



STEPHEN
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ON STAGE AND
SCREEN

Robin Nelson

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ABBREVIATIONS

BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
BFI	British Film Institute
C4	Channel 4
ITV	Independent Television
NT	National Theatre
RSC	Royal Shakespeare Company

For Avril

and in memory of my father,
Donald Nelson

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INTRODUCTION

The aim of this book is to afford an overview, and offer a framework for critical review, of the substantial career to date of writer-director Stephen Poliakoff. It is the first book-length study in English of a major, if quizzical, dramatist who, despite receiving many industry awards, has not always received the recognition – both in the UK and internationally – the book argues he deserves.¹ Whereas there have been book-length studies of several of his peers,² Poliakoff has received scant critical attention from academics, and the reasons why this might be so are touched upon in the discussion to come.³ Following this Introduction, Chapter 1 addresses several senses in which the dramatist is not easy to categorise, working as he does across media. Even though his early plays directly address British culture in the 1970s, a sense of the Russian Jewish outsider drawn from his family history increasingly informs Poliakoff's work. Emerging initially as a theatre playwright, Poliakoff moved progressively into writing television drama and screenplays for feature film, ultimately directing his own scripts. This book takes the view that, while he has found considerable success in all media, Poliakoff's television work between 1999 and 2007 has been the most consistent, and the crowning glory, of his career to date. Chapter 2 defies the traditional chronological approach taken by studies of this kind to foreground this period of exceptionally impressive output for television.

The book otherwise deals with Poliakoff's published plays for the theatre,⁴ and his 'films' (his preferred term for both his feature films for initial cinema release and his television dramas ranging from single plays to mini-series).⁵ A chronological list of works is provided in Appendix A, while Appendix B lists the casts of the original productions. The availability of much of the film and television work on DVD (or videotape) has made it less necessary to expound those pieces as much as the earlier theatre plays, which are accessible today

mainly through scripts published by Methuen.⁶ It is not possible in the scope of this book to discuss the many productions of Poliakoff's plays in the UK and internationally, but reference is made to initial productions, drawing upon press reviews – and, later, internet sources – to convey how the plays and 'films' were received at the time of first showing. Chapter 3 sets the context for a dramatist emerging in the early 1970s and further develops a critical framework, culminating in a sketch of the 'Poliakovian' for readers to consider as they explore what follows. Chapter 4 charts the meteoric rise of Poliakoff to become a resident writer at the National Theatre (NT) at just twenty-four years old.

From here the book broadly follows the progressive stages of Poliakoff's career while grouping together works across media which share themes or approaches. Though he is well aware of the opportunities and constraints of different media – both in their technical and industrial dimensions, and in audience and critical response – Poliakoff does not make sharp distinctions between them in his writing process.⁷ He writes primarily to explore what he wants to say in a dramatic form. Poliakoff's theatre work has been described by Charles Sturridge as 'putting the cinema into theatre',⁸ and at times Poliakoff has reciprocally attempted to restore to the medium of television something of its theatrical heritage, notably in *Shooting the Past* (1999).⁹ Accordingly, Chapters 5, 6 and 7 address clusters of texts without sharply differentiating the theatre work from the film and television output, though attention is paid to medium differences. Given more than forty substantial works, it has not been possible to address them all in equal measure. While most works are discussed, a few regrettably receive no more than summary comment. Emphasis is placed upon bringing out common concerns and approaches. At times, the resonances are specific – as in the reworking into the film, *Close My Eyes* (1991) of the early play *Hitting Town* (1975) – but traces, of which Poliakoff himself may not even be consciously aware, will be otherwise identified through readings of both the texts and the intriguing life story of the Poliakoff family. Chapter 8 addresses 'feature films and films for television' leading to Poliakoff's return to features after a decade break with his most recent work, *Glorious 39*

(2009). Chapter 9 revisits the ‘Poliakovian’, offering a critical summary of Poliakoff’s achievements to date.

References to Poliakoff’s writings are given in the body of the text; all other references are located in endnotes.

1 POLIAKOFF

A LIFE ON STAGE AND SCREEN

First impressions

Meeting Stephen Poliakoff, as other interviewers have noted, is by turns a disconcerting and engaging experience.¹ You are conscious first of all of an energy emanating from a somewhat boyish figure, from a man small in stature, casually dressed in jeans and a crumpled cotton shirt and jacket. A shock of dark curls and a beard frame bespectacled but intense eyes. It might be a character from Chekhov or Dostoevsky. As like as not, Poliakoff will be pacing, distracted. He will be twiddling a drinking straw in one hand and clutching a cell phone in the other, frequently glancing at it as if a call or text message is urgently awaited. He speaks in nervously energetic bursts, slightly wary, as if he is not sure what you might want him to say. But, once settled and engaged in a conversation, he is remarkably sharp about his own work. He has a powerful memory and responds well to a challenge, refining points put to him. When I note that his work shows a strong historical consciousness, he agrees but stresses that it is never sentimentally nostalgic. When I raise and challenge his observation made two decades ago that his work is a reaction against a Brechtian approach to theatre, he recalls that in his time at the National he worked on a piece based on Brecht's poems and was surprised to find he shared a sensibility with his fellow-playwright. A formidable intelligence is engaged but occasionally leavened by a self-deprecating laugh. When he learns I am consulting the BBC Written Archive, he remembers the library and its staff with enthusiastic affection and wants me to pass on best wishes.²

Authorship in context

The primary aim of this book is to chart the career of the dramatist, Stephen Poliakoff, and to afford a framework for its critical assessment. In so doing, however, it is impossible to avoid reference to the dramatist and his biography since the plays, films and TV pieces are shot through with deep personal and familial traits. In the early twenty-first century, it may seem idiosyncratic, if not outmoded, to inform an overview of an author's work with key aspects of his life. According to the poststructuralist theories of Barthes and Foucault, the author has long been dead and the authorial voice silenced. Barthes famously asserted that 'writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin' and Foucault predicted that 'the author function will disappear'.³ We inhabit an age in which texts are deemed to be open to productive readings in a field of intertextual play. The identity of the individual writer or reader is similarly thought to be multiple and fluid. As Giddens (1987: 88) summarises: 'Just as the primacy accorded to the author is an historical expression of individualism of the Age of Man, so [in poststructuralism] the "I" of the author is a grammatical form rather than a flesh and blood agent.'

I want to propose at the outset that it is possible to delineate authorial signature within and across a writer's works without indulging in the 'intentional fallacy'⁴ or, as Barthes puts it, falling in with 'the myth of filiation'.⁵ This book will bring out characteristic themes and patterns in Poliakoff's work, noting his view that all his work in television 'has been completely self-generated' and that he is 'proud that [he has] consistently done individual work – in film/television and theatre – work that has been unlike any other work'.⁶ But, however much Poliakoff aims to inscribe his vision in original works, he cannot wholly determine the readings of viewers and he cannot entirely avoid established generic forms. This book thus pursues a 'both-and' sense that authors – and indeed audience members – retain some agency, the extent of which is nevertheless bounded by the broader contexts in which they function.

In the arts today, the dominant model of encounter, extending Barthes's notion of the 'writerly text' (see 1977: 155–64), involves

the interactive engagement of the experiencer drawn into the co-production of textual significance. But Poliakoff and his *oeuvre* pose a challenge to the ready dismissal by some poststructuralists of the idea of work with an authorial signature. Poliakoff consciously occupies the last bastion of the playwright in a lineage of 'writers' theatre' and 'authored television', his approach and work sustaining a liberal-individualist tradition of free expression through authorship (see Nelson 2006). Indeed, he has emerged as an 'auteur'⁷ in a medium which has not typically been associated with authorship since its very early days.⁸ By directing his own screenplays in recent years, Poliakoff has brought together the auteurist tradition of the art-film director along with the dominance of the television playwright in former times when the aim of the director and production team was to realise the writer's vision on the stage or small screen.⁹

From an early twenty-first-century standpoint, a time when the industrial process of writing for television in Britain (following a practice, long since dominant in America) is one of teams of writers for seasons of series or serial output, opportunities today for work of substance written by an individual are significantly reduced. Partly because his early success as an NT playwright carries high cultural status, however, Poliakoff now holds a position of relative power when it comes to negotiating working conditions. His contemporary, Trevor Griffiths, famously told Edward Braun in 1979 that he saw writing for the stage 'largely as the necessary means of sustaining a reputation which would enhance his bargaining power when dealing with television'.¹⁰ A very substantial output of successful playscripts realised in prestigious theatre spaces has no doubt enhanced Poliakoff's standing in the film and television industries. In television at least, he can now insist on maximum creative control over his output, demanding, for example, a longer period of rehearsal with actors than is typical of moving-image media. Moreover, besides writing and directing his screen works over the past two decades, he sits in with editors and works very closely with other contributors such as composers. Indeed, one of the reasons he has eschewed offers from Hollywood is that its working methods do not afford anybody such a position. As he has remarked, 'I am much more like Mike Leigh or Ken Loach; I just

want to do my own thing . . . It's about having complete artistic control.¹¹ In itself, this status is a rare achievement, matched only in British television culture perhaps by the legendary Dennis Potter (1935–94) and by the avowedly idiosyncratic Alan Bennett (1934–) whose work also spans stage and screen, but otherwise unparalleled in modern practice.¹²

If, however, the auteurist approach staunchly defended by Poliakoff is redolent of times past, his concerns are typically of the moment and his work might be characterised as a progressive chronicle of the contemporary. In Poliakoff's early plays, located amid shopping malls, greasy spoon cafes, tower blocks and pop radio stations, he documents the brutalist anomie of 1960s architecture and its impact on a dreary, strife-ridden early 1970s culture after the Summer Party of Woodstock and the 1960s liberalism were over. In subsequent theatre plays he addresses the mid-1970s nuclear stand-off and the rise of racism and the National Front. In the 1980s he deals with Cold War suspicion, pop festivals and runaway kids, while his 1990 plays figure the tensions of immigration policy and the popularity, through increased affordability, of video recording technologies. Later television work revisits the 1970s and charts a not unambiguous progress through the Thatcherite 1980s to burgeoning global capitalism in the 1990s.

The plays are by no means historical documentaries, however, since Poliakoff the playwright is interested in affording a fresh, often quirky, perspective on characters confronted by predicaments. His avowed aim is 'to make the audience look at the world slightly differently'.¹³ In Chapter 3, the motives and implications of an invitation to what I call 'complex seeing', will be located in the political context of theatre in the late 1960s and early 1970s through which Poliakoff emerged.

Besides broad socio-cultural commentary, there is a strain of more overt historic documentation in specific Poliakoff works. From *Berlin Days* and *Clever Soldiers* in the 1970s, through *Breaking the Silence* in the 1980s and *Talk of the City* and *Shooting the Past* in the 1990s, and, most recently, *The Lost Prince* and *Glorious 39*, Poliakoff reveals his concern with European history, partly through public events and partly through his own family story. As the descendant of Russian émigré Jews, Poliakoff is conscious of a need to be watchful lest

Europe's latent totalitarian tendencies in the first half of the twentieth century erupt again. Historical research informs this strand of plays and films in which specific events are confronted. Since resonances of his family's experience are, however, more or less audible and visible in much of the work, it is helpful at the outset to recount the family story.

Backstory

Stephen Poliakoff was born in Holland Park, west London, in 1952 to an irascible Russian Jewish father, Alexander (born 1910), and a formidable Anglo-Jewish mother, Ina (born 1913). His parents, having met at a tea-dance, were married in 1939 and had children relatively late. Stephen was brought up in material comfort with an older brother and two sisters, and he was educated at Westminster School and Cambridge. Before completing a degree in history, however, Stephen left King's College at the end of his second year to pursue a career in the theatre – and, subsequently, film and television.

A charismatic figure, Joseph, Stephen's paternal grandfather, had been born into a middle-class family but presented himself in the manner of an aristocratic Russian count.¹⁴ An inventor, he was the first person in the East to record sound on film, possibly the first in the world (as recounted in *Breaking the Silence* and MacGowan 1955). Following the Russian Revolution, the family fell on hard times and was close to starvation, holed up at their house 60 kilometres outside Moscow with a diet of tiny amounts of millet. A chance meeting in March 1920, the result of a broken-down vehicle and the need to use a telephone, brought a member of Lenin's government to Joseph's door. Despite being, in Poliakoff's own account (2008), 'an arrogant and snobbish figure', Joseph found favour with the commissar. His summary appointment as telephone inspector of the Northern District, with the assignment of his own special train and a reasonable amount of income and food, almost certainly saved the family from starvation.¹⁵ Later, Joseph assisted in the development of an automated telephone exchange for Moscow. After Lenin's death in 1924, just ahead of Stalin's anti-Semitic pogroms, Joseph escaped to England

with his wife and son, the family's wealth distilled into a diamond concealed in the heel of a shoe. If that diamond had been discovered it is highly likely that they would all have been shot. It is thus unsurprising that Stephen Poliakoff's work is haunted by an awareness of the precariousness of Jews in history and their plight under the totalitarian regimes of Stalin and Hitler alike.

Alexander, Stephen's father, inherited something of Joseph's electrical engineering talents and invented the hospital 'bleeper' in the 1950s. Despite this innovation, the electronics business he ran (with his father's support until Joseph's death in 1958), 'teetered on the edge of bankruptcy before it finally flowered in the 1970s'.¹⁶ In Stephen's dramatic works, Jews ambitious in business often encounter setbacks as a result of prejudice (see, for example, *Playing with Trains* and *Century*). Alexander aspired to rub shoulders with the rich and famous and, in the early 1950s, Winston Churchill was a customer for hearing aids which the Poliakoff business developed. In 1953, however, the Churchill contract was summarily terminated; the likely cause transpired only much later: it seems MI5 were keeping the Poliakoff family under surveillance in the light of its long-standing links with the Soviet trade delegation, and feared Churchill was being bugged.¹⁷

Alexander regarded Russia as his homeland, having spent his formative years there. Aged six, he had witnessed some events of the 1917 October Revolution from his bedroom window in the family apartment opposite the Kremlin in Red Square and, aged nine, he had experienced the hardships noted above.¹⁸ Throughout his life in England he felt an outsider, scarcely suppressing the loss and pain of exile. Though in much less straitened material circumstances, Stephen's own formative years were spent amid an atmosphere of thwarted paternal ambition and a sense of being somewhat foreign, despite the family's relative wealth and success. Bad-tempered and *déraciné*, Alexander cannot have been an easy father. He sustained a strong sense of the past, of Joseph and life in Russia, recounting the past at most family mealtimes (Poliakoff 2008). In the light of his own experience, however, Alexander strongly encouraged his children to be ambitious and to be original.¹⁹ They did not fall short.²⁰

The legacy of science and technology on the paternal side is overtly

carried through the siblings and manifests itself in Stephen's work in a demonstrable awareness of new technologies and other scientific developments – for example, in *Remember This* and *Playing with Trains*. Stephen's Russian paternal grandmother, the absent subject of the eponymous play, *Granny* (see below), inhabited the attic and 'instilled in him a continuing fascination with the darker and more complex shades of European history' (Gilbert 2006). But it is from the maternal side, perhaps, that Stephen inherits his love of theatre. His mother, Ina, a descendant relative of the wealthy Montagu banking family, was a would-be actress, while her mother, an elegant and glamorous figure in Stephen's memory, wrote plays on Jewish themes.²¹ A sense of time, place and heritage are all important in that their traces are visible in Stephen's work. Indeed, his ambition as a writer is no doubt motivated by the drive of his Russian Jewish ancestry but nuanced by what, in his own account, was a 'classic English preparatory and public school education' in London.²²

Outline career trajectory

Not cut out to be an engineer, young Stephen found himself a slightly awkward teenager at Westminster School with ambitions to be a thespian. When his first attempts at acting in school plays (in productions of *The Tempest* and *Billy Budd*) were derided by teachers, he turned instead to writing. His first play to receive a public showing was initially performed by his fellow-pupils at Westminster, when he was sixteen.²³ *Granny* (1969)

concerns two teenage couples and in particular David their leader. It is David who decides that they should not turn up for the final performance of their satirical revue, amused by the idea of the audience waiting indefinitely, who tricks the middle-aged housekeeper into thinking that a German friend has come to London to see her, and who persuades Granny's male companion that Granny (who lives in a flat upstairs and is never seen) is dead. (Kerensky 1969)

The play was revived for a series of amateur performances Poliakoff himself set up at the Abbey Community Centre, west London. It was here that Oleg Kerensky reviewed the play for *The Times*, famously reporting (ibid.) that it was ‘more dramatic, with greater command of dialogue and psychological insight than many plays by older authors which have been seen, for example, at the Royal Court’. However, any sense that Poliakoff was to embark on a distinguished career as a playwright was called in question by his mother, who told him when he was seventeen that his career was ‘going nowhere’.²⁴

Though he continued to write plays, he found himself reluctantly reading history at Cambridge, from his point of view a ‘stuffy’ way of life to which he never took, and which he summarily abandoned following the professional staging of *A Day with My Sister* at the Edinburgh Traverse (1971).²⁵ Two further publicly performed but unpublished plays followed: *Bambi Ramm* (Hampstead Theatre Club, 1970), and the aforementioned *A Day with My Sister*, produced by the up-and-coming Michael Rudman and directed by the playwright David Halliwell, with schoolmate Nigel Planer taking the lead.²⁶ Poliakoff’s next theatre contribution was, in his own dismissive view, a few lines in the collaboratively written *Lay-by* (1971, see Chapter 3). The most significant thing to arise from this adventure is what Poliakoff learned from the experience, namely that he was not cut out to be part of a writers’ collective such as were fashionable in the late 1960s and that, unlike many of his contemporaries, he would not initially pursue a Brecht-derived dramaturgy (see Chapter 3). As he remarks of *Clever Soldiers*, the play is ‘a reaction to the Brechtian approach to theatre, and in this case to history plays in particular’ (Poliakoff 1997: ix). A Brechtian influence informs some of Poliakoff’s later plays but, at this early stage in his career, he aimed to ‘reach an audience through vivid, tactile emotional theatre: a commitment to visceral writing’ (ibid.).

Following Kerensky’s review, the Royal Court sent its literary manager, Christopher Hampton, to check out the apparent prodigy, and he introduced Poliakoff to the literary agent Peggy Ramsay, who took him on.²⁷ His career soon gathered momentum and his output became prolific. In the six years between *Lay-by* and *Strawberry Fields*

(1977), the first production in the Cottesloe, the NT's black-box studio space, Poliakoff stormed on to the London stage with nine plays performed at the Bush, the Little Theatre, Hampstead Theatre and the Royal Court (for full list with dates, see Appendix A). Having won one of two Thames TV playwrights' bursaries to become a writer-in-residence at the National Theatre in 1976, the trajectory of Stephen Poliakoff's career can genuinely be described, contrary to his mother's prediction, as meteoric.²⁸

Like other dramatists of his day, however, Poliakoff was soon attracted by the scale of potential audiences in television.²⁹ Still young, he found success in the medium in which he has arguably done his best work, and which gave rise to a 'second starburst' in the late 1990s and early noughties. Poliakoff's break into television came in 1977 with *Stronger than the Sun*, directed by Michael Apted and launched in the legendary 'Play for Today' (BBC1) strand. Poliakoff followed with his first film for television, *Bloody Kids*, directed by Stephen Frears.³⁰ On its heels, a second TV film, *Caught on a Train*, directed by Peter Duffell, was transmitted in the BBC2 'Playhouse' strand on 31 October 1980, winning an award for 'best single play'. Thus, not yet thirty years of age, Poliakoff had established himself as a playwright literally on the National stage and as a screenwriter for both film and television.

In the early 1980s, Poliakoff continued to write screenplays. A second 'Play for Today', *Soft Targets* (1982), was followed the next year by *Runners* (1983), both directed by Charles Sturridge.³¹ *Runners*, Poliakoff's first feature film, premièred at the Gate Cinema, Notting Hill on 4 August 1983, before a limited cinema release and subsequent television transmission in 1984 in Channel 4's 'Film on Four' slot. Throughout the 1980s Poliakoff continued to write also for the theatre, averaging a play every other year mainly in London venues, without ever quite repeating the impact of his youth. While most of his works received at worst 'mixed reviews', there were some which might be regarded as relative failures. *The Summer Party* (1980) was not a great success at Sheffield Crucible. Indeed, according to Robin Thornber, 'it was a complete disaster',³² and, even more strident, Ned Chaillet claims that 'Mr Poliakoff gets all the details of reality wrong'.

The play centres on Kramer, a self-assured, controlling police chief constable who quells an incipient riot at a pop festival which happens largely off-stage. Chaillet found that ‘the whole thing was completely implausible’.³³ Irving Wardle (1981) thought *Favourite Nights*, in which circumstances entrap a young woman to be a language teacher by day and ‘escort’ by night, ‘a feeble piece’ at the Lyric, Hammersmith in 1981. In W. W. Demastes’s (1996: 331) judgement of this period of his career, Poliakoff ‘has yet fully to replace his earlier accepted and understandable aggressive antagonism with a later, expected vision’. Indeed, when in *Capturing Mary*, young Mary remarks, ‘When you have success . . . without really thinking about it when you are very young . . . your confidence can go amazingly quickly when things go wrong’ (Poliakoff 2007: 176), she might even be echoing a slight frustration on Poliakoff’s part that, after its initial meteoric rise, his career – though highly successful in terms of regularly published work in significant venues – was on slow burn rather than flash ignition.

In 1987, however, Poliakoff’s career took a significant turn when he directed his own screenplay, *Hidden City* (Channel 4 1988), which was well received when it premièred at the Venice Film Festival. His next film, *Close My Eyes*, made a significant impact, and thereafter, in spite of a couple of feature films (*Food of Love* 1997, and *The Tribe* 1998) which were less successful, Poliakoff has come increasingly to be recognised as a writer-director, the auteur in film and television, indicated above. In his ‘second starburst’, the subject of the next chapter, Poliakoff wrote and directed a particularly prolific and impressive output for television. Most recently he has returned to feature film with *Glorious 39*, released in the cinema on 20 November 2009.

Poliakoff has realised forty-two substantial works – twenty-three theatre plays and nineteen screenplays for film and television – in a professional career over thirty-nine years to date, throughout which he has won prestigious awards. As early as 1976, he won the *Evening Standard*’s Most Promising Playwright Award for *Hitting Town* and *City Sugar*. He won a BAFTA Award for the Best Single Play for *Caught on a Train* in 1980. In 1992 he won the *Evening Standard*’s Best British Film Award for *Close My Eyes* and, in 1996, *Blinded by the Sun* won the London Critics’ Circle Best Play Award, followed, in

1997, with the Laurence Olivier Theatre Award for Best New Play of 1996. In 2001, Poliakoff was awarded the Prix Italia and the Royal Television Society Best Drama Award for *Shooting the Past*. In 2002 he won the Dennis Potter Award at the 2002 BAFTAs for *Perfect Strangers* (2001), and Best Writer and Best Drama at the Royal Television Society Awards. *The Lost Prince* (2003) gained three Emmy Awards in 2005 including Outstanding Mini Series. Poliakoff's most recent work for the BBC includes *Friends and Crocodiles* (2006) and *Gideon's Daughter* (also 2006) which won two Golden Globes and a Peabody Award in 2007.

Poliakoff's achievements in British theatre and television and his European outlook have not afforded the broader exposure in America that many feel he deserves.³⁴ Despite this constraint, John Patterson has recently remarked that, when introduced to Poliakoff's work, many Americans are hooked by it:

Whenever my American friends ask me to name a good English director they've not heard of, I always push them towards the work of Stephen Poliakoff . . . And those who take up my recommendation/challenge usually come back about three weeks later, after a bracing immersion in whatever traces of Poliakoff can be found in LA's video stores, filled with gratitude and suddenly obsessed with Poliakoff's recurring themes: ancient family secrets, the power of images and documents to realign our understanding of histories both national and familial, and London as a city of secrets, forever yielding up surprises and shocks from its subterranean depths and farthest-flung outer suburbs; all somehow viewed by Poliakoff with the fresh-peeled eyeballs of a newly landed immigrant.³⁵

It would seem, then, to be only a matter of time before Stephen Poliakoff gets the wider international recognition which sparked with *Close My Eyes* in 1991 but has subsequently failed fully to ignite. The Emmy awards for *The Lost Prince* may be a sign of things to come.

Life into work

As remarked, it is not fashionable today to read works in relation to the author's life as manifest in his or her texts. In the case of Stephen Poliakoff, however, the work is so much informed by the life that it would be unwise to overlook repeated tropes and themes which resonate with the dramatist's personal and family history. An obvious example of where personal biography directly informs Poliakoff's writing is the treatment, in *Breaking the Silence*, of his grandfather's experience of trying to complete his work adding soundtrack to image in cine-film technology in straitened circumstances after the Russian Revolution.

Less directly, but none the less resonantly, a successful and wealthy engineer in *Playing with Trains* has made a fortune from a brilliant development in gramophone technology but nevertheless bemoans the lack of support for invention and innovation in British industry. Eccentric in his dress and behaviour, protagonist Bill Galpin resembles Poliakoff's grandfather. Like his father, Galpin is an outsider who has difficult relations with the British establishment and his children alike. At least in Timothy Spall's presentation of him in a radio adaptation of the play (BBC Radio 4 2010), Galpin is genial enough, with admirable ecological concerns and a willingness to back young talent, but his fierce energy, his constant mobility and his conviction that ultimately he knows best, are not endearing. In particular, his relationship with his daughter, Roxanna, is fraught with tension. Echoing Poliakoff's trajectory, she drops out of Cambridge and, though she has the talent to follow her father's footsteps into engineering, chooses a life in the arts. Set over two decades beginning in the late 1960s, *Playing with Trains* carries clear echoes of Poliakoff's tense relationship with his engineer father. But, as ever, the family history is reworked into the needs of the play, in which there is a tension between admiration for innovators with drive and an awareness of the destructive potential of extreme single-mindedness.

Even less direct, but no less telling, are the events at the centre of the narrative of *The Lost Prince*, which resonate with both public and personal aspects of Poliakoff's life and work. They involve a visit to

George V of the King's Russian cousins, the Romanovs, shortly before the latter family is virtually wiped out in an act of slaughter at the crux of the events of the 1917 Russian Revolution. Though in one sense these historical events have nothing to do with Poliakoff's family history, there is a resonance of the, not royal, but established upper-middle-class Russian Poliakoffs being displaced by the impact of world historical events. As producer John Chapman summarises, *The Lost Prince* 'intertwines a familial story with massive tectonic shifts in world politics . . . a cataclysmic period in history when the great powers of Europe represented by one family had a collective nervous breakdown'.³⁶ Furthermore *The Lost Prince* is made to feel familial, beyond the facts of a mere encounter between two families, by its dominant point of view. This is the perspective of Johnnie, the youngest son of King George V and Queen Mary, who was kept hidden from public view on account of his epilepsy and seemingly autistic learning difficulties. In consequence, Johnnie is afforded only stolen glimpses of the big events of history, often peeping out at them from behind blinds and curtains. On one occasion, Johnnie, wearing striped pyjamas (having crept out of bed along with his elder brother), witnesses through the balustrades of a balcony the grand banquet held by his father for his Romanov cousins and a host of dignitaries.

This viewpoint has both specific and general resonances for Poliakoff. On one level, it directly echoes the experience of his father who, as a young boy in pyjamas, witnessed some of the events of the Russian Revolution from the window of the apartment in Red Square. Poliakoff (2008) has noted that his father was 'an interesting witness, with a child's-eye view of great events'. Secondly, Poliakoff's sympathy with the plight of Johnnie and his perspective on the world rests partly also in his father's and his own experience of being an outsider. The well-documented nervous tic, apparent in Stephen Poliakoff's compulsive twiddling of a drinking straw, is, in his own account, a trait shared by his siblings, though manifest in different ways.³⁷ Significantly, the equivalent viewpoint of Johnnie – witnessing major historical changes but viewing them from the edge of the arena – features sufficiently often in Poliakoff's work to amount to a

dramaturgic strategy combining intimacy and historical grandeur by deploying a perspective on great events from a nearby, but concealed, angle of vision.

Apart from his short time at Cambridge, Poliakoff has lived all his life in London, travelling frequently across the city on public transport to gain inspiration or to visit specific sites.³⁸ Buses and trains and the architecture of London locations inform his writing. Indeed, another way of characterising some of his work is social change as reflected in the dynamics of England's capital city. A Croydon estate is the location and context of *Shout Across the River*, while Canary Wharf in the process of construction looms large in *Close My Eyes*. The iconic London Routemaster bus nostalgically graces Paul's birthday party picnic in *Friends and Crocodiles*, as well as serving as a signature 'wipe' in several film sequences. The site of Crystal Palace features in *The Tribe*, and the network of tunnels underlying London, now used mainly for government storage, haunts *Sweet Panic* (1996), *Hidden City* (1988), and *Perfect Strangers* (2001). Poliakoff is personally an obsessive who writes repeatedly about obsessions, often set in literal or metaphorical tunnels relating to anxieties about dark pasts. This is not to say that his works are simply biographical, but to observe that distinctive personal and familial preoccupations inform them.

Poliakoff's deep European consciousness, besides being embodied in him through his family history, is grasped cognitively through his continuing study of socio-historical circumstances. When, for example, he remarks of the context of *Glorious 39*, that, if the English upper classes had won the day in respect of appeasement of Hitler, he would not be here, he speaks knowledgeably of Jewish history as well as feelingly (Poliakoff 2009: viii). Indeed, it is Poliakoff's cognitive understanding which prevents the work from lapsing into nostalgia or sentimentality. Seen more from a cultural materialist than a biographical point of view, a social context or major historical event is typically evident in the hinterground of Poliakoff narratives such that the agency of the individual – or the lack of it – is located in a broader socio-historical structure.