding of what it actually means. But, as the exhibition makes clear, things are not quite so simple.

The exhibition poses a number of interesting questions. What is crime? Why have criminals been treated more harshly in some periods compared to others? What are the origins of the police? And what has all this to do with protecting the existing social order?

Prior to the advent of industrial capitalism, society could be harsh and unforgiving for those at the bottom. But it also offered peasants, artisans and cottage workers a degree of control over how and when they worked.

It also provided them with various common rights and established customs and practices which they used to structure their day, to appropriate goods and to eke out a living.

With the advent of industrial capitalism most of this became a problem for the ruling class. They had to enforce time discipline to ensure people were in the factory when the employers wanted them there.

They had to make sure the unemployed would migrate to wherever jobs were available, rather than seek relief.

They tried to stop people taking scraps of material home from work, or coal from slagheaps, or crops from harvested fields (this was now "stealing"). And they had to try and stop people from organising against their exploitation.

With the rise of capitalism there was a huge increase in laws passed to regulate people's lives. These included a range of new offences and crimes against property as well as laws like the New Poor Law that dealt with people whose crime was poverty and unemployment.

The punishments were generally far more brutal than the previous norms. The unemployed were forced into the workhouse. Criminals (including young children) were imprisoned, transported or executed for minor offences.

The exhibition in Manchester covers all of this and introduces some personal stories of those who were at the wrong end of the criminal justice system.

It also makes it clear that the real reason for the introduction of the police force was not to protect

EXHIBITION



An anti-racism campaign has been instigated by the CWU postal and telecommunications union. Posters produced by Leicester College students are on display at Leicester City's home ground to raise awareness of the damage discrimination can cause. The students won a national competition organised by the CWU.

racism will damage health, ruin lives and can even kill!

ordinary working people from petty crime or violence. Rather the police were created to protect the property of the rich and this included protecting their interests in the class struggle.

For me, the best bits of the exhibition are those that look at the criminalisation of the Suffragettes, who campaigned for votes for women, and the harassment and imprisonment of working class activists

The exhibition is all the more powerful because it is located in the People's History Museum. Make sure you include enough time to go through the rest of the museum that deals with the history of the labour movement in Britain.

Both the temporary and permanent exhibitions provide plenty of interactive points for children to get involved with. In some museums "interactive history" is really about the commodification of

history and historical events, but here it is usefully done to engage children and introduce them to bigger social and political questions.

I took my 12 and eight year old children and this was one time in a museum they moaned because we had to leave!

Crime and Punishment 1800-2000. People's History Museum, Manchester. Until 15 January 2006. Free. Phone 0161 228 7212 or go to www.peopleshistorymuseum.org.uk

ROUND-UP

The Skies are Weeping, A Cantata for Rachel Corrie

by Philip Munger
Hackney Empire, London
Tuesday 1 November

THIS controversial anti-Zionist classical cantata in memory of US human rights activist Rachel Corrie, killed in Gaza in March 2003, will have its world premiere at the Hackney Empire.

The evening will feature choral settings of Palestinian poems, traditional Palestinian dance and Israeli music fused with jazz. Rachel's mother Cindy Corrie will introduce the concert.

Composer Philip Munger believes that artists have to take an active part in society and his music addresses environmental and social issues.

Adrian Parsons

1001 Nights Now

The Academy, Newcastle College Rye Hill Campus, 23-25 November, then touring
Go to www.northernstage.co.uk

EIGHT performers play migrant workers in a British factory making Christmas decorations, in this new play based on the real life experiences of asylum seekers.

Because they are bored with their work they use their breaks to tell stories, using the factory and its products to illustrate their tales.

Comedian Shazia Mirza stars in the play. It is a powerful evocation of the struggles of life.

Katherine Branney



Caged in 1001 Nights Now

Paul Robeson Live At Carnegie Hall 1958

Ace records £13.99

PAUL ROBESON was a fighter against war and oppression. The US authorities declared Robeson "enemy number one" and took his passport.

In 1958 aged 60 he returned to the US stage in a concert captured here. It is one of the great concert recordings and gives a real sense of the breadth of Robeson's talent and politics.

BOOK

How to be a responsible person in the 21st century

The Man in my Basement

by Walter Mosley
Serpent's Tail, £10.99

FAMOUS FOR his novels featuring the black hero Easy Rawlins, Walter Mosley has recently been branching out. His books have maintained his punchy, fast paced writing style, but become more overtly political.

In this excellent new paperback novel, Charles Blakey lives in a dilapidated mansion on Long Island in New York state. Historically his family's proud boast has been that they were never slaves.



Walter Mosley

His own directionless life is slowly coming apart. He is driving his friends away, has lost his job through petty pilfering and drinks too much. His biggest fear is losing the heavily mortgaged family house, where he lives alone.

Why does the mysterious white Anniston Bennet want to stay in Charles's basement, offering an absurdly large amount of money? What do the three African masks Charles finds in the house represent?

Though the pace is that of a thriller, Mosley is more concerned

with issues of race, class, power and responsibility.

Charles is a study in inertia. Inability to overcome childhood traumas and racial slights leave him almost physically incapable of taking control of his life.

Bennet, on the other hand, is used to giving orders and extracting profit, as becomes increasingly clear as his shady past is revealed. Can either of them discover what it means to be a responsible individual faced with the horrors of capitalism in the early 21st century?

Ken Olende