

THE BIG ISSUE

SOUTH WEST

COMING UP FROM THE STREETS

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LEO BAXENDALE

MINNIE THE MINX'S MAKER

EXCLUSIVE: TRACEY EMIN

THE BAD GIRL OF BRIT ART



ESSENTIAL LISTINGS
SOUTH WEST NEWS
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MINNIE THE MINX © DC THOMPSON & CO LTD



WITH TALES
OF ANARCHY,
CROSS-DRESSING
TEACHERS AND
BANGERS AND
MASH, LEO
BAXENDALE'S
DRAWINGS HAVE
INFLUENCED
GENERATIONS.
BY JANET SCOTT

COMIC GENIUS

"Once I saw a giant painting of Plug on the side of a house near Wigan. He completely dominated the landscape." Leo Baxendale – creator of the immortal Minnie The Minx and The Bash Street Kids – is describing a geographical scene, but he could equally be talking about the cultural landscape. A few years ago for the seventh anniversary exhibition of the Sergeant Pepper LP cover, professional artists were asked to nominate a new set of 20th century icons. Hundreds were nominated, but Minnie the Minx

was elected, becoming an international star – right up there with Elvis, Monroe and Ghandi.

Although Baxendale himself is not a household name in the way his characters are, any cartoonist will tell you that his influence is legendary. Steve Bell, political cartoonist for *The Guardian* heaps praise on him: "There's nothing to touch his work today. He'll always be a hero of mine."

Baxendale is wholly candid about his ambition. "I set out from the start to dominate the

comic market," he says. At twenty-two he was drawing for a local paper, but already had his eyes on the national market. "I'd read Dennis the Menace in my brother's *Beano* and I knew I could climb on board." Soon after, in 1953, he was employed by DC Thompson, publishers of *The Beano*. "We'd play Keepie-Up in the office... You'd make a ball from leftover lumps of *The Dundee Courier*, sew in a piece of tweed then nut it, kneel it, elbow it, and kick it around the place. As the ball was flying so were the

ideas for next week's issue." Think bounding, sprawling, leaping Beano-ish comic body positions and it begins to make sense.

As far as comedy goes, Baxendale's work is more in the spirit of Eddie Izzard than Ben Elton. He says he's uncomfortable with practical joke humour "or anything tainted with spite." But what about the kids pulling down dopey Teacher's trousers then? He gives me a verbal slap: "No. Look closely. My comic scenes can't happen in physical

reality, they're a surreal comic world of their own. And I never drew to please children, by the way. If an idea made me laugh aloud I'd take the drawing to *The Beano* subs. If they laughed too, I knew it worked.

"I wanted to create something with the most comic possibilities. Bash is a surreal world all of its own. I never base my drawings on real life - I did things that can only happen in a drawing. Things occurred by chance, or cause and effect - disaster was visited on characters, though they were gormlessly oblivious of where their actions would leave them.

"Once I drew a set where the Bash Street Kids thought they'd make pots of money training a gang of pigeons to deliver messages. Smiffy was done up as a hawk to cow and exploit the work force. But the pigeons made a mess of it. Realising their capitalist venture had failed and they'd lost their invested pocket money, the kids made pies of the pigeons and ate them.

"A particular feature of my drawings was leaving off at a point where something else was about to happen." He points to a copy of the strip on the table. Teacher is holding forth to a class of chimps. "These chimps are the best behaved class I've ever had," reads Teacher's speech bubble, the chimps grinning, daft but angelic. But closer inspection reveals one dodgy chimp bending down ready to plunge an explosive device.

George Moonie, who founded *The Beano* in 1938, believed that moral "naughtiness must be punished", but decided to indulge Baxendale's non-authoritarian creative vision because it was of its time and was pushing up sales. Nevertheless, commentators have tried to cram Baxendale's work to fit the 'reward-punishment' creed - baddies get



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PREVIOUS PAGE: LEO BAXENDALE AND MINNIE THE MINX
 THIS PAGE: ABOVE: MINNIE REFUSES TO GO TO BED
 BELOW: FE, FI, FO AND FUM - FOUR OF THE ORIGINAL BASH STREET CHARACTERS BAXENDALE WROTE OUT OF THE COMIC
 TOP LEFT: LITTLE PLUM ON THE WAR PATH
 BOTTOM RIGHT: THE BASH STREET KIDS GIVE TEACHER A LIFT IN HIS CAR

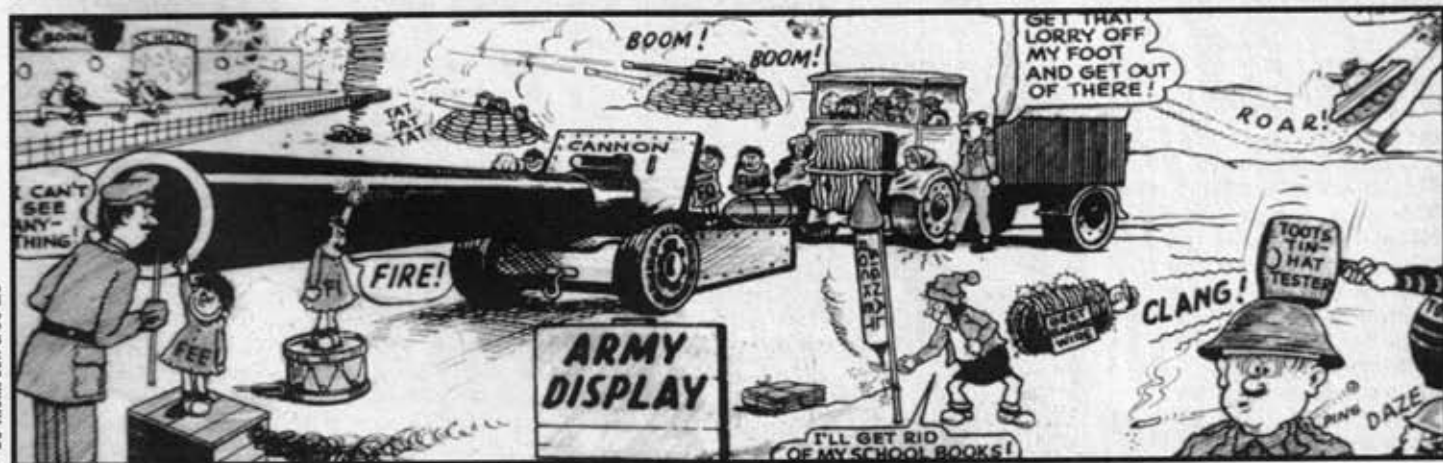
their come-uppance with 'whacks' and the goodies come out on top with a 'big feed'. But Baxendale insists he only used pies and massive bangers and mash pics for comic effect. "The idea of reward was alien to me," he says.

When the makers of a 1987 Arena documentary insisted that punishment and reward were central to Baxendale's work, he trawled through back copies of *The Beano* in the British Library, to prove that out of 424 weekly Bash Street sets there were only 72 picturing whacks. He claims Arena wilfully plucked pictures out of context to fit their theory. But they are only one among a host of groups to have subverted Baxendale's work. Riot Grrls (feminism with 'BIFF, WALLOP, take that, YOU CREEP!') adopted The Minx - her whirlwind legs giving politico magazines and agitprop cards a radical rush. When I ask if he's a feminist, Baxendale says: "Probably, but I didn't know it then. But yes, it was always my intention to base Minnie on an Amazon warrior."

Another of Baxendale's creations, Grimley Fiendish, influenced The Damned single *Grimley Fiendish*. But though punk knew Baxendale, the man himself says "I was too busy drawing to notice punk."

Anarchists, too, have made use of his drawings. "In fact everything about your drawings suggests you're an anarchist," I say. "No I'm not really," he responds. "I'm more like water seeping into the woodwork and rotting it."

Baxendale left *The Beano* suddenly in 1962. "The collision between the intensity of creation and scale of production was becoming unbearable. The more profitable my work was, the more pressure there was to produce. I was in my twenties,



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school, and says he doesn't see the artist as special. "I believe we're all artists, it's just that with the demands of making a living we don't always get the chance to develop it."

Regular comic fairs are held in Bristol. The next two are at St John's Hall, Brislington on Saturday July 31 and at Jury's Hotel, Princes Street on Sunday August 8. The first British Comic Strip Festival will be held in Baxendale's home town, Stroud, in December 2000. A permanent exhibition of Baxendale's 'Beano' drawings will open in 2001 also in Stroud.

strong, with a robust mind, but with 52 *Beano* weeks in a year, it was still a drain." The American cartoon strip market chased him with the lure of treble his income for a fraction of the work, but he let the opportunity slide out of love for his own comic characters. (Similarly, although original *Beano* drawings are now worth a mint, he still gives private collectors the elbow.) "I was

doing full page Minnie, Little Plum, Three Bears and Bash. Then a page of Banana Bunch for *The Beezer*, as well as doing work for Christmas annuals. I was working seven days a week and eventually into the night." Puff, heave, wheeze. "I came down with pneumonia."

Baxendale's vocation finally took its toll on him in the mid-Nineties, when he had to give up

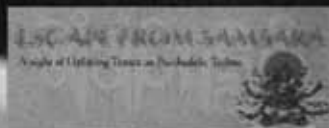
drawing altogether because of eyestrain. But he insists he's not upset about it. "I'm not sentimental. Steve Bell said: 'It's terrible, Leo, you're an artist, you have to draw.' But just because I'm an artist doesn't mean I have to do it." He didn't go to art



Mr C and Layo*
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Sham 69
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Amnesia
Juno Rector*
Mad Iccy
The Secret
Solray
Terry Francis
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The Dub Pistols
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The Selector
Bus Station Loonies
Quespasa
Lee Davey
Jeep Grizz
Elfin
Hamish McDoodle
Katie Kios Krew
PAIN
DJ Stuff
Angels Versus Aliens
King Kooba
The Rit
Charlie Hall
Andy M and Chris Coco
Mix Master Morris
(Rilija tubes)
Slack Babbath
Essen
Vince Lee Combo
Two Bones and A Pick
Blacksmith
East of Ealing

Devious
Karma
Ozric Tentacles
Mojah
Daddy Teacha & Racial Unity
Fly Casual
Madame Zu
The Saint
Max Pashn
Sunfish
Ollie Childs
Xian
Tim Webster
Holy Ghost
Blue Angels
Tye
Neil Bennet
Daryl
Dusk QED
Dolly Bird
John Weatherby



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Dark Marc
Curby
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