

THE COMEDIANS

Richard Logan

Graham Greene's book The Comedians was published in 1966. Greene set his novel in the early 1960's in Haiti, which was governed by Doctor Francois Duvalier, who was popularly known as Papa Doc. Greene had read an article about Papa Doc and decided to visit Haiti in 1963. Greene had visited Haiti before, as he mentioned in his autobiographical book Ways of Escape :

My first two visits to Haiti in the fifties had been happy enough. That was the time of President Magloire, there was extreme poverty, but there were many tourists and some of the money they brought was allowed to trickle down the social scale.¹

Haiti had always been ruled by dictators but Papa Doc set a new low in terrorizing his people and destroying the economy of his country. What little money that came into Haiti was pocketed by Papa Doc and his friends, and the Haitian people had the lowest per capita income in Latin America.

GREENE IN HAITI

Greene had traveled throughout Haiti on his previous trips meeting government leaders, artists, and novelists. When Greene arrived in 1963, he was shocked at the changes in Haiti. The poverty of the people had increased, but even worse was the nightmare quality of life in the country. Papa Doc had instituted a reign of terror which was carried out by a secret police group called the "Tonton Macoute" who were distinguished by their dark glasses and submachine guns.

The Tonton Macoute extorted money from shop owners and businessmen and controlled projects paid for by foreign aid. Greene mentions one incident on a construction project :

One young labourer was taken off his job because a Tonton wanted it for another. The labourer tried to appeal to him, 'Please I am hungry. I have no work', and the Tonton promptly shot him through the head, the cheek and the body.²

People were taken from their homes in the middle of the night and tortured and killed. The human rights violations were so obvious that most of the embassies and the Vatican had withdrawn their people, and most foreign aid was cut off. Roadblocks were set up along all the highways and travel was made very difficult if not impossible. Greene was searched whenever he traveled around the capital city, Port-au-Prince. He was denied permission to travel north to the historic region of Cap Haitien. "What I wanted most was to get away from the stifling nightmare city where a few weeks after I left all the schoolchildren were forced to attend the execution of two captured guerrillas in the

cemetery, a scene repeated every night for a week on the local television.”³

THE COMEDIANS

Greene decided to write about what he'd seen and heard in Haiti :
“The Comedians is the only one of my books which I began with the intention of expressing a point of view and in order to fight—to fight the horror of Papa Doc's dictatorship.”⁴

The book is not a non-fiction piece of journalism, however, but a novel. In this novel Greene takes up issues of involvement and responsibility, as well as the difficulty of retaining religious faith. The novel is narrated by a man named Brown, who has inherited a hotel in Port-au-Prince from his mother.

Greene uses the word “comedian” in the French meaning of an actor in the theater. We are all actors in the theater of life. For Greene's character Brown, life is not just a tragedy but an absurd comedy :

When I was a boy I had faith in the Christian God. Life under his shadow was a very serious affair ; I saw him incarnated in every tragedy. ... Now that I approached the end of life it was only my sense of humour that enabled me sometimes to believe in him. Life was a comedy, not the tragedy for which I had been prepared, and it seemed to me that we were all ... driven by an authoritative

practical joker towards the extreme point of comedy.⁵

BROWN'S EARLY LIFE

Brown sketches in a brief outline of his past by mentioning that he was born in Monaco of a British father, who left before he was born and a French mother who sent him to a Catholic boarding school. Brown expresses uncertainty about his parents :

My mother was certainly not British, and to this day I am uncertain whether she was French—perhaps she was a rare Monegasque. The man she had chosen for my father left Monte Carlo before my birth. Perhaps his name was Brown. There is a ring of truth in the name Brown—she wasn't usually so modest in her choice.⁶

Brown's sense of a lack of identity is exacerbated by his doubts about who his father was. His mother deserted him and left without paying Brown's school fees, but the Jesuits allowed him to stay on at the school. Brown then "borrowed" a teacher's passport to enter a casino where he managed to win a lot of money and also have his first affair. The underage Brown was very conscious of "acting" at the casino, and later, at mass at school he dropped a roulette chip into the collection bag and was expelled from the school for this impudent gesture.

Brown then made his way to England, where he made a living at various jobs he obtained with a false resume and false references.

Finally, he set up a business selling paintings which he fooled customers into thinking were works of art which were done by up-and-coming artists whose work would one day be very valuable. Just when his scam was on the point of being discovered by the authorities, Brown received a postcard from his mother, inviting him to visit her in Haiti.

BROWN IN HAITI

Brown arrives just as his mother is dying. She tells him that she owns a hotel in Port-au-Prince, which she is going to leave to him. She dies without revealing any more family history, so Brown is still as much in the dark as ever about his family's background.

Brown manages the hotel after his mother's death and turns his business into a thriving success. Brown starts a love affair with a married woman, Martha Pineda. Martha is the wife of a South American ambassador, with a son in grade school. Brown and Martha meet secretly once a week, although their affair is always under strain because of Martha's family responsibilities.

As the effects of Papa Doc's reign of terror begin to impinge on the foreign residents, Brown finds himself discussing the lack of criticism of Duvalier by the foreign embassies with Martha's husband and a Haitian intellectual named Dr Philipot :

The ambassador said, 'come on, cheer up, let us all be comedians together. ... Perhaps even Papa Doc is a comedian.'

‘Oh no,’ Philipot said, ‘he is real. Horror is always real.’

The ambassador said, ‘We mustn’t complain too much of being comedians—it’s an honorable profession. If only we could be good ones the world might gain at least a sense of style. We have failed—that’s all. We are bad comedians, we aren’t bad men.’⁷

The men rationalize their failure to do anything about the horror and brutality around them by claiming to be playing their parts in the black comedy of life. Brutality exists everywhere, not just in Haiti. Individuals can do nothing except try to get on with their own lives and ignore what goes on around them.

BROWN’S SENSE OF ROOTLESSNESS

Brown’s attitude of cynicism and passivity is based on his disconnectedness with others. Daphna Erdinast—Vulcan points out that “Brown views life as a comedy, because he had never had a father on earth and he believes he has lost faith in the Father in heaven ... ”⁸ Brown muses about his father late in the story :

And my real father ? He had deposited not so much as one childish memory. Presumably he was dead, but I wasn’t sure—this was a century in which old men lived beyond their time. But I felt no genuine curiosity about him ...

Yet my lack of curiosity was a hollow where a hollow should not have been. I had not plugged the hollow with a

substitute, as a dentist puts in a temporary filling. No priest had come to represent a father to me, and no region of the earth had taken the place of home.⁹

Brown is forced into action, however, when a couple named Smith and a man named Jones enter the story.

THE SMITHS

Mr and Mrs Smith, an elderly American couple, come to Haiti to promote the cause of vegetarianism. Mr Smith had run for the U.S. Presidency in 1948 on an independent ticket, and the Haitian authorities are at first very respectful. The Smiths' views on how vegetarianism could save the world seem rather silly and Brown responds sarcastically :

'Vegetarianism isn't only a question of diet, Mr Brown. It touches life at many points. If we really eliminated acidity from the human body we would eliminate passion.'

'Then the world would stop.'

He reproved me gently, 'I didn't say love,' and I felt a curious sense of shame. Cynicism is cheap ...

'Anyway you're on the way to a vegetarian country,' I said.

'How do you mean, Mr Brown?'

'Ninety-five per cent of the people can't afford meat or fish or eggs.'¹⁰

The Smiths soon have their illusions shattered by the brutality and corruption of the Haitian authorities. When the authorities find that the Smiths have no intention of paying bribes or working out a profitable scam for themselves and the authorities, the Smiths are ignored. At great danger to themselves, the Smiths try to stop incidents of violence by the Tonton Macoute which they witness. They even save Brown from a beating. As A.A. De Vitis points out, the Smiths “emerge as the two strongest characters in the novel ; they are saved by their humanity, by their certainty that there is goodness in the world. Ultimately, it is their dedication to their cause, as Brown comes to understand, their sincere and straightforward desire to better the human situation—by reducing acidity in the human body—that makes them heroic in Brown’s view.”¹¹

JONES

A man named Jones arrives in Haiti with an introduction to a military official. Unfortunately, the officer had fallen from favor and Papa Doc had had the man brutally murdered. Jones is thrown in jail on his arrival and the Smiths, who had gotten to know Jones on the ship to Haiti, ask Brown to go with them to the police to demand that Jones be given his human rights. Brown realizes quickly that Jones is a scam artist who doesn’t really deserve any pity. But Brown is shamed into helping Jones by the Smiths, and Jones is released.

Jones stays on and often runs into Brown, Martha and the Smiths. Brown thinks that Jones is having an affair with Martha and is con-

sumed with jealousy, even though Martha denies she has anything to do with Jones. Jones brags about his World War II guerrilla experiences and Brown maneuvers Jones into agreeing to help a small band of rebels who are trying to overthrow Papa Doc. To Brown's surprise Jones agrees to help the band of guerrillas. When Brown takes Jones to the rebels, Jones confesses that he'd never had any battle experience at all. However, Jones sees this as a chance to redeem his life and become a hero.

Brown learns that Jones also had a father who left before his birth. Brown begins to feel that he and Jones are not that different. They both had a feeling of rootlessness and they both had lived by working scams on other people. They begin to talk about the Smiths, laughing at their simplicity and naivety. They feel a certain respect for Smith, though :

I wish I'd seen more of them,' Jones said. 'There's something about him ...' He added surprisingly, 'He reminded me of my father. Not physically, I mean, but ... well, a sort of goodness.'

'Yes, I know what you mean. I don't remember my father.'

To tell you the truth my memory's a bit dim too.'

'Let's say the father we would have liked to have.'

'That's it, old man, exactly.'¹²

PHILIPOT AND MAGIOT

Two Haitians who represent opposition to Papa Doc in the novel are Philipot, the young nephew of a murdered government minister and Dr Magiot, a respected surgeon and heart specialist. Maria Couto points out that "the most important aspect of The Comedians is that for the first time in Greene's fiction the voice of the non-European articulates its own point of view."¹³ Philipot is a young poet who is finally turning to the view that armed resistance is the only way to get rid of Papa Doc. Philipot recounts a conversation he had with Jones to Brown :

'I said, "I used to write verses. Now I want a Bren gun. And training. Training too." He asked me, "Are there many of you?" and I told him that numbers were not so important. If the seven men had had seven Brens ...'

I said, 'The Brens are not magical, Philipot. Sometimes they stick. Just as a silver bullet can miss. You are going back to Voodoo, Philipot.'

'And why not? Perhaps the gods from Dahomey are what we need now.'¹⁴

Dr Magiot studies Marx and Lenin and considers himself a student of Communism. Magiot also finds value in the Haititan religion of Voodoo. When Brown sarcastically asks if religion is the opium of the people, Magiot replies :

'Religion can be an excellent means of therapy for many states of mind— melancholy, despair, cowardice. Opium, remember, is used in medicine. I'm not against opium.'

Certainly I am not against Voodoo. How lonely my people would be with Papa Doc as the only power in the land.’¹⁵

The novel ends with the Smiths giving up on Haiti and going on to another country with their vegetarian mission, Jones being killed along with the other guerrillas, and Brown escaping across the Haitian border into the Dominican Republic. Brown’s concluding remarks do not hold much optimism :

The rootless have experienced, like all the others, the temptation of sharing the security of religious creed or a political faith, and for some reason we have turned the temptation down. We are the faithless ; we admire the dedicated, the Doctor Magiots and the Mr Smiths for their courage and their integrity, for their fidelity to a cause, but through timidity, or through lack of sufficient zest, we find ourselves the only ones truly committed—committed to the whole world of evil and of good, to the wise and to the foolish, to the indifferent and to the mistaken. We have chosen nothing accept to go on living, ’rolled round on Earth’s diurnal course, With rocks and stones and trees.’¹⁶

REACTION TO THE COMEDIANS

The publication of the novel infuriated Papa Doc. In an interview given to the local newspaper in Port-au-Prince, Duvalier said that the book was not well written and had no value. Duvalier was even

more enraged when a film was made of the book the following year, starring Richard Burton as Brown, Elizabeth Taylor as Martha, and Alec Guinness as Jones. The Haitian government published in 1968 a ninety-seven page pamphlet entitled Graham Greene Finally Exposed, which was distributed by Haiti's embassies around the world. The pamphlet accused Greene of trying to destroy Haiti.

The Haitian government sued to stop the distribution of the film in France and won its case for libel but was awarded exactly one Franc for damages. When the movie was shown on American television three years later, the Haitian embassy in Washington released a statement criticizing Greene.

Haiti was not the only country which was disturbed by the novel and film. In the United States, the last few minutes of the movie were cut because they showed a scene where Martha is in an airplane leaving Haiti and the stewardess announces that the flying time from Haiti to Miami is one hour and ten minutes. Judith Adamson points out the reason for the cut :

Since the cut shortens the film by only a few minutes, it was obviously not made with time considerations in mind. The amputated sequence added a final bit of irony to the movie by leaving the viewer with the knowledge that the brutality he has seen was going on only one hour and ten minutes from the United States. And it reinforced Greene's

point about American involvement in Haiti.¹⁷

Papa Doc died in 1971 and was replaced by his equally corrupt son, who was dubbed Baby Doc. Baby Doc was forced into exile several years ago, and Haiti is starting down the road towards democracy but the days of bloodshed have not yet ended.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 Graham Greene, Ways of Escape (London : Penguin Books Ltd., 1981), p.203.
- 2 Graham Greene, Reflections (London : Reinhardt Books, 1990), p.226.
- 3 Ways of Escape, p.205.
- 4 Marie-Francoise Allain, The Other Man ; Conversations with Graham Greene, trans. Guido Waldman (New York : Simon and Shuster, 1983), quoted in Brian Thomas, An Underground Fate (Athens, Georgia : The University of Georgia Press, 1988), p.127.
- 5 Graham Greene, The Comedians (London : Penguin Books Ltd., 1966), p.31-32.
- 6 Ibid., p.59.
- 7 Ibid., p.134.
- 8 Daphna Erdinast-Vulcan, Graham Greene's Childless Fathers (Basingstoke : The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1988), p.80.
- 9 The Comedians, pp.222-23.
- 10 Ibid., p.21.
- 11 A. A. DeVitis, Graham Greene, Revised Edition (Boston : Twayne

- Publishers, 1986), p.128.
- 12 The Comedians, p.195.
 - 13 Maria Couto, Graham Greene : On the Frontier
(Basingstoke : The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1988), p.177.
 - 14 The Comedians, p.172.
 - 15 Ibid., p.176.
 - 16 Ibid., p.279.
 - 17 Judith Adamson, Graham Greene and Cinema (Norman, Oklahoma : Pilgrim Books, Inc., 1984), p.137.