



**NIGHTMARES & DAYDREAMS – A CENTENARY  
CELEBRATION OF SCREENWRITER NIGEL KNEALE**

# The Year of the Sex Olympics

*The Year of the Sex Olympics* was first broadcast as part of BBC2's *Theatre 625* and provides an excellent example of writer Nigel Kneale at his most imaginative but downbeat. His earlier work, *Quatermass and the Pit*, concludes with the hope that mankind could rise above its baser, more aggressive tendencies, and his following play, *Wine of India*, set in 2050, presents a flawed but essentially civilised society. *The Year of the Sex Olympics*, however, delivers a considerably more Orwellian vision of the future, seemingly influenced by *1984*, which Kneale had adapted both in 1954 and 1965.

Now regarded as one of the 1960s most effective and engaging one-off pieces of science fiction, the play is chiefly remembered for the prescience of the scenarios it develops. Most obviously, the play's characters devise a television programme called 'The Live Life Show' in which a group of people is separated from society. The ensuing struggle to adapt to new surroundings is broadcast live, with the viewing public's voyeuristic pleasure heightened by the problems participants endure. Both the template for this fictitious entertainment and the audience's rapt reaction seem to presage the proliferation of 'reality' television in the 1990s, and, in particular, *Castaway* (2000), a show in which members of the public volunteered to live on an inhospitable island deprived of everyday luxuries normally available to society. Similarly, the 'dumbing down', 'sexing up' and sheer predominance of television appear to have been predicted by Kneale's play.

In reality, however, Kneale was merely identifying current trends and evolving them to their logical extremes. For example, reality television had already proved popular with Granada's ground-breaking *7-Up*, independent television was constantly facing accusations of appealing to the lowest common denominator and the 1960s laissez-faire attitude towards onscreen sex was already manifest in a profusion of cinematic soft porn. Even the bizarre, modified form of English spoken throughout *The Year of the Sex Olympics* brings to mind Anthony Burgess novel *A Clockwork Orange*, published seven years earlier and filmed by Stanley Kubrick in 1971. Nevertheless, Kneale's expert marshalling of these elements, sound characterisation and the inexorable tension and pathos which pervade the play ensure it stands as one of his most effective scripts.

Roger Andrews' extraordinary set design offers another bonus but, sadly, only a black and white version survives today.

**Gavin Collinson, BFI Screenonline, [screenonline.org.uk](http://screenonline.org.uk)**

In *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, his classic warning of the dangers of a post-literate, post-rational world, the cultural theorist Neil Postman argued that while the late 20th century had fixated on the possibility that *Nineteen Eighty-Four* might come true – Postman's book was published in 1985, and there'd been quite a pothole the year before – the dystopia we should really be

worrying about was *Brave New World*. Forget George Orwell's totalitarian future based on surveillance and fear, and focus on Aldous Huxley's, in which control is exercised through distraction and pleasure. (Neither of them foresaw a future in which, thanks to smartphones and home assistants like Alexa, the instruments of surveillance and the instruments of pleasure can be combined in one handy package.)

Nigel Kneale had already tackled Orwell, writing the script for the 1954 BBC version starring Peter Cushing (and more recently he'd updated it for a 1965 remake). But his script for *The Year of the Sex Olympics* suggests that he was more of a Huxleyite. The action takes place, according to an opening title, 'sooner than you think...' – well, in the words of the old song, how soon is now? This is a world where – imagine! – humanity is stuck indoors, glued to screens, and ratings are the measure of everything: 'Audience feedback, instant and constant, it matters!' as the rising TV executive Lasar Opie (an almost unrecognisably young Brian Cox) declares.

Material desires are catered for by automatic dispensing machines; other urges are satisfied, or sublimated, by TV: 'Watch, not do' is the governing slogan. So the masses gawp at Artsex and Sportsex (which this year is building to the climax of the Sex Olympics!), or *The Hungry Angry Show*, which consists of clowns pelting each other with food – more irritating than cathartic, I'd have thought. The people dress in gaudy, skimpy clothing, and wear shiny metallic makeup, jewellery glued on or incorporated into their elaborate hair-styles; the aesthetic looks forward to *Logan's Run* or *The Hunger Games*; the horror of old age – 'Thirty? Eurkh!' – is very *Logan's Run* too.

Nat Mender (Tony Vogel), Lasar Opie's immediate superior, is a 'high-drive', ambitious, competitive, successful, but something is not right: coordinator Ugo Priest (a sly Leonard Rossiter), an older man set apart by his memories and his vocabulary, tells him that something has shown up on his computer profile, some shadow or anomaly. Nat has eccentricities: the bubbly hostess of Sportsex, Misch (Vickery Turner) is startled to hear that he still talks to Deanie (Suzanne Neve) – who must have been, what, 40, 45 girls ago? – and they even had a child together, who they visit in the public nurseries. Deanie introduces Nat to Kin Hodder (Martin Potter), who works with her on Artsex. He is struggling with his own bizarre conception of art, drawing faces full of rage and pain: 'tension' is the blanket word covering all negative feelings in the impoverished vocabulary available to them.

There are echoes in this primitive language of Orwell's Newspeak, intended to restrict thought by cutting down on the words for describing it; and an echo in Kin's plight of Damon Knight's short story 'The Country of the Kind' (1956), set in a future where violence has been eliminated, and the last living criminal is also the last living artist. Kin lurches towards a crisis, which awakens something in Nat: he comes up with an idea for a new programme, showing life on the outside – people living like old days, no TV but cold, hunger. And he proposes himself, Deanie and Keten, their daughter, as subjects for the experiment. The second half of the drama sees them settling in an old cottage on a remote, windy island, struggling with something harsher and more real than they have encountered in their greenhouse lives. They don't know that Lasar has arranged a surprise to boost ratings.

The play was lost for 30 years, the original colour tapes wiped; by all accounts, the black-and-white version that survives doesn't give a fair

impression of the visual richness of Michael Elliott's production – the critic Nancy Banks-Smith wrote at the time: 'If you didn't see it in colour, you didn't really see it.'

As a prophecy of reality TV, and more generally of a screenbound culture, *The Year of the Sex Olympics* remains impressive; as a drama that engages feeling, its success is more equivocal. There are notable performances – Rossiter, naturally, as the only character who has any kind of perspective, any grasp of why things are as they are, but who is perhaps less cunning than he imagines; likewise, Cox is predictably on top of his part, making Lasar a little too shifty and pleased with himself to be entirely charming: Cox was evidently already en route to becoming Hollywood's go-to guy for self-serving Machiavellians, in the Jason Bourne and X-Men franchises. The revelation is Turner's superb Misch, hinting that she's much less airheaded than she plays. It's a pity Vogel has trouble negotiating between Nat's different moods – he's plausible to begin with, as thrusting TV exec, but when Nat's ambivalence emerges that persona seems to get dumped rather than inflected, and he seems merely dumb. He does cope well with the play's most affecting moment, though – outside, on the island, with his daughter Keten, he wants to tell her he loves her, but doesn't know the word: instead, he can only convey his weight of feeling by repeating again and again, 'I like you. I like you. I like you. I like you.' Orwell, you feel, must have got it wrong: without the words, the feelings don't die; they just get harder to bear.

**Robert Hanks, *Sight & Sound*, Summer 2020**

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#### THE YEAR OF THE SEX OLYMPICS

*Directed by:* Michael Elliott  
*Production Company:* BBC  
*Producer:* Ronald Travers  
*Story Editor:* James Brabazon  
*Written By:* Nigel Kneale  
*Film Cameraman:* Peter Hall  
*Lighting:* Sam Barclay  
*Film Editor:* David Taylor  
*Designer:* Roger Andrews  
*Costumes:* Joyce Hammond  
*Make-up:* Pamela Burns  
*Sound:* Derek Miller-Timmins  
*Custard pie fight arranged by:* Trevor Peacock

#### Cast

Leonard Rossiter (*Co-ordinator Ugo Priest*)  
Suzanne Neve (*Deanie Webb*)  
Tony Vogel (*Nat Mender*)  
Brian Cox (*Laser Opie*)  
Vickery Turner (*Misch*)  
George Murcell (*Grels*)  
Martin Potter (*Kin Hodder*)  
Lesley Roach (*Keten Webb*)  
Hira Talfrey (*Betty*)  
Patricia Maynard (*nurse*)  
Trevor Peacock, Brian Coburn,  
Derek Fowlds, Wolfe Morris, Braham Murray, Job Stewart  
(*custard pie experts*)  
Sheila Sands (*Artsex girl*)

UK 1968  
BBC2 tx 29.7.1968  
105 mins

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#### NIGHTMARES & DAYDREAMS

##### A CENTENARY CELEBRATION OF SCREENWRITER NIGEL KNEALE

##### The Year of the Sex Olympics

Tue 12 Apr 18:10

##### First Men in the Moon

Fri 15 Apr 14:30; Wed 27 Apr 20:50

##### The Abominable Snowman

Sat 23 Apr 14:50

##### The Woman in Black

Sun 24 Apr 14:40

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