

Hangings

by Andrew Kenneally

Hangings were back and thriving - twice a week at half seven in the evening. There had been complaints about the initial six o'clock times - this was too early, some people had to work you know, there were families to be fed and so on; and so it was graciously admitted by the relevant authorities that this was indeed a bit unfair, and after much analysis and debate, debate of analysis and analysis of debate, it was decided that seven thirty was the time most acceptable to the greatest number, and so seven thirty it became.

First there had been only the one performance per week, but it became quickly apparent that the great success of this evening warranted a second evening's entertainment, and so to the Thursday show was added a Monday one. The Monday performance eased the start of the working week, gave everyone a boost with the evening to look forward to, while Thursday's seemed to extend the boundaries of the weekend, and of course both evenings giving people something to talk about on the following morning.

It was soon apparent that demand exceeded supply in more ways than one; that the numbers of people who could reasonably be called for hangings were far from sufficient, the supply of worst criminals quickly being drained, and so qualification for the rope was made more lenient, more representative of the population as a whole - not to infer that any but those deserving would end up at the wrong end of the rope. To this end the most successful if inevitable stroke of law was to permit entrance to the roll-call to all those incarcerated under the Prevention of Terrorism Act.

To provide a little background information for those ignorant enough to require such information: naturally, for reasons of state security, the State need not produce any precise evidence against any such insane ingrates as became terrorists, since such evidence could jeopardise future counter-terrorist procedures. Any qualms anyone may have had about potential miscarriages of justice by the use of such legal methods were vanquished by the State's

Infallibility Decree regarding its operations in precisely such matters of State, according to which, guided by the clear thinking of Hegel amongst others, the machinery of State was incapable of producing error in matters integral to the absolute integrity of the State, for error in such matters would contradict the State's innate perfection, and so the notion of the possibility of such error a contradiction in logic.

Five "pariahs" as they were known were hanged each evening, and the means of selection a lottery: the prior evening during the nine o'clock news five balls drawn from a transparent drum by some blindfolded celebrity blessed with the much lusted for task, and who would have the further pleasure of seeing his or her face, minus the blindfold, with the five numbered balls on, if not the front pages of the next days newspapers, certainly on some other page, depending a little on how bright that particular celebrity's star was shining at that moment in time. Naturally much jostling and pleading went on behind the scenes in pursuit of this task in the not unfounded belief that such exposure could but intensify or sustain one's career, or even help resuscitate a flagging flightpath, but if one's career had flagged a bit too much then it was highly unlikely one would be called forth - however insistent the begging, the producers loathe to tarnish the glitter of the occasion by association with yesterdays' faces. And as a general rule the best the forgotten could do was to remain forgotten. The present was more than enough to be getting on with without embers of the past flaring up and complicating matters.

Initially the balls were merely numbered and that was an end to it - the next evening a face and name would come to accompany the number, but this it was quickly seen was a lapse. How were the viewers to get excited by an anonymous ball and number? Firstly the method was upgraded to photographs of the selected participants being shown on the night of selection, but this rather lame improvement was soon superseded - some bright spark having done himself and his future the favour of suggesting, blindingly obvious in hindsight - that the fifteen nominees be gathered live in the studio to

be direct witnesses to the drawing of the five balls, with the cameras and producer naturally able to extract television gold from the accumulated tensions - the faces most expressive of dismay or relief providing much hilarity on various programmes over the following few days. Prior to this change the amount of balls in the drum had been thirty, but it wasn't feasible to have such numbers all gathered in the studio, and anyway thirty faces starts to veer towards anonymity again - a crime against entertainment.

The idea of a quiz format of some sort was also hit on, with the selection process having a full programme to itself. Make it a full hour with phone a friend devices and so on, but to the astonishment of those involved this sure-fire winner was rejected from on high. The producer, flushed I suppose from a run of other successes, in his anger and frustration tried to argue his case, couldn't they see how successful it would be; but he was informed coldly that such a format would inevitably favour the intellectually inclined, and since these were the very people the State was most pleased to send on their way, then he could forget about any such show. There was the icy implication that one who needed this spelled out might not deserve the exalted position in television attained by said person.

However the role of such a producer, even when working within the bounds of 'news', perhaps even particularly so, needs to entertain, to keep the viewer dazzled, and so the producer, nervously and obsequiously, asked for qualification on some other points. What about short interviews with those selected for hanging? "How are you feeling now/as your ball was drawn?"

The naivety of the question again though demonstrated how pure a citizen this producer really was: entertainment was simply the first and last principle of his mind, and subtleties of sensitive political matters involved access to regions of the mind alien to his knowing. And so, no, but this time even with a touch of amusement, it was explained that no such interviews could be permitted. If it were a mere matter of entertainment (a mere matter of entertainment!), then yes of course it would be mad to deny oneself such interviews,

but the world being alas what it was, these people were dissidents, perverts of thought, and so given the opportunity, now their fates absolutely decreed, one more day to live, what might such madmen say given such an opportunity!?

The producer, absolute in his faith in the State - so absolute it was altogether unconscious - couldn't imagine what a dissident might say, but it was all a subject of such confusion he elected, rather than find himself in even more strange waters, to remain silent.

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But hanging, some exclaimed - while others merely wondered, unsure as to the wisdom of voicing their wondering - hanging, in this day and age, surely that's uncouth, barbaric, a throwback, an insult to the present, to progress, to all we stand for - something of a composite utterance of the theme. Why not, rather than all this lynching, some method reflecting where we are now? - some use of technology of the modern kind.

But they had failed to discern that the reason behind hanging lay precisely in its very barbarism, its rawness. Man was animal after all - if one delved deep enough, though it would have been shocking to have come out and said it just like that - but animal he and she was, and the idea that the State should restrict its playing on the keys of this animal nature more or less just to that of sexual themes would have been stupidly self-restrictive when there were other such bountiful resources to be exploited, and if these lower regions were not exploited and harnessed who knows might happen the precious equilibrium of existence - strange subterranean dissatisfactions might in time begin to set in, and the delicate human eco-system begin if not to break down, to show warning signs of it.

And so to satisfy these immense ancient naked elements of being, so apparently unrestrainedly and so trustingly - trusting that is in the ability to unleash these tremendous forces and yet keep them within certain bounds, not to be overwhelmed by them - well it took

great skill and knowledge, but the State hadn't declared itself infallible for nothing, knew its business. And on top of all the other virtues of hanging, the great subconscious gratitude of the citizens for this raw spectacle, coupled with pride in being entrusted with such undistilled pleasures... All this bubbled away silently in the depths. It was a stroke of genius, if only the genius of limitations, not really genius in the proper sense but more in the Hitlerian sense - an incredibly refined intuiting and knowing of the basest potentialities and regions of nature, and all this precious knowledge gained through intimate familiarity with these very regions.

These people were masters for good reason. They had capitalised on themselves, put every drop to good use, were draining the cup dry.

