

PETER KOSMINSKY

My Lord and Chancellor,

Peter Kosminsky is an eminent TV drama director and writer whose critically acclaimed work has for many years addressed strong social and international issues. He describes himself as 'an old-fashioned programme maker' for whom 'TV is about informing as well as entertaining'.

Peter read Chemistry at Oxford, and to this day the detailed research and the intellectual rigour which inform his writing owe much to his scientific background. He joined the BBC in 1980 as a general trainee, one of four graduates taken from a field of several thousand applicants. This was what he calls the 'glory route': television was doing new and brave things, particularly in drama, and attracted many applicants of the highest calibre. As a very political student, Peter had been inspired by Jim Allen and Ken Loach's *Days of Hope* (1975); he was greatly moved by this story of the labour movement between the end of World War 1 and the General Strike in 1926, but he also saw the power of the medium and wanted to be involved. From the start of his TV career his main creative influences were Loach himself, Les Blair and other film, television and theatre directors whose work was strongly informed by social and political awareness.

All Peter's work stands in the same high-minded radical tradition. He first came to prominence in 1990 when he directed *Shoot to Kill*, a four-hour drama detailing the government cover-up of the Stalker Enquiry which set out to establish whether there was a 'shoot to kill' policy at work in Northern Ireland. Nearly two decades and many successes later he still has the same capacity to create surprising and moving films which also make uncomfortable viewing for those in power. His most recent production *Britz*, broadcast by C4 in 2007, was set in London, Bradford, and Rawalpindi in Pakistan and reflected the differing attitudes of British Muslims to world events through the stories of two young British Muslims, brother and sister. One works undercover for the British government and the other becomes a suicide bomber. This film exemplified some essential characteristics of Peter's work: he looks analytically, almost forensically, at complex issues; he disturbs his audiences and presents alternatives to tabloid stereotypes; and he does it all with warmth and humanity. He is convinced that 'people want to be told the truth', and he engages with this public instinct by portraying ordinary people in extraordinary situations. So, for another example, *Warriors* (in 1999) viewed the Balkan wars of the 1990s through the eyes of British soldiers serving with the United Nations peacekeeping force, showing not only the devastations of ethnic wars but how they scarred soldiers and their later lives.

Peter's current production takes a similar approach, telling through the eyes of a British squaddie the story of the last days of the British Mandate in Palestine, leading to the foundation of the State of Israel in 1948. This series for Channel 4 will be filmed on location in the Middle East, where Peter is now casting (and we are delighted that he has flown back specially to be with us today). It has taken more than six years to reach this stage of production, and

Peter has, in his own words, had to 'wrestle it into life' against the constraints of squeezed finances and 'corporate caution' at a time when shallow entertainment increasingly dominates the schedules.

So much of what happened in Palestine in 1945 – 48 still resonates in the Middle East, and indeed throughout the world, that this latest of Peter's productions is expected to be as influential as his earlier works. On-line forums were besieged by record numbers of hits after the showing of *Britz*; the discussions went on for weeks. *No Child of Mine*, a controversial and painful examination of child abuse, led to many hours of call-centre conversations with people affected by it. *Warriors* is now used by the Army in its training of soldiers; *The Dying of the Light*, about an aid worker in Africa, is similarly used in UNICEF's training; *Walking on the Moon* is shown to schoolchildren as an antidote to bullying. Not that all of his output is so positively received: *The Project*, a fictional but well-informed account of the origins of New Labour, was greatly and predictably resented by certain figures in the Labour Party.

The consistent excellence of Peter's work has been recognised and honoured many times over by national and international awards, where it is appraised by the most distinguished and exacting of judges: his peers and fellow-professionals. The awards and accolades span nearly two decades and are too many to list now, but they began spectacularly enough in 1990 with a British Academy nomination and the Royal Television Society Best Single Drama awards for *Shoot to Kill*, and they have multiplied ever since. *No Child of Mine* in 1997 won no less than 14 prestigious international awards, ranging from the BAFTA Best Single Drama to Overall Winner of the Mental Health Media Awards. More recent awards have come from the Monte Carlo Television Festival, the Broadcasting Press Guild, and the Royal Television Society; all these, with a Prix Italia and a BAFTA, came to him for *Warriors*. BAFTA also gave him two further Awards (Best Single Drama, and Best Writer) for *The Government Inspector* in 2005. He takes particular pleasure in the BAFTA Award for Outstanding Creative Contribution to Television, given in the name of one of his heroes, the TV director Alan Clarke, in 1999.

All these dramas started life as personal explorations of subjects which are important but not well understood. Peter explains that 'if I, as a reasonably well-read bloke, don't understand them, others probably don't either'. He sets out to make people think, but avoids the limelight himself, admitting that he has 'made a career of hiding behind the camera'. For him, to be a director and writer is 'a privilege' which come with (I quote) 'a great responsibility – a responsibility to get it right'. His challenging philosophy and his insights are greatly appreciated in The Media School at this University, where he gives seminars, lectures and master-classes. He takes a close interest in the work of students and is generous in the time and help he gives to them, knowing that they face a media industry very different from the one he joined as a graduate.

My Lord and Chancellor, I have the honour to present Peter Kosminsky, and ask you to confer upon him the degree of Doctor of Arts, *honoris causa*.