DIARY

Introduction

Nicaragua is a country of the combined size of England and Wales. It spans the Central American isthmus with Costa Rica to the south and Honduras to the north. In spite of its size, Nicaragua's population numbers a mere three million, half of whom are under the age of fifteen.

For forty years, up until 19 July 1979, Nicaragua was ruled by a dynasty of dictators named Somoza. Underwritten by Washington, its hallmark was terror. Whilst the Somozas grew immeasurably wealthy, the people of Nicaragua remained malnourished, illiterate and landless. The Somozas' instrument of repression was a vicious private army, the National Guard. After the Triumph of the Revolution in July 1979, when the last Somoza was overthrown, the hated National Guardsmen fled across the borders into Honduras and Costa Rica. Here they re-grouped and started the counter-revolution.

The Nicaraguan Revolution was fought and won by the Sandinista Front for the Liberation of Nicaragua. In the two years following the Triumph their achievements were staggering. Over forty thousand landless rural families were given access to land on which to grow food for the first time. Infant mortality was reduced by one third, malaria was halved. Polio, measles and tetanus were all but eradicated. Illiteracy in over half the population was cut to less than one seventh. More than one million Nicaraguans began receiving formal education in 1200 newly-built schools. Food production rose by 10 per cent, consumption by 40 per cent.

In 1980 the regime in Washington changed. Jimmy Carter, who had provided the Sandinista government with aid since 1979, was replaced by hard-liner Ronald Reagan. Reagan immediately withdrew Carter's aid and imposed a crippling embargo on all trade between the United States of America and Nicaragua. He then went on to give military assistance to the counter-revolutionary, or Contra, forces in Honduras. After

1981 the Contra war and Reagan's rhetoric gathered momentum. By 1984, when Nicaragua held its first free elections, one hundred million dollars' worth of military aid had been supplied by the US to the Contras, thirty thousand women, children and men had been mutilated and murdered, and four hundred health centres had been destroyed by Ronald Reagan's 'freedom fighters'. In 1986 it was revealed that a Marine Lieutenant-Colonel in the depths of the White House had been selling arms to Iran in exchange for the release of hostages and channelling the money to the Contras. The scandal of Oliver North and Contragate permeated right to the top of the Reagan Administration but failed to topple it. Indeed, in 1988 Reagan's vice-president George Bush followed him into the Oval Office.

Contragate aroused my interest in the plight of the Nicaraguan people. I was angered by the way Ronald Reagan had so blithely subverted the US democratic process in order as he saw it to hasten a 'democratic' solution to the problems of Central America. This after the Nicaraguans had contested the first free and fair elections in their history, abolished the death penalty and drawn up a constitution the like of which many in Britain are now calling for in order to safeguard our own battered democracy. My anger grew when I started to research a play on Nicaragua, and the scale of American injustice became apparent. In 1987 I wrote a play about the people who had most to gain from the Revolution but who were the principal victims of Ronald Reagan's war – the peasant farmers, or campesinos.

The Royal Shakespeare Company bought the production rights to the play, and after several revolutions of its own, including a change of title, it was premiered in September 1989. Roger Michell, who had previously directed two other plays of mine, *The Catch* for the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs and *The Dead Monkey* for the RSC, directed *Kissing The Pope*.

In the spring of 1988 Roger and I travelled to Nicaragua in order to aquaint ourselves with the subject matter of the play. The diary is an account of our trip.

Tuesday 26th April

Our journey took twenty hours. Roger had had the first night of his production of Vaclav Havel's *Temptation* the evening before so he slept longer than I did. We stopped over at San Domingo for an hour then on to Augusto C. Sandino airport, Managua. After a long haul through customs, our worst fears were confirmed: nobody to meet us. We had a letter of introduction to the Minister of Culture, but there was no telephone number. We sat for two hours on the concrete outside the airport lounge getting hotter and hotter and finally decided to take a taxi. The dilapidated Cadillac cost $30 for a 13 kilometre journey into Managua. The driver was speedy, and he swerved to avoid enormous potholes. At one point we veered to the left, just missing the carcass of a white bullock which lay stretched across the road. The stench of its rotting flesh followed us for a good half mile.

The Ministry of Culture had been Somoza's residence before the Triumph. A cool building, with tiled floors and plenty of shade. Nobody had heard of us. I asked if they'd phone the ASTC, the Cultural Workers' Union. They had heard of us and sent somebody to meet us who, as it happened, had seen us on the concrete and mistaken us for coffee-pickers. She'd expected RSC representatives to be wearing a collar and tie. We were picked up and driven to a hotelito for ASTC guests only. So here we are with two Cuban acrobats teaching circus skills, a Philippino photographer and a Russian translator named Boris whose version of *The Cherry Orchard* is currently playing here at Managua.

The hotelito is a single-storey building which stands on the edge of a park. Today the park was dedicated to a young US engineer and unicyclist called Ben Linder, who was murdered by the Contras a year ago. He is remembered with affection by the Nicaraguan people, and at 4.30pm the park was filled with jugglers, unicyclists, acrobats, a salsa band and children performing traditional animal dances with exotic masks. President Daniel Ortega drew up in a Landcruiser and sauntered over to the naming ceremony. Henceforth this place will be known as Ben Linder Park.

Linder's father spoke, and Ortega said a few words then wandered over to watch the children dancing. After a minute or two he walked back to his vehicle and drove away. Roger and I were astonished at the ease with which the Head of State moved amongst the people. Ortega is no Castro. Charisma is not his strong point. It's a stroke of Nicaraguan genius to have embodied the values of the Revolution not in their living leaders but in the martyred Sandino, who was assassinated by the first Somoza in 1934 and after whom the Sandinistas took their name. (His silhouette is on walls everywhere.) Sandino is the great unassailable legend of Nicaragua, and he's dead. Though Ortega's credentials are impeccable (he spent many years in jail tortured by Somoza's National Guard, and he fought heroically for the liberation of his country), he is Sandino's humble representative and casually accepted as one of the people.

6.15 pm. Dusk, pink light, cicadas, palms, unbearable heat.

Wednesday 27th April

It's too expensive to hire a car. We walked two miles through the heat to the Hotel Intercontinental to discover this. Then walked back, dehydrated and with one hat between us. Failure to wear a hat in this climate is to scorn the power of the sun.

Went to ASTC to discuss with Noel Carreras our game plan.

The ASTC, our host, is the Association of Cultural Workers, or the artists' union. It is headed by Rosario Murillo, who is one of Nicaragua's leading poets and Daniel Ortega's partner. The Association's headquarters, a stone's throw across the park from the hotelito, is a complex of single-storey buildings strewn like pearls amongst a lush garden of palms and dense greenery. There's a dance studio, offices, a cool bar/restaurant and a large outdoor area for concerts, usually given at night by local and international artistes. The policy of the Sandinistas is to introduce alternatives to the US dominated beefburger/baseball/gum society and steer the people towards a rediscovery of their own culture – or should I say discovery – it's hard to imagine the effect a revolution can have on a deprived population. Nobody knew the names of the trees or mountains before 1979, because

there was no reason for learning them. The trees and mountains and everything else were the property of Somoza, whose power was so complete that he made no pretence of sharing his country with the people who lived there. They existed in a limbo-land which was itself out of bounds, beyond their reach.

Noel Carreras looks and behaves like a New Yorker, which is where he's lived much of his life. He's attached us to a US delegation who are arriving on Friday. We will travel with them. Meanwhile Roger and I have appended ourselves to a Philippino photographer, Rick, a big man with a face like the moon. Rick has an ASTC car and driver. This afternoon he took us round Managua.

Managua is the capital city of Nicaragua. In 1972 its centre was completely flattened by an earthquake. The international aid which poured in was embezzled by Somoza, and Managua stayed flat. Now, the closer you drive to the centre of town, the more barren it becomes, until you reach the middle, a desert overlooked by the Intercontinental Hotel, which along with the Bank of America was the only building to withstand the 'quake.

Rick had to photograph a children's diarrhoea ward in the hospital. The eradication of diarrhoea was one of the Revolution's great achievements. But the Contra war has eaten away at the country's medical resources, and, thanks to the efforts of Ronald Reagan, diarrhoea has once again climbed the charts to be the nation's number one killer. In a large blue room a dozen mothers sat on a bench holding their inert, underweight children. Now and again, a child would retch, but mostly they stared blankly across their mothers' shoulders at the wall. I fell into conversation (in Spanish) with one woman who talked non-stop about her child, his age, his weight, and the effects diarrhoea had on him.

Rick dropped us off at the Place de la Revolution. We had a quick look round then a short stroll to the Reuben Dario Theatre. Reuben Dario was Nicaragua's greatest poet, and the theatre which bears his name is a civic monolith. This is where *The Cherry Orchard* is playing, apparently to half empty houses, having been greeted with incomprehension by the critics. Noel had arranged for the director to meet us. She didn't. Too busy. So, a wasted journey and a long walk back to the hotelito at dusk. Pink light, cicadas etc. Four beers cost six quid.

We had our clothes laundered today, and ironed.

Thursday 28th April

6am. Retired early last night and rose at 4.30am. I'm beginning to despise this hotel. It makes me a tourist, and that's the last sensation I want. If I can't get to share even a particle of what it's like to be an ordinary citizen of Nicaragua, then the visit is a sham. This hotel has everything – air-conditioning, three square meals a day, yes three, and very square: beans, rice and meat or fried cheese, chicken. There's a swimming pool (piscina), shower, flushing toilet; we could be on the Costa Blanca except it's too hot for that and the whole thing's costing us $35 a day. However, Rick introduced us last night to a carpenter who's lived all his life in San Francisco but has returned to Nicaragua to help build a school in Acoyapa. His name is Don Paco, and he looks like Spike Milligan. His English is patchy despite a thirty-year sojourn in the US. He's going to take us with him to Acoyapa, heavy Contra territory south-east of Managua, and we'll stay there two days – no beds, no latrines, nothing. So we'll soon be getting dirty.

Rick, who is here at the behest of the ASTC to take consciousness-raising publicity photographs, told us he is not, remarkably, a professional photographer. He sells drugs – the medicinal kind – and the most he's ever made taking pictures is $75. He displays a generosity of time and spirit, not to mention material sacrifice which would be hard to find in England. Here is a man with no parsimonious patronage of the poor but real empathy and concern, and who devotes every minute of his spare time and every cent of his spare money to the cause. Is he a saint? Of course not. Coming from where he does he sees the world from a different perspective. In England charity is replacing the state as the buffer against poverty, and yet we still believe a small donation now and again will eradicate suffering. Over here you get a full picture which demands not charity but a commitment to change the world.

Friday 29th April

I've taken to writing this early (5.15am) in bed. The air-conditioning, though effective, sounds like a DC10, and every now and again it gets an automatic boost, which gives the impression we're about to take off. Once you've woken it's impossible to get back to sleep. I'll go for a swim . . . I'm now away from the air-conditioning and sitting in the bowels of God's own central-heating system.

A word about status. The more important they consider you, the more you can expect from them. An international artist of the Pinter/Rushdie calibre will get the five-star itinerary, i.e. a driver and car. Another determinant of status is numbers. There are eight Americans arriving today, and they will get to go round in an air-conditioned bus. Roger and I comply with neither of the above classifications and so enjoy nil status. Yesterday Noel had promised us a driver to take us to the market in the morning. We arrived at the ASTC. No car. No driver. No Noel. Under any other circumstances, Noel would owe us a lot of favours but in a country where so little is possible, yet so much is achieved, isn't it natural to promise the earth in the hope that maybe you can deliver a grain of sand?

So once again it was Rick who came to the rescue and took us to the market. There are several markets in Managua, but this one is the biggest. It stands on its own out of town, covers a vast acreage and is housed in enormous hangar-like buildings. Small recessed shops spill their goods out onto wide concourses. All kinds of stuff is on sale, notably shoes. There are few imports. The heat, of course, was unbearable. The sensation which hit me and made the occasion unlike any other was not the size and colour of the fruit nor the high artistic merit of the craftwork or the mind-blowing, tropical, Dickensian scene of an army of women making tortillas in engine-room heat over vast furnaces fuelled with wood nor the noises of kids shouting nor the incessant ringing of ice-cream vendors' bells nor the deep ominous grinding of huge mince machines crushing mangoes, the twitter of pullets in wicker baskets, the flapping of sandals on the tiled floors, the whirr of home-made skateboards nor the clumping of square-wheeled carts, nor even the sight of the deformed, the legless, the very poor – the one thing that assured me I could never be anything but an observer of this scene was the smell. The smell of the meat in the butchery sector clung to

my nostrils, the odour of cheese in giant vats made me nauseous. The heat sits on a smell and squeezes it inwards through the pores of your skin. Everything you touch and eat, even the water you drink is charged with the smells of the market. Pungent and unfamiliar.

Roger and I visited the Museum of the Revolution, which is close by. Here the history of the armed struggle for the liberation of Nicaragua is laid out behind glass in the form of photographs, documents, the makeshift weapons used – bazookas made from drainpipes – and most potent, the clothes of the heroes. Sandino's leather jacket with a crudely mended rip on the hem is draped round a mannequin, and there beside it is a photo of the great man wearing the same jacket. This place is not the Imperial War Museum but a shrine with great emotional force, which is tangible like the smell in the market. When Ronald Reagan invaded Grenada, the Nicaraguans packed the exhibits up and buried them, so that if Reagan invaded Nicaragua next, which many thought he might, he couldn't destroy its history.

Rick is our friend and benefactor. He has another trip to a theatre this evening, a small fringe-group which I'm going to watch tonight with Don Paco the carpenter from San Francisco. Roger and I, who spent this morning like a couple of newly-weds, politely discussing money and trying on hats in the market, decide to take a rest from one another. He goes off with Rick, and I stay home to siesta. At four o'clock Roger comes bounding back. 'I've struck gold, mate.' And so he has. He's arranged a trip for us on Sunday, Labour Day, to go with the fringe theatre group to the Matagalpa region, where they will be taking part in the Mayday celebration, entertaining the troops in the war zone.

Tonight, Don Paco and his friend Gonzalo picked me up at dead on six and drove me through the gathering dusk and crazed, half-tamed anarchy which are the streets of Managua to the Teatro Justino Ruffino Garay. I swear to you this place is like the Bush, one of London's scruffiest but most go-ahead fringe theatres, but transported to Acacia Avenue in a deranged, tropical Orpington. The auditorium, seating and stage are identical to the Bush. The director, with her warm greeting and efficient charm, is the spitting-image of Jenny Topper, the Bush's artistic director. A woman queuing for a ticket carried a Boots the Chemist bag, and the two plays on offer were classic Bush fare, one-woman pieces by Dario Fo.

Whilst I was at the Bush, Roger returned to the Reuben Dario to sit in with Rosario Murillo and some musicians who were

auditioning acts for ASTC. Finally we went to the ASTC to catch a local band called Praxis – jazz-funk fusion with more than a hint of Santana.

Observations: at the market I had my first (and only) experience of feeling threatened. A large drunk teetered over to me and, breathing sweet alcohol fumes in my face, demanded money. Having none, I backed off and ran. Later, I took the tape-recorder with me to the Bush and asked Don Paco and Gonzalo, could I leave it in the car? No way. The car would be broken into and vandalised. I found this difficult to believe, but it must be remembered that Don Paco and Gonzalo have spent most of their time in San Francisco.

There are slogans everywhere. Banners, Sandino silhouettes stencilled onto walls, stickers on trees, all with a political message. The favourite right now is 'We are flexible because we are strong'. This refers to the unpopular talks which are taking place between the Sandinistas and the leadership of the Contras, Enriquez Bermudez and Adolfo Calero. The Sandinistas swore they'd never do business with the Contras, but diplomatically the talks are vital, hence the slogan.

There's Beatles music everywhere.

Many women are pregnant.

I re-read my play. How can I square this odd piece with the momentousness around me? Is it true? Is it real? How can I absorb what I see and hear (and smell) into the text, and if I succeed will it make the play any more real? The most I can expect from this visit is to provide the play with a setting, a context. The characters come from within me, of course, and in one sense I'm looking for affirmation that the kind of people I write about exist in Nicaragua. I come from a remote rural area myself, and the play is about farmers. In the same way that I met Jenny Topper's counterpart earlier, I'm confident that a farmer is a farmer, wherever he or she might live.

Saturday 30th April

Our first trip out of Managua, courtesy of Rick. A short shoot north to Masaya by way of the volcano. We stood on the lip and looked down into a sulphurous smoking hole

to the centre of the earth, down which Somoza used to drop Sandinista prisoners out of helicopters supplied by the USA. Charming man. An example of his philanthropy: after the earthquake, thousands needed blood. The call went out, and plasma was given by donors from all over the world, collected and delivered by the aid organisations to Managua airport. There it sat. The blood was requisitioned by Somoza and *sold* by him to the earthquake victims, his fellow-Nicaraguans.

Masaya is an old Spanish-colonial town, and one of the first to be liberated from Somoza's clutch. There were vendors in the market who didn't want to be photographed by Rick. It was the first example of camera-hostility he'd come across.

Rick had an assignment way off the beaten track in a tiny *barrio*, the inhabitants of which were all involved in spinning string from jute. Two huge sows lolled beside three old men and a youth, who teased the bundles of the coarse fibre into threads by thrashing it against a table of nails. The spinning technique is similar to that used by the rope-makers of Chatham and Bridport, several threads a hundred feet long are trained along pylons and spun together by an enormous wheel. Roger and I were mesmerised by the scene – one of serene tranquillity broken by the furious spinning of wheels. We recorded the sound they made. Recorded also is our reaction to Eujelio's driving, which is fast.

At the ASTC tonight there was a band called Moncatal, fronted by Luis Enriquez Mejia, one of the most charismatic performers I've ever seen. His music is Latin, salsa, exhilarating stuff. Before the Triumph he broadcast his revolutionary songs across the border from a radio station in Costa Rica. Now he's big right across north and south America. After him, a muscle-bound French version of Tom Jones. Machismo personified. Very popular.

Off afterwards with Matthew, the local Reuter's correspondent. His house, a mansion in the Orpington millionaire's row, is rented from an exiled Somocista. Two other journalists both American, greeted us round the pool. Scott, who writes for the *Christian Science Weekly*, and Charlie, who writes for the *Financial Times* in London. After a quick glass of delicious Nicaraguan rum, we head off to Charlie's place where he's entertaining tonight. This is a full-blown party we've stumbled on here. Roger and I sample what's on offer. Guests: Maria, an Algerian, and an unbearably vain Belgian TV journalist. Plus several of Scott's girlfriends, past, present and future. His life is complicated right now, which is perhaps why he offered to take us home at 12.30.

The journalists say there is no corruption (drugs, etc.) in this country. It doesn't surprise me to hear this; what does surprise me is to hear hard-bitten journalists tell me there is none. They also say that Nicaragua is the best place to be posted. I've got a speech of Scott on tape where he tells us that Nicaraguans stand out a mile from other Central Americans because of their liberated souls.

Monday 2nd May

5.15pm. Just got back. Extraordinary two days. Slept last night in ammo dump. Nearly killed on journey back.

I'll start on Sunday morning. Yesterday. May Day. The plan was to meet up at the theatre at 8.30am and away to Muy-Muy with a band to entertain the troops, then back in Managua by nightfall. Rick got us to the theatre on time, where we met the company, Claudia and Otie, whom I'd seen on Saturday night in the Fo plays, and a younger boy and girl of about eighteen. There was also a Dane called Martin, who was fluent in Spanish and English. Martin warned us that if our transport turned out to be an East German EFI truck we'd be lucky to get back alive because they tend to turn over. After waiting around for four hours – it was now noon – I was relieved to see they'd sent a bigger, Russian vehicle. We clambered up over the tailgate and sat on the flimsy wooden benches which ran the length of the truck's flat bed. After a further four hours travelling north, we turned off the main highway at Matagalpa onto a mountain grit-road which soon petered off into nothing more than a track through uninhabited bush. The military are trained to drive fast to avoid ambush. Our speed was a constant 90 kilometres an hour. It shook the shit out of me.

We arrived at Muy-Muy at dusk. The first sign of civilisation was a hillside covered with small fires like a scene from *Henry V*. We came to rest beside an empty parade ground surrounded by chicken-wire fencing. At the far end was a narrow stage with a wall behind it. The wall was pock-marked with bullet holes like the streets of Masaya. Portraits of Sandino and Fonseca were painted on the wall and flanked by black and red Sandinista

flags. Flags flew everywhere round the square, high on bamboo poles. We were led through a thick plantation of jacarandas, mangoes and palm trees with their trunks painted black and red. Bullfrogs belched a greeting. We came to an enormous piscina fed with water from a pipe high up like a waterfall. This place had been the weekend retreat of a high-ranking Somocista.

Campesinos had travelled from all over Nicaragua to be with the soldiers, who had come down from patrolling the mountains for the first time in a year. Roger, Rick, Martin and I were the only 'Internationalistas' amongst a thousand soldiers and their families, deep in the war zone. The band went off to prepare for their gig. We knelt at the pool and washed the dust off our faces. We were so hot we stripped and bathed.

We ate beans and rice and drank rum at a long table with twenty soldiers. One soldier leaned over and introduced himself. He spoke quietly. Martin interpreted. His name was Carlos. He was the political cadre of the platoon. He told us about the war with the Contras, how it is fought and why. He talked intensely for three-quarters of an hour, articulating with a measured fervour. I put his age at thirty, but it turned out he was nineteen years old and a sub-lieutenant. He'd been a soldier for five years and had fought for the Revolution since he was eight. He put us entirely at ease in this extraordinary place.

Carlos took us back to the parade ground, which was now crammed with people, then vanished. Claudia and Otie taught Roger and I how to salsa. I'm a good dancer and Roger is light on his feet, but I'm not sure how successful we were with the salsa. The movement derives from the hip, which Englishmen often find hard to dislodge from the perpendicular. Looking round I witnessed a scene of joyful abandonment. Rivers of rum had been consumed, but I heard no breaking glass; there was no hint of aggression. These soldiers were nothing more than kids having a rare night out with their families. There were children of all ages, but those aged fourteen and over were in uniform: the pale-yellow tee-shirt, camouflage trousers, red bandana, sweatband round the head and the distinctive soft jungle hat worn with pride by the crack BLI regiment. Tomorrow they'd be back in the mountains with their Kalashnikovs.

We danced till midnight, then it rained: a light shower, but it emptied the square and the band ceased playing. It was the first rain of the season, and the smell from the ground was overpowering.

We were ushered into a 15ft × 10ft store with four slatted shelves either side about 4ft deep. The room was full of semi-

automatics and ammo. There were two false legs leaning against the wall, and it wasn't until we tried to go to bed that we discovered their owners asleep on two of the shelves. Eight of us slept here. I had two belts of live ammunition for a pillow; and Roger nestled up to a rocket-launcher. Rick snored very loud throughout the night, an extraordinary snore which started soft and built slowly to a deafening crescendo. I recorded it.

I set foot outside at dawn and was met with the sight of campesinos asleep everywhere. At one place I counted seven hammocks slung one above the other between two trees. Knots of men scuffed dirt round burros, while women collected water in bright-coloured plastic buckets. There was one latrine that I could see which served a thousand people. It was a hole in the ground surrounded by a box. The hole was full of shit and the box was full of flies so I made my way down the hillside and squatted. At a moment when it would have been impossible to stand up and pretend I was doing something else a campesino family filed past me and squatted in a line about ten feet further down the hill. There was mother, father and five kids. The scene took on a religous quality as we all faced east and watched the sun rise together, shitting in concert.

Roger spoke at length to the paraplegics who'd lost their legs stepping on land-mines. They'd been treated like heroes since their discharge from active service. They were now at Managua University, studying to be engineers.

At twelve noon we were ushered into a massive ten-wheeler. This time we had two spare wheels and a fifty gallon drum full of oil in the back. The truck filled with campesinos going home. Before long it was full to capacity. Roger and I were near the front, he had his back to the cab and I leaned against a single wooden rail which bowed out every time we went round a corner. Sitting on a spare wheel in front of me was a campesina of about sixty, thin and mischievous. She provoked the trumpet player into a relentless squabble by saying things like, 'All musicians smoke marijuana', or 'Daniel Ortega has four swimming pools and a Cadillac', which sent the trumpet player wild. Then she said, 'Soon this country will be full of old people, they're killing all the young ones'. She spoke with a smile and kept glancing at me as if to say, 'Watch how he reacts to this one'. Then out of the blue she roared, 'All Internationalistas bring AIDS to Nicaragua'. This time she was denounced as a *La Prensa* reader. *La Prensa* is the CIA backed pro-Contra newspaper which peddles misinformation and does its best to undermine the Sandinistas.

The driver of this truck was a maniac. His foot never left the cab floor. His homicidal tendencies reached their nadir when we were hurtling down a mountainside at 80 kph and swung out to negotiate a right-hander at the bottom. He swerved to avoid another vehicle coming up. The truck lurched hideously to the right, we were thrown about like dolls in the back and the fifty-gallon drum tottered over into Rick. Then the driver swerved to correct the skid, and we lurched as far in the other direction. By a miracle we survived. First there were screams, then yells of abuse at the driver. 'You'll kill us all!' 'Are you trying to do the Contras' job for them!' If he showed any sign of recklessness for the rest of the journey, the driver would get a torrent of catcalls from the back. The closest to death I've ever been.

Tuesday 3rd May

Don Paco and Gonzalo picked us up at 6.30am sharp, and we travelled to Acoyapa. Gonzalo is an aggressive driver too, and we had 200 kilometres of hell. Don Paco is involved with the San Francisco Bay Area Solidarity Group, which is building a school and workshops down here. Bill, also a carpenter like Don Paco, had just driven a Toyota flatbed loaded with tools down the pan-American highway from California to Nicaragua. Bill had given US customs false documents and a destination in Costa Rica, as it would be embargo-busting for the tools to wind up in Nicaragua. Bill is an artisan, retired. A solid, thoughtful man. He told us that, thanks to the military, driving through Guatemala and El Salvador is a death-defying act. It's well-known everywhere outside the White House that these two countries are controlled by their armies, which are corrupt and murderous. In making the journey, Bill ran the risk of having his throat cut and his truck stolen by the US-backed forces of democracy in Central America.

Acoyapa is a town the size of Padstow in Cornwall, and it has a full-size baseball stadium. The home team was hosting a league series, so Roger and I got to see our first match. The standard of play seemed very high. Bill informed us the game is a legacy left by the American Marines who occupied Nicaragua in the twenties and thirties before Sandino booted them out. 'That's the

way we have of doing things,' said Bill. 'We come into a country and introduce the children to baseball while we're out killing their moms and dads.' Everywhere you go in Nicaragua there's a kid wielding a baseball bat.

The school is a single room, 30ft x 20ft, with concrete walls to waist height then open to the roof. About fifty kids of all ages sat at tables facing the teacher. There was no evidence of books, however the children had satchels and exercise books, though there is a shortage of pencils. The uniform is a starched white shirt and skirt or trousers. Schools and teachers are prime targets. Ronald Reagan knows that knowledge is power, and his freedom fighters are trained to destroy school buildings and to rape and murder staff as a disincentive to taking on the job.

Roger said it's hard to keep sight of the play in these surroundings. I can see what he means but it isn't him who has to re-write it. How much of the play squares with what I'm experiencing now and how much is inaccurate? In the first scene a brigadista (health worker) arrives at the village and takes blood samples from everyone who has had contact with pesticides. She then proceeds to demonstrate how to use protective clothing provided by the ministry. Thanks to Mr. Reagan there is a shortage of protective clothing in Nicaragua, and there are no longer the medical supplies to test blood for toxin levels. Would it be correct of me to imply that the medical supplies are holding up or better to scrap that scene and write another which deplores the lack of these resources? In the second scene we move to the undergrowth away from the village, where the Contras have re-grouped after attacking the village at the end of scene one. They have captured a youth of fifteen, Emilio, his father and the brigadista. The man is mutilated then murdered before his son's eyes, and when the Sandinista army mounts a counter-offensive the brigadista escapes. The play then proceeds on a dual-track, leap-frogging from the village to the camp where Emilio has been taken to be trained as a Contra. When Max Stafford-Clark did a rehearsed reading of the play with the *Serious Money* cast in the Royal Court's Theatre Upstairs, the most successful scenes were the murder scene and the ones with Emilio and his wild captor, Sanchez. The problem with the village scenes is the central character of Emilio's mother, Rosa, who has just suffered the double tragedy of a murdered husband and kidnapped son. Grief is hard to write in a cynical age. Synge managed it in *Riders to the Sea*, but in his time an audience's emotional response would have been stronger and less hedged. Besides, Synge used the device of keening, which is a formal expression of mourning and a

technique not at my disposal. Grief is a mixture of emotions – not just mourning but a fear for the future, repugnance for the murderers, a desire for revenge, all of which are complicated in my character's case because her son is in mortal danger and there's a helplessness arising from that. I cannot have her speak this, or show it in the way she behaves. But any action which occurs in the village, such as the trial of a captured Contra or the re-building of the CDS (Sandinista Defence Committee) hut, and which doesn't place her centre stage appears thoughtless. She is a sponge to soak up the tragedy. Squeeze her and what comes out? Soap.

We stayed a few hours in Acoyapa but had to leave by mid-afternoon as the roads here are sealed off at dusk because of Contra activity.

Don Paco treated us to a meal at Nicaragua's most famous fish restaurant, which is nowhere near the sea or the lake. We ate the most expensive and delicate fish, which resembled a gurnard and tasted like cod.

Thursday 5th May

The Americans are here, and we now have the choice of attaching ourselves to them or continuing with Rick. They're off for two days, one of which will be spent on a co-operative farm, so I plump to travel with them. Our first stop, however, is at a Bulgarian canning plant stuck out on the plains just north of Managua. This monstrosity, straight out of a Herzog movie, is foreign aid on a grand scale. The Bulgarians have built a factory capable of peeling, washing, boiling, processing, pickling, canning, labelling and packing millions of tomatoes an hour. However the Nicaraguans can provide neither the tomatoes, the labour to pick them, the seeds to grow them, the trucks to transport them, the fuel for the trucks if they had them nor the electricity to power the plant. They will one day, when the war is over and the trade embargo is lifted, but until then the place stands silent, with thousands of gleaming empty cans on motionless conveyor belts. The union official who showed us round was full of pride for the place, empty as it was.

There are six women and two men in the delegation, here to prove to the Nicaraguans that not all Americans are redneck commie-haters. Each member had a present for the guide which was given with messages of goodwill for the workforce and the Nicaraguan people from the citizens of the country which is doing its best to destroy theirs. Their tone when they talk of Ronald Reagan is one of a parent apologising for an unruly child. I must say I was apprehensive about travelling with the Americans. At least with Rick you're with somebody who's doing a job of work which is of benefit to the country, but with the Americans I felt more like a tourist than I did before. This feeling was compounded during our guided tour of the cannery, but dispelled for ever after our next visit.

In Matagalpa we were taken to meet the Mothers of the Heroes and Martyrs. About one hundred and fifty women of all ages and their children. We entered the crowded hall and were applauded. No attempt was made to silence the meeting. Silence is a product of repression, and the lack of it is a mark of the Revolution's success. We sat opposite the Mothers behind a long table.

The jefa (leader) stood first and said, 'In the name of all the mothers, welcome. All here have lost children. Sometimes the women can't speak because it is too hard and emotional and they'd be too upset to talk about it. This lady has lost all her beloved family including her husband and children. She's the only one that remains.' The woman in question stood up to be shown, then sat down again. Then Karmen spoke. Karmen is a civil rights lawyer from L.A., and this is her eighth trip as delegation leader. She interpreted both ways. She gave her name and said she was from Ventura, California. One by one the delegation members introduced themselves until finally I stood and gave my name. 'I'm from London England; our prime minister, Margaret Thatcher, supports Ronald Reagan's policies, but there are millions of ordinary people in Great Britain who do not support Margaret Thatcher.' Of course the mothers had never heard of England nor Margaret Thatcher, to them I was an American and that's what mattered. There was a hiatus, then a mother rose and said, 'When the Contras have killed your sons, it's not easy to repeat what happened, how they were killed, but we think, if we tell you, you will denounce it when you return to your country.' Another woman said, 'In Nicaragua although we are very poor nobody dies of hunger. We have been hearing that in your country people have been dying of cold and starvation. The campesino children here have a

chance to go to university, and that's the result of our struggle.' Catha, the youngest delegation member, stood and spoke in halting Spanish. 'I'm a student from Los Angeles, and I'm very heartened to hear what the mother said about the children of campesinos getting to university. I think your health and literacy campaigns are a model to the world, and when I get back to the States I'm certainly going to tell them about the courage of you people here. I'm ashamed to be an American, and if I could lay down my life for you like so many of your children have I would gladly lay down my . . .' Here she had to stop, overcome with emotion. The mothers applauded her. After several more speeches, a mother stood up. She was about forty and frail. She wore a tee-shirt with a picture of the Pope on the front. 'Would you tell the student not to cry? She has to be strong like us. It's the only way we'll win, through strength and solidarity. We are thankful that you people are here today; it means so much to us. We hope that you will go back and show your solidarity to Ronald Reagan.' I had the impression throughout the meeting that the mothers expected us to tell Ronald Reagan personally to get his ass out of Nicaragua. Of course this is a country where it's possible to do that with your president. Once a week Daniel Ortega goes to a barrio for a gruelling (and televised) 'Face the People', when for up to three hours he fields questions and brickbats direct from the electorate. The meeting with the mothers was moving, and it brought home to me how vital it is for a bunch of ordinary Americans to express solidarity with the victims of their leader's murderous policies, however remote they might be from his ear.

That night we stayed in a hotel way up in the mountains close to the border. Here were monkeys and parrots and big insects. I caught one for my son Henry. The beast was too fat for a matchbox, so I emptied a box of sticking plasters and put it in that. This I placed in the padded pocket of my camera bag.

The co-operative farm was the highlight of my trip. This is where I would get the perspective I needed to give edge to the play, since it is set on just such a farm. The president, Miguel, showed us round. The place was primitive. He showed us a plough carved from the branch of a tree. The share was a plate of steel bolted to the front. This would be pulled by two oxen. The only other tool was the omnipresent machete. Of course they use pesticides. Do they wear protective clothing? 'We don't have it'. We saw a mountain side being cleared for cultivation. I asked Miguel what they planned growing here. 'Potatoes, beetroots, carrots, coffee.' The co-operative functions democratically, so a

campesino who wants to join will propose himself, and the members have a meeting to discuss whether they should let him join or not.

'Would you ever turn a person away?'

'If we know somebody's a drunk and not likely to work, we won't let that person join.'

'What about an ex-Contra, would he get in?'

'There have been counter-revolutionaries who have asked to join certain co-operatives, and they've been let in. Under the law of amnesty any Contra who was a campesino before he was a Contra is entitled to land.'

The qualification here is important. Many Contras are unwilling abductees from farms, taken across the border and trained by CIA advisors. When these Contras escape or are captured, they get amnesty, but there is a distinction to be made between this kind of Contra and the hardened ex-national guardsman who would be ideologically committed to the destruction of the Revolution. These are incarcerated in an open prison (few bother to escape) taught a trade and rehabilitated slowly for their own good as much as society's, because they are despised by the Nicaraguans.

'What other officials are there besides the president?'

'There are those responsible for production, organisation, education, defence and finance. They are all elected at a meeting of the whole co-operative. Everybody has a vote. The co-operative is self-governing. We make all our own decisions.'

'How often are the officers elected?'

'It depends. If you have someone in office who's not doing their job you replace them.'

'How?'

'We have a meeting and say, we are going to replace you.'

'This is an ordinary campesino, who will tell someone to their face?'

'Of course.'

'Why are people dismissed?'

'It's not as though they're doing anything wrong. They just weren't performing up to capacity. Like if they're late with plans. Everybody has to co-ordinate the harvests, and if they're late with the plans they're not going to comply with their job responsibilities. It's not as if they're grasping or corrupt.'

The co-operative had a small schoolroom. Miguel showed us inside his house, which had two rooms with an oven in one corner. There was a bench to sit on and a hammock slung across the main room. That's all there was in the way of furniture. No

ornaments. Outside, a rocking chair. There were barbed wire washing lines across the square in front of the co-operative's meeting hut, and against one wall there was a single tap over a stone basin. A spruce woman with her hair tied tight back in a bun was washing beans. Her fingernails were painted with red varnish.

I spoke at length with two old campesinos, who were leaning over the balcony of the hut waiting for a lift to Jinotega. I knew these characters well. I've met a thousand like them in the Molesworth Arms, Wadebridge, on a market day. I'm not here to find characters for my play. The most common question I'm asked as a playwright is, 'Who did you base such-and-such a character on?' and it's a mis-question because the answer is no one. No one character is based on a single human being. All characters are composites of many people the author might know intimately or hardly at all. The nuts and bolts of a character are the common roots of all humanity. Scratch a Nicaraguan farmer and a Cornish farmer and you'll find the only difference between them is the width of their hat brims.

Inside the hut was a consignment of wellington boots from Russia. Outside was a rusty fifty gallon drum of DDT – from Surrey, England.

Friday 6th May

We spent the morning in the company of a Miskito Indian representative from the Atlantic Coast. There are about 500,000 inhabitants in the eastern half of the country, which is more or less cut off from the west. The language and culture of the Indians are different, and Somoza didn't bother with them. As a result the Triumph didn't mean much to them, and when the Sandinistas tried to coerce them into the Revolution, the results were a disaster. The Indians' leader, one Steadman Fagoth, joined the Contras, and many Miskitos fled across the border to Honduras. However the Sandinistas have admitted their mistakes and have ceded to the Miskito demands for autonomy.

Then on to the Ministry for Internal Affairs and a meeting with a charming civil servant, who told us plenty but not much

we didn't know already. In the afternoon Roger and the Americans went to the dollar store. Karmen's friend Laura came over to the hotelito. Laura is a sociologist working for the Ministry of Agriculture and the University. She's spent the last five years studying the effect of agrarian reform on the campesinos. I asked her if I could come tomorrow to visit a group of independent farmers, but she said no, they're sensitive to outsiders. Apparently a few of these farmers have to fiddle their quotas to get by, and they are suspicious of strangers.

It's 11.30pm. Roger and I have been talking to a woman we've seen round the hotelito but never spoken to. Her name is Herita Stern, she's a theatre worker and a famous TV actress in her native Uruguay. She teaches theatre to actors in the eight theatre groups in the Nicaraguan Army. She did *Romeo and Juliet* and two scenes from *Macbeth*, the murder of Duncan and the handwashing scene. The significance of *R & J* is obvious given the average age in the army is seventeen. The explanation for doing the *Macbeth* scenes is to dramatise the treachery in the Contra camps between Bermudez (Macbeth) and Calero (Duncan). Herita's husband was thirteen years in a Uruguayan gaol, and she herself was a political prisoner for six. She said while she was in gaol she had her identity stripped from her. Her hair was cropped short and she was known only by a number and a colour. To keep sane she and her fellow prisoners formed a clandestine theatre group. Of course they were allowed no texts, but, having been an actress and director, Herita found she could remember whole plays. When they didn't know the words they made them up. They gave performances of Lorca and Strindberg to secret gatherings. She had spent a lifetime in theatre and TV in Uruguay, rising to stardom and playing in anything that made her money before she realised that 'theatre does not exist unless it is a social or political act'. She knew no English, so she spoke Italian to Roger. It was novel having him interpret.

Saturday 7th May

5.30pm. Today was our first day with absolutely bugger all to do. Rick and the Americans have gone and the place is empty without them. Roger and I took a walk

over to the ASTC, and Marguerite (Noel's associate) was there (Noel is in New York learning French). She was polite but unhelpful. She said she might go to the beach on Sunday, and if she does she'll take us with her. Bumped into Jose, a San Dominican lawyer who has a responsible job with the New York District Attorney. Jose quotes Shakespeare and Ogden Nash whilst groping his girlfriend. He was off to the beach but despite heavy hints from Roger he didn't offer us a lift. We tried phoning some people we knew, but they must all be at the beach. I lay on the bed all day reading. I couldn't even summon the energy to write this diary. I slept a lot and began to think of home. There are some people to whom travel is an imperative and others for whom it is hell. I fall into the latter category.

My conviction that the play should be strictly about campesinos is waning. Nicaragua is a young country, inexperienced in everything except the art of war. Youth is a vital ingredient of any play about Nicaragua. The greatest concentration of youth here is in the army. So perforce the play should be about the army. This would mean quite a serious re-write. Roger shrugs when I mention this. I know Roger: a shrug is a strongly affirmative act. He won't push me any more, but I can see he's hinting at major re-writes. I steer him back to the play. 'It has a cartoon quality which I like,' I say. No response. 'But the dual-plot structure would buckle if we loaded it with any more material.' Roger nods, he agrees with that. Roger's keen there should be a debate about the nature of democracy, and that the problem of acute shortages of everything from toilet rolls to tractors should feature. I'm quite happy to abandon the play as it stands, but there's one scene which I think is too good to lose and that's the murder scene. The one where Emilio has to watch his father being killed. There is an American Civilian Military Advisor in this scene, who orders the killing but doesn't carry it out. That honour is left to Sanchez, the Contra who takes Emilio back to Honduras. Sanchez doesn't know that the man he killed is Emilio's father (neither does anyone incidentally, until Emilio tells us at the end of the scene). Roger agrees with me that it's a good scene and it has several bona fides. One, it's about youth; two, it places the blame for the war squarely on the shoulders of Uncle Sam.

Sunday 8th May

Laura came round with a paper on 'Agricultural Policy and the Campesino,' which she wanted back, so I spent an hour dictating it into the tape-recorder. Roger dropped heavy beach-hints, but she seemed to be the one person in the whole of Managua who wasn't spending Sunday by the sea.

After lunch Roger and I sparred with the play. We're both agreed the murder scene should start the play, but that means ditching the pesticides scene because it precedes it chronologically. One could play with time and have the murder scene start the first half of the play, tell the Honduras story straight through and then go back to the village after the interval, starting with the pesticides scene. This is how I wrote an earlier play, *The Body*; with great effect.

The only Honduran scene I would fight for is the 'fat girl/thin girl' scene. This takes place in the camp at night when Sanchez has lined up two prostitutes for himself and Emilio. It's too good a scene to jettison, but Roger asks what it's about. I'm not sure. I think it's about the American Dream. This is not apparent to Roger from the scene as it stands, and he suggests I elaborate it along that line. This brings me on to Icaza. Icaza is the Contra in charge of the political education of new recruits. When he was directing the reading, Max Stafford-Clark had pointed out to me that Icaza is the least successful character in the play, but I hadn't been able to improve on him much at the time. When a character doesn't sparkle for me, I have two choices: ditch him or take him off-stage. This can be effective, and I can see ways of mentioning him in the American Dream.

Roger hasn't said as much but I have a suspicion he's terrified of the play turning into a worthy 'revolutionary tractor' story. I have this fear too. Particularly if we overload the play with our new material. The pressure on me to drop the campesino strand altogether is becoming very great, and the attraction even greater. Sanchez is the best character in the play, followed closely by Emilio. Emilio is a good foil for Sanchez; they make a great double-act. And I'm on home ground when I'm writing these two because I have two sons of my own. They are both younger than Sanchez and Emilio, but we are born with our emotional equipment intact. Growing up is a matter of hiding and controlling our feelings, and Emilio and Sanchez are still kids in

this respect, because they haven't acquired these adult tricks.

Talk of abandoning the campesino strand has filled me with guilt. I must not yet cast them into the wilderness.

After an early dinner I went back to reading. Roger interrupted me at eight, and we joined Boris, the Russian translator, and his wife, Irena, for a drink on the patio. After an uneventful day we spent a quiet evening communicating with these two soft-spoken Russians in broken English on glasnost, theatre, Sandino – practically everything under the sun. They were celebrating the Great Patriotic Victory – the end of the Second World War, in which twenty million of their fellow-countrymen died. We solemnly drank a toast to Winston Churchill, which apparently is something all Russians do on this day every year. Roger and I were anxious to talk about the changes which are happening behind the Iron Curtain, and they were keen to tell us. They are confident the Berlin Wall will be a memory by the end of the decade. I suggested that the end of the Cold War will be seen as a victory for the West and a vindication of all our posturing, and Irena took this to be my opinion. It's difficult to explain to someone with scant English that what you are saying is not what you believe yourself to be the truth, and I'm not sure I was entirely successful in clearing up the misunderstanding. I told them my play, *The Dead Monkey*, is at this moment being translated into Russian and a production is planned in 1990. So we agreed to meet in Leningrad.

Monday 9th May

7pm. Today we visited Alan Bolt – Renaissance man: ecologist, agronomist, Marxist, dissident, playwright, producer, director, architect – at his hacienda north of Matagalpa in the most fertile region of Nicaragua. We talked for an hour in his wooden house, which reminds me of my place in Kent. Bolt's grandfather was an Englishman who made his fortune in Nicaragua from the railways. He took us round his estate of about eighteen manzanas (about 100 acres) and showed us his experiments in the cultivation of new fruits and vegetables, his erosion halting planting schemes, his non-chemical pesticides, and the bamboo

project. In this area alone they are going to have to build 50,000 new houses in the next five years. With the war and the embargo, building materials are in short supply. To avoid cutting down hardwood, Alan is experimenting with bamboo – it grows fast, needs no seasoning, just curing, is flexible and versatile. The A-frame living units Alan has built bear this out. Everything from the floor joists to the roof is made of bamboo. I'm envious at the ease with which the stuff grows here; I'd love to be able to build a bamboo shed.

Alan's theatre group performed two rumbustious scenes from one of his plays: much music and a cartoon-like depiction of Nicaragua's tortured history. America is the villain of the piece. The French and English come in for scrutiny, but after 1850 it's Uncle Sam all the way, from Vanderbilt through the United Fruit Company up to Reagan. 'Banana Republic' is a derogatory term but it was the Americans who created the cash-crop economy from which the name derives. Alan's company tours the barrios and villages of Nicaragua with a repertoire of three or four home-made plays. The actors are young and vigorous, and I was left exhausted.

We travelled up with John Carlin, the correspondent for *The Independent*, and his girlfriend, Maria, whose brother, a Sandinista, was killed three months after the Triumph. She's researching a book about the mystery surrounding his death. Her family were all Somocistas except for her and her brother, who were revolutionaries. The split family syndrome is a common, tragic occurrence. And there was Abbie, who arranged the trip. She had worked with film director Alex Cox on his movie, *Walker*, and co-produced the Oscar Cabezas film, *Fire From the Mountain*. When we set off from Managua in John's car, I thought at last we'd get some sensible English driving, but apparently journalists are trained to drive fast to get to the next assignment. We reached Matagalpa in record time.

Tomorrow we fly home and I've been packing. I opened the padded pocket of the camera bag and discovered that the beetle I picked up for my son is alive. Not only that, it's managed to scratch its way through the plaster box and halfway out of the pocket. This beetle deserves its liberty. I took it out to Ben Linder Park and released it. The park was empty and dark. It was 11pm, and I recalled how busy the place had been on the day of our arrival. I took a little walk around, probably treading on the newly liberated beetle, and turned down the road, past Ortega's house and onto the main highway into the centre of town. I walked till gone midnight and then walked back. I had

no fear walking the streets of this capital city. When I returned to the hotelito, Roger had half a bottle of rum to finish and a couple of cans of coke, so we took them back to the park and drank them.

The question on everybody's lips is: why? Why us? Why is Ronald Reagan fighting this war? Why are we such a threat? Why does he hate us? Nobody seems to know the answer. There's no doubt that the Sandinistas are a force for good, not only in Nicaragua but in Central America. They have the interests of the ordinary people at heart. Everybody says this. I've not met one nun, one nurse, one priest, one teacher, one doctor, one campesino, one journalist who denies it. Yes, the Sandinistas are a threat to American business interests because now, instead of all profits from cash-crops such as cotton, coffee etc. flowing out of the country straight into US corporate banks, the money stays put in Nicaragua. US big business has plundered Central America for so long, maybe it feels it has a divine right to the region's wealth?

There's no doubt in anybody's mind who's fighting this war: Ronald Reagan. Whatever else the play says, it should say that. It should also show how cynical it is to have Nicaraguans fighting their own people. At least when Sandino was around, the Yanks had the honesty to put their own marines into combat. There's also no doubt that we are in a Catholic country, and, with three priests on the National Directorate, the Sandinistas can hardly be accused of propounding a 'godless creed'.

The play should begin with an atrocity (the murder) and end with a bright ray of hope. Ronald Reagan goes at the end of this year and his successor, even if it's George Bush, won't share his obsessive hatred of Sandismo. There's a ceasefire on at the moment, and talks with the Contras, but the trade embargo has to be lifted. Whoever said sanctions don't work should come to Nicaragua: the country is on its knees. Certainly the people's spirit has not been broken, but there's a relentlessness about Reagan's onslaught – political, economical and military – which will in time cause the Nicaraguans to shorten their vision and start blaming those closer to home for the appalling grind of everyday life. It's a young country, and when those who are not of an age to remember Somoza become the majority, Ronald Reagan's chickens will start to come home to roost.

The Pope also has a lot to answer for, I reckon. When he visited Managua recently on one of his tours, a member of the Sandinista National Directorate who's a priest (Ernesto Cardinale, I'm not sure) knelt to kiss the Pope's ring and the

pontiff withdrew his hand. The Pope makes no secret of whose side he's on, and his attitude to the Sandinistas must make Catholics, devout and lapsed, despair.

Roger and I kicked the Pope about in Ben Linder Park into the small hours and discussed a title for the play, the new version which starts with the murder and tells the story of Emilio and Sanchez. *Kick the Pope*? Too abrasive. *Kiss the Pope* – that's better. Too short, needs another syllable. My mother used to say that Laurence Olivier was a successful actor because he had the right number of syllables in his name for people to remember it. *Kissing the Pope*. Maybe.