

Jim Riordan surveys East European sport

## Spoil Sports

course, there is still an amazing problem. And I can't understand it. One of the most popular stars in the States is Eddie Murphy. He pulls in umpteen million viewers. Why can't producers see that there's an audience there?

**Ayshe** The problem is that there still aren't enough people commissioning at the top of the tree. In the BBC and ITV, for example, there are no black or Turkish people. Maybe with Channel 4 things are getting better, but this is why we don't have the programmes.

**Trix** And we aren't going to get them quickly either. I came up with a series idea which had no black or ethnic characters for TVS. I rang them and they read the treatment and loved it to death. They asked me to their London office. But as soon as I walked through the door this guy's mouth dropped to his feet.

He hadn't detected on the phone that I was black. He asked if I was sure that I could write this. So I said: 'Listen, I've been through the same educational system, say, as your son, right? Went to university and did English, the whole works? I know about your Chaucers and your Shakespeares. Are you telling me I can't write it? What's your problem? Give me a chance.'

**Is that your experience as well, Ayshe? What drew you to tv work, and was it difficult getting started?**

**Ayshe** Well, I grew up with television and I was drawn to television work by the status of having work on tv. And the money. But it took me a long time to get there, endless phone calls, letters. My agent and I were both after the commissioning editor from Channel 4 and Tony Holland from *EastEnders* because it was the perfect thing for me.

Neither of them wanted to take a risk with me because I hadn't written for television before. But they both put me forward for the first BBC Writers' Workshop. A few months after that I got an episode of *EastEnders* to do and then I got an episode of

*South Of The Border*. That's how I got in but I had to go to the workshop first.

**When you do get the chance to write about people from your own communities do you feel a special pressure as a writer?**

**Ayshe** I don't want to write about the Turkish community only as a problem, in that sense I don't want to show them in a disadvantageous way. I don't want to put out to the world that this is a community of moaners.

**Do you ever think that as well as creating role models, you are also a role model yourself? How do you feel about that idea?**

**Ayshe** I'm happy to be a role model because the Turkish community is a hidden, quiet Muslim community, keeping themselves to themselves. They're peaceful, so you never get to see or hear much about them.

**What about the pressure to present our communities as homogeneous angels, as positive stereotypes?**

**Trix** I think that, as writers from various cultural viewpoints, we have only just started to get access to popular programming. In many ways we have always been steered towards the documentary. When I went to film school, there was this assumption that I was going to be a documentary producer.

Now we've got to get away from the idea that 'black' is a blanket expression, regardless of where we come from, who we might be. We have to go into the fact that blacks are different individuals, they come from different islands, have their own private prejudices like everybody else. It's time for us to start to show that.

I didn't realise that *Desmond's* would be as successful as it is but the thing is that it's just a start. I want to see more black and ethnic drama. I want to see much more because, you know, we're the 'song and dance people' and we are the butt of jokes but we are also very good actors, we've got good dramatic stories to tell and we should be doing that now. ●

A compelling feature of the turbulent events in Eastern Europe has been an intensive debate about sport. Since the end of the second world war, the East European sports system has been dominated by the clubs of the security police and the armed forces – Dinamo (Kiev, Tbilisi, Moscow, Tirana, Bucharest, Zagreb, Berlin, Dresden) and the Central Army clubs (Dukla Prague, Red Star Belgrade, Steaua Bucharest, Honved in Hungary, Legia in Poland, TsSKA in the USSR).

With the welling-up of hostility and revenge directed against the paramilitary forces that have shored up the old corrupt regimes, it is natural that their sponsored sports clubs should suffer by association.

In East Germany, some sports stars have even been assaulted and had their conspicuous sports-reward symbols – cars and apartments – vandalised. The GDR's ex-champions Roland Matthes and Kornelia Ender have gone West, while world figure-skating champion Katarina Witt has stayed put, voicing bewilderment that fans should turn on those they once fêted.

In Romania, sport was in the front line of the civil war, with Dinamo clubs locked in bloody battle against army clubs and a number of athletes, like the Romanian rugby captain, are reported killed. In Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Poland and Romania several clubs have hurriedly changed their names. Such events have demonstrated that sport in Eastern Europe is identified in the popular consciousness with privilege, hypocrisy, distorted priorities and, in the case of non-Soviet states, with an alien Soviet-imposed institution.

Some in the West have looked with envy at the successful talent-spotting and nurturing system developed in the communist states. It has brought considerable success in world sports – the USSR and GDR have dominated the summer and winter Olympics of recent years. But many people, East and West, have abhorred the flag-waving razzmatazz accom-

panying sports success, which was evidently more for the benefit of bringing prestige and recognition to the regime than to the people. The elite sports system, producing medal winners to demonstrate the superiority of communism is popularly perceived as a diversion from the realities of living 'under communism'.

Since Gorbachev came to power, however, radical changes have appeared in Soviet sport. The functionalist, bureaucratic mould has been broken. Until then, not only had the Soviet-



Katarina Witt: Fallen star

pioneered, state-controlled system hampered a true appraisal of the realities beneath the 'universal' statistics and 'idealised' veneer, it had also prevented concessions to particular groups in the population. The 'we know what's best for you' syndrome, whereby men tell women what sports they should play; the fit tell the disabled that sport is not for them (Soviet disabled athletes attended the Paralympics for the first time only in 1988); the political leadership, mindful of the nation's and ideology's international reputation, decides that Olympic (ie, European) sports are the only civilised forms of culture.

In the heat of battle, it is tempting to blame stalinists



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Peter Guttridge talks to Carlos Fuentes

## The Exorcist

and 'stagnators' for neglecting 'sport for all' in their race for glory. In truth, much effort was made over the years to involve the population in some form of exercise and recreation that was completely free of charge – whether through the national fitness programme, work-based facilities or compulsory sports facilities for all students in their first two years at college. But it was the coercive nature of sports activities, their being part of the plan-fulfilled system (every school, factory, farm and region received a sports quota and incurred penalties if they fell short) that turned people off.

In the case of the non-Soviet nations, there was the added irritant of having to put up with a system tailored by Stalin and imposed from without in contradiction to their own traditions (Sokol gymnastics was banned in Czechoslovakia and Poland after 1948; youth organisations involved in recreation and leisure were similarly proscribed; and prewar Olympic committees were disbanded).

Being tied to the USSR meant following Soviet foreign policy, including on Olympic boycotts; the Soviet party decision to boycott the 1984 Summer Olympics in Los Angeles was simply passed down to other members of the Warsaw Pact; no sports or national Olympic Committees, not to mention athletes, were consulted. Rumania demurred, though hardly because of player-power.

What of the future? That is clearly for the people of Eastern Europe to decide when the dust settles. Some Germans may lick their lips at the prospect of adding East to West medals in a united team again. Others may well be sick and tired of the unreasonable prominence accorded to the winning of victories, the setting of records and the collection of trophies – a fetishisation of sport. The popular mood seems to favour sport for all and sport for fun, rather than the elitist sport of the recent past.●

'I wish I could be described in my passport with nothing else but this: "Profession: writer, which is to say Don Quixote's shield-bearer".' For Mexican writer Carlos Fuentes, 'writing is essential to my life, it is absolutely my human condition'. Yet the 60-year old author, awarded in 1987 the Cervantes Prize, Spanish writing's most prestigious award, is also known as a diplomat, university lecturer and distinguished political thinker.

Calling writers 'distinguished' often means they are worthy but dull. What distinguishes Fuentes' writing in his first novel, *Where The Air Is Clear*, through his magnum opus, *Terra Nostra*, to his latest, *Christopher Unborn* (Andre Deutsch, hbk £13.95), is his giddy use of language, his inventiveness and his wit. Nor has advancing age slowed him down.

'When I reached 60 the Proustian worm started tickling my belly,' he says, 'so I have a very full agenda. One of the advantages of reaching my age is that I now have the experience to write the books I wanted to write when I was 20.'

A collection of novellas is ready for publication, he has completed the first draft of another novel and he is in London for the first part of this year working on a massive documentary about the Hispanic world for the BBC. 'It's a six-hour series. We've been working on it for five or six years but now it's ready to go into production.'

The son of a diplomat, born in Panama City and raised in Washington DC, Fuentes trained as a lawyer at Mexico City and Geneva universities but always intended to commit himself to writing: 'I decided that although the English language didn't need another writer, the Spanish language did.'

His first novel *Where The Air Is Clear* was an immediate success, translated into 25 languages. It was about Mexico City. 'The city has been the theme of much of my work,' he says, 'although with *Christopher Unborn* I think I have finally exhausted it as a subject. I hope

my writing about its death in *Christopher Unborn* is exorcism not prophecy. In my time I have seen the death of several Mexico Cities. I still have a great nostalgia for a city where the air is clear.'

Aside from the city, another presence in much of his work is an ambivalence towards Mexico's overbearing neighbour, the United States. It permeated his novel *The Old Gringo* (recently filmed starring Jane Fonda) and the ambivalence is clearly expressed in *Christopher Unborn*. Although he has been a professor of Latin America studies at Harvard and regularly does the lecture circuit of North American universities, he is outspokenly critical of the US's conduct towards Latin America.

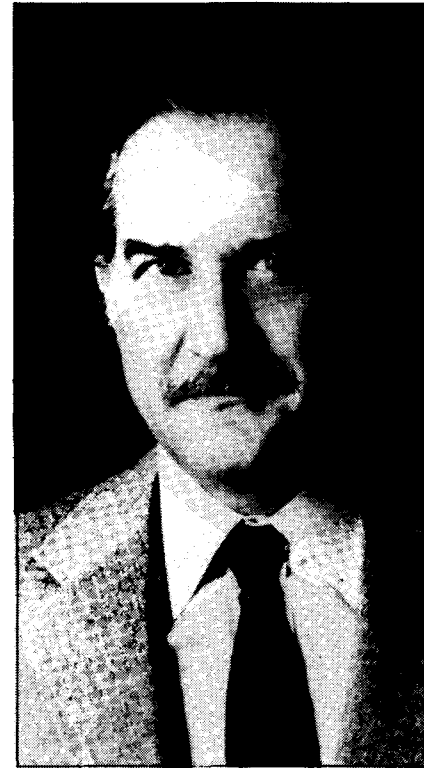
He likes to tell a story from his youth when his father took him to see a film about the Alamo in Washington. At the climax the young Fuentes stood on his seat to scream: 'Viva Mexico! Death to the gringos!'

'There are only two democracies in Central America – Belize and Costa Rica,' he notes, 'and they have only one thing in common. Neither has been subjected to US military pressure. If the US preaches democracy why does it impose dictatorships?'

His concern for the fate of Mexico has contributed to his involvement in politics over many years. 'I am a citizen therefore I am interested in politics,' he says simply, 'but, you know, Latin American intellectuals must wear many hats.'

He is often lumped in with those other Latin American intellectuals, Llosa and Marquez, in a South American school of fiction. A Latin American writer? Magical realism will do nicely. 'Garcia is my good friend – in the 60s we collaborated on film scripts to pay for our real writing – and I like his work immensely. But I do something different.'

In fact, Fuentes has as much in common with Joyce and Sterne as with his Latin American contemporaries. 'Latin American writers keep on re-inventing and developing the language to make it



Fuentes: Magic realist

their own. This is what Borges or Paz did. So when I read Joyce I discovered I had always been a Joycean. He was a writer who was in the air for people of my generation.'

In *Christopher Unborn* Fuentes cuts loose with all sorts of post-modern tricks, pinching lines from other writers and from his own work, mixing fact and fiction at will. The real hero of the book is language. He showers the text with puns – Make-sicko Shitty, Kafkapulco, Acapulcalypse – relentlessly playing with words, twisting and re-shaping them.

Not surprisingly, then, Fuentes is a great champion of the Spanish language. 'Recently the state of California passed a law confirming that English is the main language there. That of course means that it is not.' He adds, quite sincerely: 'I believe the approaching millennium should establish Spanish not only as the dominant language of the three Americas – North, Central and South – but possibly as the world's second language.' Don Quixote's shield-bearer would then be much in demand.●