

Todd, Selina (2021). **Tastes of Honey: The Making of Shelagh Delaney and a Cultural Revolution.** London: Vintage. ISBN 978-1-784-70348-6. 296 pp

When the curtain fell on that Tuesday evening, there was a moment's stunned silence – and then the audience roared their approval. Within days *Honey* was a hit and Shelagh the most famous teenager in Britain. Over the next three weeks, hundreds of people flocked to Stratford East to watch an extraordinary episode in British theatre history. A story of slums, sexual politics and race relations, *A Taste of Honey* caught Britain on the cusp of change. (Todd 4)

In the above dramatic characterization of the moment when the writer Shelagh Delaney made her debut as a 19-year-old playwright, the optimal word is 'teenager'. It was a term imported from America in the 1950s to describe the younger generation that emerged in the wake of the Second World War and was associated with new lifestyle elements that came to define the countercultural spaces occupied by young people. Teenagers meant rock-and-roll music, juke boxes, jive dancing, espresso coffee bars, drainpipe denim jeans, brylcreem hair gel and Teddy boy gangs. Their unruly and allegedly promiscuous behavior created a so-called 'generation gap' that spread moral panic among parents. Without doubt, this new, consumer fueled hedonism represented a symbolic smack in the face of postwar austerity and the threat of atomic annihilation. It was also a class phenomenon: young working people with money to spend on loud music, frothy coffee, flashy clothes, together with a brazen attitude towards authority and the establishment. It was Shelagh Delaney who came to personify this youth revolt, both in her plays and in her own personal life.

It is this subversive popular cultural encounter that Selina Todd, Professor of Modern History at Oxford University, explores in her new study of Shelagh Delaney and her work, an in-depth biographical account that follows on from Todd's previous, critically acclaimed social history, *The People: The Rise and Fall of the Working Class 1910-2010* (2014). The pivotal decade is now the 1950s, however, when the political radicalization of the postwar years became more and more tangible. What began with the defeat of fascism in Europe translated into a landslide victory of the Labour Party in the general election of 1945, ousting Winston Churchill and his Conservative Party. Churchill had expected an easy win on the basis of his wartime record but voters clearly thought differently. They gave their overwhelming support instead to a Labour Party that offered a radical program of nationalization of key industries and the creation of welfare state services like the National Health.

These hugely significant gains for working people in Britain also triggered a 'cultural revolution', as Todd describes it, in which a broad spectrum of working-class talent came to the fore: novelists like Alan Sillitoe, Stan Barstow, John Braine and Keith Waterhouse; the playwrights Arnold Wesker and Brendan Behan; painters and sculptors such as L S Lowry and Henry Moore; cultural theorists like Raymond Williams and Richard Hoggart; folk singers like Ewan MacColl; and the actors Tom Courtney, Richard Harris and Michael Caine. All angry young men, but

no women it seems, not until Sheila Delany burst onto the literary scene. It is this context of cultural regeneration that frames Todd's study of Delaney's trajectory from anonymous shop assistant to celebrated national playwright. As Todd argues, Delaney's writing captured the changing horizons of working-class women who wanted more individual freedom, job opportunities and personal fulfillment. It was also this domestic revolution that Delaney sought to spotlight in what was very much a predominantly middle-class theatre world.

Todd approaches the figure of Shelagh Delaney on two levels. Primarily, as a uniquely talented individual who wrote her first and most significant play, *A Taste of Honey* in 1958, after which she quickly became recognized as a completely original voice in contemporary theatre. Secondly, on a more representative level, Todd shows how Delaney used her own experience of working-class life in Salford, Manchester, in order to express the desires of young women to seek more out of life than just being wives and mothers. The contact points between these two levels reveal an intersectional dynamic of gender, race and class that placed Delaney at the center of a radical cultural transformation of Britain. Not only does Todd interweave her narrative with Delaney's own words, she also broadens the perspective with interviews and personal comments by people who knew Delaney or who were inspired by her life. One of the most significant insights in this context is the way in which Delaney pre-empted the women's liberation movement that emerged in the late 1960s, not least in her radical insistence on the personal also being political.

*A Taste of Honey* was a play waiting to be written. It was moreover in complete contrast to the masculinist celebration of male working-class heroes in the novels, short stories and plays written by men at the time. It was also viewed as such by theatre director Joan Littlewood, who accepted the play for her experimental Theatre Workshop before it was transferred to London's West End and then staged on Broadway in New York. The film version in 1961 brought the work to a much wider audience, despite the initially dismissive critical reaction to it as northern 'kitchen sink realism', thus ignoring its underlying sense of youthful resilience and defiance. What struck audiences in particular was the way the plot comes alive, not least through Delaney's ability to write authentic working-class dialogue, both comic and dramatic. Another striking aspect of the play is her portrayal of a Black sailor and a gay student as distinct yet completely ordinary, something that challenged the racist and homophobic prejudice prevalent in the 1950s, even on stage. The main difference, however, was Delaney's radical change of focus onto her female characters, in particular the troubled relationships of teenage girls, young couples and single mothers.

Todd also uses these overlapping generational tensions in order to unpick some of the broader complexities of contemporary British politics. She shows for instance how this radical cultural shift challenged the ideological consensus between the mainstream political parties. Indeed, even subsequent Conservative governments of the time continued to expand the welfare state, winning elections with their slogan (directed at the working class): 'You've never had it so good'. Todd shows how

Delaney's plays contested this image of a brave new working-class world. Her plays questioned the consumerist 'taste of honey' as just another domestic trap for young women whose lives were hardly touched by the post-war economic boom. Endemic unemployment and poverty, 'sink' housing estates, the lack of day care facilities and cultural amenities such as cinemas, youth clubs and libraries, all gave the lie to the claim that the north-south division of rich and poor in Britain had been bridged. Moreover, the women in her plays, like Helen and Jo in *A Taste of Honey*, voiced their frustrations in brash northern accents, sounds rarely heard before on stage and certainly not in the public debate.

Todd's study uncovers a turbulent and exciting period of working-class history in Britain when the balance of social, political and economic forces gave ordinary people a renewed sense of collective empowerment. Britain began experiencing the protracted trauma of imperial decline, beginning with the independence of India in 1948 and then the victory of national liberation movements in Africa. Paradoxically, a process of cultural transformation was also taking place at the same time as Britain was faltering as a world political and economic force. Todd identifies a correspondence between this national identity crisis and the emergence of very different images of the working-class than the traditional media stereotypes of welfare scroungers, petty criminals or comic cretins. The ability of Delaney's characters to overcome the difficult personal challenges they face allowed audiences to perceive working people as capable of their own emancipation. Delaney's later films, television and radio plays continued to reflect this ambience of political change that connected her work to women's liberation, demanding not only equal pay and free abortion, but also deconstructing the patriarchal binaries of virgin and vamp. After her death, Delaney's still growing status as a cultural icon impelled her local Salford Council to inaugurate an annual Shelagh Delaney Day to celebrate her achievements as the city's foremost literary representative.

Selina Todd provides a unique insight not only into the life and work of a woman writer who helped to transform British theatre. She also situates this critical recognition within the context of a whole new epoch of cultural and political articulation. Most significantly, her study allows women who previously would have been 'hidden from history', to use Sheila Rowbotham's phrase, to speak for themselves. She also identifies the areas in which Delaney's work inspired a resurgence of radical gender and class awareness, showing how ordinary women could also make a decisive contribution to the outcomes of history. Without doubt, Todd's new study of Sheila Delaney represents another groundbreaking contribution to both feminist and working-class cultural history.

*Ronald Paul*