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something about it was intoxicating for him.”

Screenwriter Cary points out that judgments about the morality of Philby's actions became less clear-cut to them as they got deeper into the drama. “I personally felt, ‘It’s bad, but he has made his political choices.’ There’s nowhere it says you have to be morally in support of what your government does.”

Murphy agrees: “What Elliott did as an intelligence officer will have led to the deaths of the enemy in some capacity. That’s what espionage is. There are very real consequences – it’s just that Philby was doing it for the other side.”

After the defection of the spies Guy Burgess and Donald Maclean to Moscow in 1951, thanks to a tip-off from Philby, the latter came under intense suspicion and had to resign from MI6. But in the mid-1950s, the establishment closed ranks around Philby.

I wonder if Pearce thinks the establishment would behave the same way today, if (for instance) MI6 had serious concerns about Boris Johnson’s private meeting with a former KGB agent in 2018 at a party in Italy. “Yeah, I reckon so,” he says. “When you look at a sort of protected species, like the upper class, that need to maintain their survival, they will keep pushing their objective for as long as they can. Obviously in a more transparent society, it’s a harder task than perhaps it was for those in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. But the old-boy network will do everything it can to breathe forever.”

Maxwell Martin suggests that if an important establishment figure was revealed to be a security risk today, it would be brushed under the carpet. “It happens all the time,” she says. Lewis concurs. “There would be a hearing so justice could be seen to be done and then they’d be cleared,” he says. “It happens time and time again.” Maxwell Martin thinks a Russian connection would have played out differently if it had been Jeremy Corbyn: “I think they’d have thrown him under the bus.”

I ask about the decision to introduce a fictional character, Maxwell Martin’s Lily, into what is such a closely observed, historical narrative. It offered the most interesting way to tell the story, according to Cary. “It’s about friendships, about espionage, but it’s also a lot about class and about privilege and power,” he explains. Introducing Lily, a woman, was like putting the “broader class of British people”, who were subject to that power, into the context with him, Cary says.

After his escape by sea to Moscow, Philby was given an apartment, but he was distrusted by the Russians and lived for a long time under virtual house arrest. Was his exile a fitting punishment for this cricket-loving, thoroughly English snob? “I think this is what the series shows so brilliantly and heartbreakingly,” says Maxwell Martin. “When you see that unfold, you just think, it’s like some kind of hell.”

*‘A Spy Among Friends’ begins on ITVX on Dec 8*

# Rebuilding the priceless collection that shattered a dynasty

A bitter inheritance battle between Michael Butler’s children led to his hoard of Ming porcelain being split up. *Etan Smallman* on the attempts to restore it

It was the finest collection of 17th-century Chinese porcelain anywhere in the world. But Sir Michael Butler’s beloved hoard of late Ming and early Qing pots also proved to be a multimillion-pound bomb at the heart of his family – detonating immediately after the patriarch’s death and shattering the clan’s relationships into tiny pieces.

Sir Michael, who became Britain’s permanent representative in Brussels and a key adviser to Margaret Thatcher, began “pot hunting” in 1961, when he was a diplomat at the Foreign Office.

By the end of his life, he had amassed 850 pieces, thought to be worth tens of millions of pounds, and had put the deeply unfashionable Transitional Period of Chinese ceramics on the map. So prized was his collection that he turned a squash court behind his grand house in Mapperton, Dorset, into a 350 sq m, seven-room museum that became a magnet for global collectors and curators.

However, just a month after his funeral in 2014, his two youngest children, Charles, now 56, and Katharine, 55, began receiving “a barrage” of legal letters from their sister and brother, Caroline, 70, and James, 57. The eldest pair wanted to claim their quarter shares of the pots, but the youngest were determined to honour their father’s wishes and keep his legacy intact.

Previously, Sir Michael had invited all four children to join a

partnership that would control part of the collection, on the condition that all the items be kept together for at least 10 years after his death. The elder siblings declined the offer, which left the younger pair to take on their curatorial role.

It culminated in a very public slanging match in the High Court that hinged on case law barely used since 1925 – one dispute had involved a family fighting over a three-piece suite. Charles and Katharine lost the case, and were left paying 80 per cent of the legal fees, which totalled £1 million. The three UK-based siblings (Charles lives in Prague) also had to pay a hefty capital gains tax bill on top when the collection was divided

**‘I’m not sure you came to terms with the fact your father does not love you and prefers 800 pots’**

up during agonising turn-taking in the museum, an event Katharine described as “the most devastating moment of my life”.

The brother and sister now accept it was “a stupid thing to do” to allow the case to go to court. Charles admits he thought they would probably lose, but felt they had to do the “reasonable

maximum” to try to prevent the “cultural vandalism”. Katharine says the lawyers “made both sides feel thoroughly outraged and willing to speed onwards”.

And she says that their father – a consummate negotiator, who secured Britain’s 1984 European Community’s budget rebate – “would have been utterly disgusted and disappointed with us because he was someone who really believed in compromise. That we should end up like this is desperate.”

But that was not the end of the story. The younger brother and sister were determined to see a phoenix rise from the ashes, and have been slowly filling in the gaps with auction purchases from around the world. When I visited the museum in 2017, it appeared to have been ransacked, with half of the shelves sitting bare.

Now it is “looking really sensational”, says Katharine, and finally being officially reopened on December 14 (the “Family” having been pointedly removed from the sign that once read “Butler Family Collection”). The legal drama served only to boost its reputation and it is still the largest group of its kind on the planet. Katharine will be giving monthly private tours for a £5 deposit, which can be redeemed as a discount on her book about the ceramics, *Leaping The Dragon Gate*. There is no glass, and visitors can handle any priceless pot they want.

The period – between the closing of the imperial kilns in 1608, after the Ming dynasty had been bankrupted by civil war, and their reopening 73 years later – saw an eruption of Thatcherite-style free enterprise and creativity. Released from the constraints of the court, the potters and painters of the porcelain capital of Jingdezhen, in Jiangxi province, experimented with new styles, shapes, glazes and narrative scenes. Katharine was thrilled recently to discover a fingerprint on one of their most important pots, which revealed the horse had been painted using the artist’s thumb. “It’s absolutely amazing,” she enthuses. “A few weeks ago, I had the Chinese curator of the Metropolitan Museum in New York, who especially came down to Dorset. And he was so moved by seeing that.”

Yesterday, Charles and Katharine added another 20 pieces to the collection – by buying them back from their brother James. In a sign of the low ebb their



China crisis: Katharine, James, Charles and Caroline, with their father Michael

relationship has reached, the duo had to do so on the open market, via Christie’s in Hong Kong, where 60 of James’s pots sold for £2.3million. They were outbid on the most expensive item, a rare copper-red dragon vase that went for almost £650,000, five times its upper estimate (Sir Michael got it for just £325 in 1968). Katharine says she burst into tears when they won a pot her father had loved, a large blue-and-white Shunzhi sleeve vase with naturalistic painting of three birds at play on blossoming flower branches.

But the sale meant the pair had to stump up extra tax shipping and import charges, auction house commission and the premium now commanded for any pots owned by their father – even though they say they have spent years offering to buy directly from their brother and sister at above market rate.

“So, in all respects, it’s ridiculous,” says Katharine. “The

# Political drama that is its own worst enemy

Theatre

Baghdaddy

Royal Court, London SW1

★★★★★

By Dominic Cavendish

Never mind the war currently raging in the heart of Europe – hoary, divisive questions about the West’s handling of the threat posed by Saddam Hussein are thrust into the spotlight anew by *Baghdaddy*.

Jasmine Naziha Jones’s bold playwriting debut is the Royal Court’s final main-stage offering of 2022. The ambition of the piece is laudable enough and is allied to its affection. Jones pays homage to her Iraqi father, who came to England in 1980 as a teenager and looked on in fretful concern and growing grief as the Gulf War and then the Iraq War took their toll back home. Her approach isn’t heart-on-sleeve earnest but knowingly impish, cartoonish and childlike.

What’s clear, in the first instance, is that as a performer, she shows huge talent: Jones plays her fictionalised self Darlee, initially evoked aged eight ingeniously quizzing her pa (a sweetly shy Philip Arditti) about his far-off homeland as she snack at McDonald’s in party hats.

She’s especially funny embodying the Saudi Arabian buddy, who helps her dad negotiate the peculiarities (with hideous racism to boot) of his newly adopted country, in a 1980s flashback sequence.

But too much biographical and political detail goes missing in action. And I was unperpetuated and often irritated by the device of a clownish chorus of three “spiritual companions”, on hand to bring out Darlee’s ingrained pain and

belated adult understanding. They prance about an imposing flight of a dozen steps – multi-rolling and even mock-controlling the central duo’s movements. That mode of playground taunting even turns bloodily torturous at one point, with visceral bomb-blast noises contradicting the cardboard cut-out vibe.

As a provocative, panto-ish alienation effect, approaching Iraqi suffering as a suitable case for comic treatment, and thereby emphasising the dislocations of geography and the generation gulf too, the tactic is increasingly self-defeating. It’s just too showily obtrusive and simplistic.

A broadside on the human consequences of Western sanctions, and our complacency about that, provides a shaming

**I was irritated by the device of a clownish chorus of three ‘spiritual companions’**

sting in the tale – but it would carry more heft if other crucial context (Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait, say) were duly factored in.

Jones has revealed that she was inspired by Sabrina Mahfouz’s scolding effort *A History of Water* in the Middle East, seen at the Royal Court Upstairs in 2019. That makes sense. And it would have made sense, too, if the capable director Millie Bhatia had premiered this in the smaller space. With this work left to fend for itself in the exposing main house, the power vacuum – as with Iraq post-invasion – is all too clear.

*Until Dec 17. Tickets: 020 7565 5000; royalcourttheatre.com*

not a part of them that sees the collection as a poisoned chalice that they wish had never come into the family?

“It’s a good question,” says Charles, laughing heartily. But he insists their overriding feeling is one of “undiminished” pride at their father’s cultural achievement. “It does represent a sort of monument to him.”

As Katharine says, beaming: “There’s no question – he’s the rock star of 17th-century Chinese porcelain.”

*To book a place on a tour of the museum from Dec 14, visit [butlercollection.com](http://butlercollection.com)*



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Pottery class: Katharine shows a tour group around the Butler museum in Dorset



Sting in the tale: Jasmine Naziha Jones’s debut play *Baghdaddy*