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# FORTY-FIVE MINUTES THAT CHANGED THE WORLD: THE SEPTEMBER DOSSIER, BRITISH DRAMA, AND THE NEW JOURNALISM

GEORGE POTTER

September 24, 2002. Just over a year after the attacks of 9/11 and just under two weeks after US President George W. Bush implored the United Nations to take a stand against Iraq, the British Labor government released a dossier analyzing Iraq's weapons of mass destruction capabilities. On its surface, the dossier presented no new information of significance, as much of the intelligence collected was culled from United Nations reports and other public documents, though, as former *Sunday Telegraph* executive editor Con Coughlin writes, "British intelligence had never before been asked to produce a public document, and the authority of British intelligence had never before been called upon to justify government action" (2006, 245). As it turns out, this public justification would not go as British intelligence would have liked because of two primary problems. The first problem came when the dossier claimed that Iraq had sought "significant quantities of uranium from Africa"—a claim that would cause much debate in the United States after Bush repeated it in his 2003 State of the Union Address—and the second came with the assertion that Iraq's Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) could be ready for attack within forty-five

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minutes (Blair 2002). The latter of these allegations was particularly stressed in Britain because Prime Minister Tony Blair highlighted it in his foreword to the dossier, writing, "The document discloses that his [Saddam Hussein's] military planning allows for some of the WMD to be ready within 45 minutes of an order to use them" (2002). Interestingly, though, Coughlin notes in *American Ally*, his analysis of the relationship between Blair and the American presidency, that what the dossier actually claimed Iraq could do with those WMD was more nuanced:

> What it said, in two separate and distinct items, was first, that "some of the WMD" could be ready "Within 45 minutes of an order to use them," and second, that Iraq was attempting to build a ballistic missile that had a range capable of hitting Cyprus, as well as a number of key American military bases in the Gulf region. At no point did the dossier say that Iraq had the capability to fit WMD warheads to its missile systems. The forty-five minute intelligence related solely to battlefield munitions, such as mortars and rockets, although this was not explained in the dossier . . . Such distinctions, however, did not seem to unduly concern Downing Street in the autumn of 2002. (Coughlin 2006, 248–49)

Nor did such distinctions concern the British press, which drew a linear connection between WMD and ballistic missiles. Nowhere was this more pronounced than at Rupert Murdoch's *The Sun*, which ran the headline, "Brits 45 Mins from Doom," along with a photo of tourists at a beach resort in Cyprus and the lead, "BRITISH servicemen and tourists in Cyprus could be annihilated by germ warfare missiles launched by Iraq, it was revealed yesterday" (Pascoe-Watson 2003). Though *The Sun* hardly represents a venue for hard news, "even the distinguished defense correspondent of the *Times*, which was widely regarded as Britain's newspaper of record, offered a similar report, writing that Saddam's missiles could hit British military bases in Cyprus in just forty-five minutes" (Coughlin 2006, 248).

This turned out to be incorrect. After eight years of war in Iraq with no substantial WMD discovered, we know that Iraq would not have been able to carry out a WMD attack on Kuwait City, let alone Cyprus. In Britain, where skepticism toward the invasion of Iraq always ran high, it did not take long for the claims of the September Dossier, as it came to be known, to be dissected.[1] On May 29, 2003, Andrew Gilligan, then defense correspondent for the BBC, filed a report claiming that the dossier had been "sexed up" and that "the

government probably knew that that 45 minute figure was wrong, even before it decided to put it in," as well as arguing that Alastair Campbell, Blair's then Director of Communications and Strategy, had pushed for the inclusion of the forty-five minute claim (Gilligan 2003). In fact, Coughlin writes that "both the French and German intelligence agencies had access to material similar to that of SIS and CIA on Iraq, and government officials in Paris and Berlin were well aware that the more lurid claims being made about Saddam's WMD capability in the British press could not be substantiated by the known evidence" (Coughlin 2006, 246–47) and that

> this particular piece of intelligence was treated with a degree of derision by the CIA, where George Tenet, the director, took to calling it the "they-can-attack-in-forty-five-minutes shit." The CIA had strong reservations about the reliability of the new SIS agent who had provided the intelligence in the first place, and warned London not to rely too heavily on the new information. (Coughlin 2006, 249)

Likewise, the forty-five-minute claim, as it turns out, relied entirely on one source with no direct access to Saddam Hussein or his closest advisors. (Coughlin 2003).

Unfortunately, Gilligan's reporting also relied solely on a single Downing Street source, Minister of Defense employee and former UN weapons inspector David Kelly. Kelly claimed that his information to Gilligan did not substantiate all of Gilligan's claims about the dossier and had his name made public before committing suicide in July 2003 (Spencer 2003), around the time Robert Novak was naming Valerie Plame, setting off a parallel, though slower developing, scandal in the United States.[2] In the end, this series of events, one of many narratives surrounding the Iraq war and the intelligence that enabled the war, would lead to the August 2003 Hutton Inquiry in Britain, an attempt to explore Kelly's death that also engaged prewar intelligence and the reporting of the BBC. And it is with the Hutton inquiry that dramatic historiographies of the nascent Iraq War began to make their way to the British stage, and, in particular, the debate over the forty-five-minutes claim stood before a new judge: theatrical audiences.

The first of these engagements came through the play *Justifying War: Scenes from the Hutton Inquiry*, one of many Tribunal plays,[3] which stage trials and inquiries in Britain, performed by the Tricycle Theatre in recent years. *Justifying War*, which premiered on October 30, 2003, less than two months after the Hutton Inquiry finished

hearing testimonies, is composed entirely of direct quotes from the transcripts of the Hutton Inquiry, which was not aired on television, though limited witnesses were allowed into the galleries (Norton-Taylor 2003). Nearly a year later, on September 1, 2004, David Hare's *Stuff Happens* opened. While not nearly as focused as *Justifying War*—*Stuff Happens* takes a multinational and longer view of the lead-up to the Iraq War—Hare's play does also engage the debate over the inclusion of the intelligence about the forty-five-minutes threat (Hare 2004). Additionally, because Hare's work mixes public quotations with fictionalized scenes of backroom conversations, his play provides an alternative and complementary view of the debate showcased in *Justifying War*. Taken in tandem, the two plays provide a dynamic method to examine the works that Peter Preston, in a less than positive take on documentary theater in Britain, referred to as "the new journalism," while, at the same time, helping to establish a counter metanarrative for the representation of the failure of journalism in fictional British drama, such as in Colin Teevan's *How Many Miles to Basra?* (Preston 2004). However, as will be seen when these plays are placed into an analysis of critical historiography and ethnographic performance, as discussed by theorists such as Hayden White and Dwight Conquergood, they do not inherently solve the problems of journalistic representation, but, instead, provide an alternative slant and realm of criticism to that in more traditional forms of journalism. Through this analysis of three genres of Iraq War drama—a verbatim play, a fictionalized docudrama, and a wholly fictional play—in Britain, the specific challenges to the intersection of art and journalism can be more closely examined. Specifically, it appears that British theater, while providing a more critical venue for analyzing the narration of the Iraq War, became a parallel monolith for a singular narrative of the War that did not create a sufficient replacement for a reliable and rigorous press.

## THE WRITING OF HISTORY

In recent years, much has been written about documentary and verbatim theatre within the United Kingdom, from placing it within the context of trends in contemporary British theatre (Innes 2007; Lane 2010) to discussions with artists (Hammond and Steward, 2008) to explorations of the form in the context of democracy (Chou and Bleiker 2010) and human rights (Derbyshire and Hodson 2008). With the 2016 release of the Iraq war inquiry, which claimed both

that Tony Blair exaggerated the threat posed by Saddam Hussein and that British intelligence produced "flawed intelligence," the discussion of Iraq war intelligence has again moved toward the center of British politics ("Chilcot" 2016). However, no study has specifically examined how the depiction of Iraq war intelligence moved across different forms of documentary drama and into fictional theatre. In fact, *Stuff Happens* is the only play here that has received sustained critical attention, most likely because it also had the most sustained and covered run of any of the productions, though this coverage has often tended to focus more on the representation of diplomacy than the representation of Iraq intelligence. Despite this, *Stuff Happens* is only one part of a trend that stretched across a number of British dramas engaging the intersection of the Iraq War, British intelligence, and the media.

Before considering the plays themselves, a brief examination of critical historiography is appropriate in order to situate the works ideologically, as well as historically, particularly considering the battle over pre-war intelligence, whether it be played out at 10 Downing Street, the BBC, the Hutton Inquiry, or London theater, serves as a reminder of Fredric Jameson's claim that "interpretation is not an isolated act, but takes place within a Homeric battlefield, on which a host of interpretive options are either openly or implicitly in conflict" (1981, 13). While in this quote, Jameson is primarily concerned with literary interpretation, his metaphor presents a stark reminder of the violence that remains always-already a part of historiography, and, in particular, those historiographies that engage contemporary political discourse, especially that discourse meant to create a literal battlefield through its interpretation(s) of intelligence texts. But the debate over the forty-five minutes occurred not simply because of the fallacy in the intelligence, nor the fallacy in the reporting of the intelligence, but because coverage of those fallacies itself also contained inaccuracies. The historical moment, not just the plays or the newspapers, presents a chance to examine what history is in the first place. As Hayden White notes in his study of historical narrativizing, *The Content and the Form*,

> In order to qualify as historical, an event must be susceptible to at least two narrations of its occurrence. Unless at least two versions of the same set of events can be imagined, there is no reason for the historian to take upon himself the authority of giving the true account of what really happened. The authority of the historical narrative is the authority of reality itself; the historical account endows this

> reality with form and thereby makes it desirable by the imposition upon its processes of the formal coherency that only stories possess. (White 1987, 20)

If White is right, that dissonance is the nature of historiography and, by extension, that coherence only exists in myth, then what should surprise us is not that Tony Blair didn't know exactly what was going on with the WMD in Iraq or that Andrew Gilligan didn't know exactly what was going on at 10 Downing Street—or that I, perhaps, have little knowledge what either were ever thinking—but that the public would ever invest such credence in their attempt at intelligence/journalism/historiography. Unfortunately, though, we live in a world that likes its absolutes, that does better swinging between the extremities of utter truth and utter fabrication than exploring the grey areas between. Given this tension between competing narratives and the desire for simple stories, the question to ask of the New Journalism of the theater is perhaps *not* whether or not it is more accurate than the Old Journalism of print and television, although that might be a fair starting question, but whether the theater provides a space for a more critical historiography than the Old Journalism, and whether *Justifying War* and *Stuff Happens* attempt to create a metahistory of the intelligence that preceded the Iraq War.

## STAGING TESTIMONY

As to the first of these questions, accuracy, *Justifying War* rests safely on the fact that the text of the play is taken from the transcripts of the Hutton Inquiry, making the source of the dialogue easily verifiable. In fact, the development of works of verbatim theater became a specialty of Northern London's Tricycle Theatre, where *Justifying War* played, under artistic director Nicolas Kent. Though *Justifying War* did not receive as much domestic attention as *The Color of Justice* (1999) or international attention as *Guantánamo: 'Honor Bound to Defend Freedom'* (2004), it ran for a month in fall 2003 to consistently positive reviews in the Tricycle's 235-seat theater. However, what audiences saw during this run was a very shortened rendition of the inquiry. The Hutton Inquiry heard testimony for twenty-five days, while *Justifying War* had an initial run-time of approximately two-and-a-half hours, raising the question of how the testimony was shaped and what kind of impression of the debate over the forty-five minutes and the BBC coverage the play presents (Billington 2003).

First and foremost in any such analysis of documentary drama that contains contemporary figures, it is worth considering the effects and ethics of performing a living person. As Dwight Conquergood writes in "A Sense of the Other,"

> Performance of another living person's story is a humbling and paradoxical experience. When the ethnographer becomes performer, he or she comes closest toward entering the world of the other, while being aware simultaneously that he or she will never be that other. The reach through performance towards grasping the meaning of "the other" always falls short and must be attempted with humility. (Conquergood 1983, 154)

Although this kind of attempt at humility and striving for "accuracy" is difficult in any context, it might be even more difficult in the political context that works such as *Justifying War* and *Stuff Happens* explore than in the more traditional ethnographic framework that Conquergood writes about. This is both because the kind of extended, less guarded interviews that ethnographers aim for are more difficult inside political circles, and because the performance of political figures can more easily fall into facile caricatures, since their public lives always-already exist as hyperreal performativity.[4] Despite these risks, Charles Spencer noted of the original London production of *Justifying War* that,

> William Chubb is possibly more persuasive than the man himself as Andrew Gilligan, Kenneth Bryans leaves little doubt that Geoff Hoon is a cold, calculating buck-passer, David Michaels scarily captures the pent-up fury and menace of Alastair Campbell, while Roland Oliver presents Andrew Mackinlay MP as a positively Dickensian figure of furious self-importance. (Spencer 2003)

Similarly, Michael Billington, in his *Guardian* review, writes, "Unemphatically staged by Nicolas Kent and containing particularly good performances from Roland Oliver as Mackinlay, David Michaels as Alastair Campbell and William Hoyland as Dr. Jones, this is in no sense kangaroo-court theatre" (2003). Whether good acting and good performance of another person are inherently the same remains an open question. However, it would appear that, at least in the initial run, the performances of *Justifying War* attempted to create the play's characters, regardless of their individual politics, with respect and dignity.

What becomes equally interesting to consider is the sequencing and selection of events in the play, which, like the actual hearing,

begins with a one-minute moment of silence (Fisher 2003). As the above quotes also indicate, the three focal presentations are those of Andrew Gilligan, Alastair Campbell, and Janice Kelly, the widow of David Kelly. The first of this trio to appear in the play is the one who interviewed David Kelly as an anonymous source in the first place: Andrew Gilligan. Initially, the questioning presented in the play presents an analysis of Gilligan's reporting on the September Dossier, with Gilligan answering a question regarding his interview with Kelly by noting, "Well I was surprised [that Kelly had mentioned Campbell] and I said: What, you know, Campbell made it up? They made it up? And he said: No, it was real information but it was unreliable and it was in the dossier against our wishes" (Norton-Taylor 2003, 15). Later, Gilligan remains equally pointed while giving a summary analysis of the dossier, declaring, "So there are inconsistencies in this document; and in all cases it was the harder—the firmer statement, that they actually had weapons rather than just the ability to produce weapons. Those are the statements that make it into the executive summary, into the Prime Minister's foreword" (Norton-Taylor 2003, 16). Through such statements, Gilligan attempts to position himself as a meticulous and accurate reporter. However, when the content of his original BBC broadcasts comes up, the direction of the inquiry shifts: "Well, I never returned to the form of words I used in the 6.07 broadcast," Gilligan responds when asked if he withdrew the allegation that the Labour government willfully misrepresented information before Kelly died. "Subsequent broadcasts were scripted. The word I used in the 7.32 broadcast, the scripted one, was 'questionable,' which I am happier with" (19). But a journalist cannot remove his words from public debate, even with a retraction, and the play underscores this by showing Gilligan's testimony ending with Gilligan shifting the responsibility for the turmoil in Kelly's life back to Kelly: "I mean, I think he was pretty experienced at dealing with journalists; I cannot speculate on what Dr. Kelly may have felt but he was experienced with journalists" (22). Through such moments, Gilligan's historiography, as presented in the play, shapes a narrative in which Gilligan appropriately used a source in search of the truth, though with little remorse over the end results for that source. Campbell, though, would have a harsher take on Gilligan's reporting.

In fact, Campbell takes on the BBC directly in the section of the inquiry presented in the play, first claiming, with more than a bit of political flair, "Our perception was that BBC viewers and listeners were at times being given a sense of moral equivalence between the

democratically elected governments that were involved on one side and the Iraqi regime on the other" (Norton-Taylor 2003, 44). Additionally, regarding Gilligan's May 29, 2003, report, Campbell tells the inquiry,

> I was torn, really, because on the one hand, I did not imagine anyone would have taken them terribly seriously, because it is such an extraordinary thing to say, that the Prime Minister and the Government would do that. Given my close involvement in the production of the dossier, I knew the allegations to be false. The reason why I then got more concerned as the day wore on was because shortly after the Prime Minister spoke to British troops when we were in Basra it was clear to me that the traveling press party were frankly more interested in this BBC story than they were in what the Prime Minister had been saying to the troops and his visit to Iraq. (Norton-Taylor 2003, 44–45)

Through moments such as this, the play not only displays Campbell directly contradicting Gilligan—a standard moment of courtroom drama—but also shows Campbell later arguing that the government had to release Kelly's name in order to counter the bad reporting by the BBC, thereby laying Kelly's death squarely at Gilligan's feet. In fact, Campbell's political calculating is scripted so starkly that his end statement of sympathy for Kelly, especially depending on how an actor plays it onstage, rings severely hollow: "I just wanted to say that I think, like everybody, I have found it very distressing that Dr. Kelly who, was clearly somebody of distinction, had died in this way and obviously I have, like everybody I am sure has thought very, very deeply about the background to all this. So I think all I would say is that I just find it very, very sad" (48). Regardless of the merit of such a statement, the play does present a dual perspective on Gilligan's coverage of the September Dossier, as well as the actual information presented in it, and it leaves the decision as to which man to trust to the audience. As Jenelle Reinelt writes, "*Justifying War* is sometimes gripping the way courtroom drama is always engaging: it challenges its audience to weigh up the evidence and decide" (2004, 67).

Or it would, if not for ending with Janice Kelly's testimony, the one testimony that breaks the chronological order of the actual Hutton Inquiry (Taylor 2003). Likewise, while Janice Kelly's testimony serves, in structural terms, as the end of the play, it also provides the play's personal face and moral center, since Kelly stands outside of the backdoor binary of the BBC and Downing Street testimonies. Instead, she reminds the audience of the experience of someone

without the clout of Gilligan or Campbell, when she tells of her husband's name being made public: "Well, he did not know about it until after it had happened. So he was—I think initially he had been led to believe that it would not go into the public domain. He had received assurances and that is why he was so very upset about it" (Norton-Taylor 2003, 88). Additionally, while Gilligan and Campbell both retained their jobs at the time of their testimonies, Janice Kelly's testimony stands as a reminder of why the inquiry had been called in the first place, and of the loss to her family, when she states, of the last day she saw her husband, "Oh, I just thought he had a broken heart. He looked as though he had shrunk, but I had no idea at that stage of what he might do later, absolutely no idea at all. He could not put two sentences together. He could not talk at all" (92). Certainly, this moment struck home the hardest to the critics. Paul Taylor, in his *Independent* review, wrote,

> The painstaking verisimilitude of the staging, with its plasma screens flashing up all manner of documents, is matched by the documentary accuracy that even reproduces the fluctuating drift in the voice link-up with Mrs Kelly. A virtue of dramatic reconstruction is that it can alert you to details that fall through the net in day-to-day newspaper coverage. I shall never forget the brief, harrowing silence at the other end of the line before Mrs. Kelly, hitherto steady and stoic, confirms that the painkiller her husband used was the medication that she takes for arthritis. (Taylor 2003)

Likewise, Charles Spencer noted in *The Daily Telegraph*, "As we listen to the testimony of Kelly's wife Janice at the end . . . we are made keenly aware that the fascinating insight into public affairs afforded by the Hutton Inquiry was the result of a desperate personal tragedy" (Spencer 2003).

The reordering of Janice Kelly's testimony certainly struck a powerful blow that could be read as an arch and manipulative move on the part of the play's creators, but for the comment that Spencer ends his review with:

> Campbell became a man dangerously obsessed, the BBC should have clarified Gilligan's reporting while backing the substance of his claims, and the process by which Kelly's name became public was a sick farce. But Kelly himself doesn't seem to have behaved entirely honourably either, and I suspect his awareness of the fact was one of the chief reasons for this decent and distinguished man's lonely death. (Spencer 2003)

It would seem that, despite the emotion of the final scene, the intellectual argument—that the government and the media failed in the lead-up to the Iraq War—remained clear, and perhaps was even reinforced by reminding the audience that the cost of political malfeasance is always personal pain, regardless of the terms of the public debate.

## BETWEEN FACT AND FICTION

Along with Gregory Burke's *Black Watch*, David Hare's *Stuff Happens* is one of the two most commercially successful plays about the Iraq War to come from Britain—and perhaps elsewhere in the world. *Stuff Happens* opened on September 1, 2004, in the National Theatre's main Olivier Theatre. Future productions would eventually play at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles (2005) and the Public Theater in New York City (2006), as well as in many other countries, leading Jay M. Gibson-King to write that the play has "become part of the canon of contemporary British theatre" (2010, 151).

While *Stuff Happens* provides ample material for discussion, this analysis will necessarily limit itself to the single scene in which the forty-five-minutes controversy presents itself. Before turning to this scene, though, a few distinctions between *Stuff Happens* and *Justifying War* should be made clear. First, Hare's play takes the entirety of the lead-up to the Iraq War as its focus, moving between diplomats and heads of state in America, Britain, France, and elsewhere over a period of nearly two years leading up to and just after the invasion of Iraq. Additionally, Hare's play does not consist entirely of verbatim theater. Instead, *Stuff Happens* combines excerpts from public speeches with dramatized backroom conversations between real politicians and monologues from fictional characters, placing *Stuff Happens* at the center of the triangle that *Fanshen*, *Plenty*, and *The Permanent Way* make in the Hare oeuvre. Of course, in choosing to write scenes where the dialogue is unknown, Hare adds to the ethical dilemmas involved in performing another person, and some actors did easily fall into caricatures of those they portrayed on stage.[5] Critic Gerald Berkowitz, for one, found this to be the case most pointedly, though perhaps not surprisingly, in the performances of the US politicians at the original London production:

> Like too many Europeans, he [Hare] presents President Bush (played by Alex Jennings) as simply an ignorant buffoon, while others, particularly among the Americans, are allowed to come across

> as cartoons. Vice President Cheney (Desmond Barrit) and Defence Secretary Rumsfeld (Dermot Crowley) are practically foaming at the mouth as hawks, while Condoleezza Rice (Adjoa Andoh) is a pushy—one might almost say uppity—woman constantly interrupting conversations to explain what the President means to say. (Berkowitz 2004)

It would seem that distance makes the heart grow satiric. Certainly, this seemed to be Ben Brantley's take upon watching the differences in the New York and London productions of *Stuff Happens*: "Mr. Sullivan [the director] appears to have encouraged his cast members, most of whom play multiple roles, to use their imaginations to draw characters taken from real life in deeper, more realistic detail, avoiding the editorial cartoon sneers and snarls of many of their London counterparts" (Brantley 2006). Returning to Conquergood's statement that "Performance of another living person's story is a humbling and paradoxical experience," it's worth considering that taking the living person's words away and replacing them with the playwright's might also risk removing the actor's anchor to a humble portrayal of that person, regardless of personal politics. At the same time, in watching the two productions, the British audience seemed to find the British characters, who also had exaggerated accents, more comical—particularly Tony Blair's inability to stand up to the Americans—and the Americans more menacing. Likewise, the American production was also more critical of Secretary of State Colin Powell, the presumptive hero of the play, particularly when Powell's French counterpart questions his motives, first by implying that the United States will not join the International Criminal Court because it is protecting Henry Kissinger, then by telling Powell, "You can't play football and be the referee as well," with regards to the Americans' mixed messages over the efficacy of the United Nations.

Of course, the scenes Hare writes in *Stuff Happens*, those of shifting political alliances behind closed doors on each side of the Atlantic, represent historical events whose narratives will never exist in transcripts for any actor to work into a Tricycle-esque performance. Instead, Hare's perhaps inevitable September Dossier scene begins with Tony Blair declaring, "Really! I mean, really! I mean, come on!" to Campbell, British Ambassador to the United States David Manning, Chief of Staff Jonathan Powell, and Lord Chancellor Philip Bassett (Hare 2004, 62). Shortly thereafter, an intelligence spook reads an e-mail, noting, "Number Ten, through the Chairman of

the Joint Intelligence Committee, wants the document to be as strong as possible within the bounds of available intelligence. This is therefore a last call for any items of intelligence agencies think can and should be included! Responses by 12:00 tomorrow" (62). After a few lines, Richard Dearlove, then head of the British Secret Intelligence Service, offers a new source, with a minor caveat: "It isn't corroborated. (*Dearlove shifts.*) This is highly unusual. As you know, I don't usually like to depend on a single supplier. There are procedures," then, after a brief exchange, "We have a source who is saying that the Iraqi military are able to deploy chemical or biological weapons within twenty to forty-five minutes of an order to do so" (63). The scene then transitions to a brief exchange between Blair and Manning:

> MANNING: You asked for something. He brought it. That's service, I suppose.
> *Blair considers the implications of this remark.*
> BLAIR: It's an instinct, isn't it? It's a feeling.
> *Everyone waits for his decision.*
> What did he say? "Twenty to forty-five"?
> MANNING: Yes.
> BLAIR: Use Forty-five. (Hare 2004, 64–65)

After a few more lines, *The Evening Standard* declares "Forty-five minutes to attack!" while George Tenet refers to the claim as, "The 'they-can-attack-in-forty-five-minutes' shit" (65). Interestingly, regardless of the accuracy of the scene that Hare creates, he still comes to the same resolution that Coughlin would paint in the book-length study *American Ally* two years later. At the same time, Hare lays the blame for the misuse of the intelligence squarely at the feet—or in the mouth—of Tony Blair, showing that it was the Prime Minister's choice to include the forty-five-minutes intelligence. As such, the fiction of Hare's play becomes the counterbalance to the missing Prime Minister in *Justifying War*. Additionally, the juxtaposition of public record and fiction within Hare's play helps to throw the public record and accepted "facts" into question. This is not to say that Hare stands without blame for any misrepresentations in his own text about Iraq intelligence, but, that, regardless of the verisimilitude in his creation of the debate over the forty-five-minute claim, the intelligence itself was, as George Tenet might say, shit. In the end, the scene would seem to ask who is telling the bigger fiction: Hare or Blair?

Through this technique, *Justifying War* and *Stuff Happens* can stand as a necessary tandem in the discussion over the forty-five-minute debate. *Justifying War* presents the unfilmed public record before the eyes of the audiences. Conversely, *Stuff Happens* attempts to shed light on the unseen private conversations of public officials. Unlike the Old Journalism of Andrew Gilligan, this forces the play to own up to the fictions of theater's New Journalism. All of which would make for a nice excuse to abandon one's newspapers and televisions in favor of the theater, if it were not for one small problem: the Hutton Inquiry actually ended, and it released its findings.

## PERFORMING IN A SHIFTING LANDSCAPE

On January 28, 2004, a slightly delayed final report from Lord Hutton was made public, and it put more blame on the BBC than on the Labor government, noting that "the allegation reported by Mr. Gilligan on 29 May 2003 that the Government probably knew that the 45 minutes claim was wrong before the Government decided to put it in the dossier was an allegation which was unfounded" (Hutton 2003). Despite this, during the hearing, Campbell's "correspondence with [dossier author John] Scarlett was published, [and] it transpired that the language on the forty-five-minute claim had been strengthened at Campbell's request, after he complained that it was 'weak,'" and Campbell was compelled to resign before the Inquiry was even completed (Coughlin 2006, 344). Gilligan, as well as other members of the BBC hierarchy, would also lose his job over the revelations of the Hutton Inquiry. None of this information, though, is covered in either play.

There are many reasons for this. In the case of *Justifying War*, the findings of the Inquiry were released after the initial staging of the play, and the choice to only stage testimony precluded the possibility of staging any outside effects of the events inside the courtroom. Likewise, the events in the chronology of *Stuff Happens*, aside from a few stray connections to US policy toward Palestine near the play's conclusion, end with the invasion of Iraq, thereby placing the Hutton Inquiry outside of the domain of the play, though the Inquiry's insights were available to Hare. Whether he believed such findings or sided with the numerous groups who questioned them is a whole other question. All of this, though, points to the fact that theater's New Journalism—like New Labor's relationship to Old Conservatism—still has all of the same problems of the Old Journalism: the

need to run important stories as soon as possible, even as new information is constantly uncovered, bias, and a choosing of historical facts to shape a specific narrative, as Hayden White might say, that leads to a particular view of the present. This is not to say that the New Journalism is without value. Certainly, works such as *Stuff Happens* and *Justifying War* stand as important counterdiscourses to the hegemony of the state and mass media, particularly when that media is either state-owned or corporate. Interestingly, such a move would appear to parallel the conclusion to Janelle Reinelt's study of British political theater *After Brecht*, where she writes,

> Here, then, is the social challenge of history-at-this-moment: how to move forward into a new situation with renewed creativity and without giving up a sense of social justice and a vision of a better political order. Reenter *agency*, *identity*, and *teleology*—old-fashioned terms that may keep the Brechtian legacy alive and vital as the new historical formation takes shape. (Reinelt 1994, 209)

Certainly, Brecht's counterdiscourses critiqued the assumptions of journalists and newspapers in his own time, but it seems dangerously facile to imply that theater can ever wholly replace politics or media, if for no other reason than that might lower the standard of politics and media, rather than encouraging both greater ethics from those in power and greater skepticism from those viewing the power, a perpetual meta-stance. Perhaps most importantly, the New Journalism's greatest trait comes from its meta-journalism, its attempt to point out the failings of the dominant narrative, to alienate audiences from the failings of media, politicians, and theater. Few would doubt that Hare and Norton-Taylor selected and sequenced their play's material for a variety of artistic and political purposes, not for the sake of a pristine journalism alone. As such, their works point to the same selections made by journalists and politicians every day, whether for ratings, votes, or the aesthetics of a feature story. And the work of these cultural authors should be equally scrutinized—their fictions and sequencings equally questioned—as those of the New Journalism, where no one assumes the accuracy sometimes, and troublingly, afforded politicians and newspapers. Interestingly, though, within British drama, what Hare and Norton-Taylor helped to achieve was not a new mode of scrutiny for both British drama and journalism, but a counternarrative that would fuel much new fictional drama in Britain exploring different aspects of the "war on terror."

## AN ALTERNATIVE MONOLITH

Among the first of these critical encounters with journalists on stage was Colin Teevan's play *How Many Miles to Basra?* Although the work did not reach stage until it was performed at the West Yorkshire Playhouse in Leeds in September 2006, its original incarnation as a BBC Radio 3 production broadcast on July 11, 2004, left the markings of an adventure story for radio all over the play's narrative, even as the story is set beside a critique, presumably, of BBC Radio, as well as the broader BBC journalism hierarchy. The show's month-long run in the 350-seat theater means that there was the opportunity for more people to see *How Many Miles to Basra?* than *Justifying War*, though its location outside of London means that the play invariably received less attention. However, that the critique of the media would move to wholly fictional productions beyond the capitol speaks to the pervasive nature of the concerns raised in the plays under discussion here.

The play tells the story of a group of four British Army soldiers, accompanied by an Iraqi translator and a BBC reporter, who travel on an unauthorized mission through Iraq in order to deliver blood money to a warlord in an attempt to make amends for killing three Iraqis at a checkpoint. By the end, all of the British soldiers are killed—the last by American F18 Hornets—but the journalist, Ursula, armed with an endlessly working digital recorder, lives to tell their story, or her perception of it. The narrative of the play is framed, and broken once in the middle, with Ursula's encounters in her United Kingdom office, just after having returned from Iraq. And, as it turns out, Ursula's return just happens to dovetail with the breaking of the September Dossier, as the office's new secretary, Sophie, tells Ursula, after Ursula enquires into her boss Tariq's location and doesn't understand why he would need to meet with the lawyers about the "sexing up":

> A source in the Intelligence Service told Andrew Gilligan that the Government asked Intelligence to sex up the dossier on Saddam's weapon capabilities. And the Government then published the dossier knowing it to contain false claims. And Andy went on air with it earlier in the week, and since then the place has gone mad. The Prime Minister's office has been piling the pressure on the heads of departments, and so we're having to go through everything with a fine-tooth comb. Even Tariq's under pressure and he'd nothing to do with it. (Teevan 2006, 19)

While primarily serving as a plot device—this explanation provides the justification for Sophie's cataloguing of Ursula's recordings, the playing of which takes the play into flashback mode—the specific frame sets the tale of events on the ground in Iraq against a backdrop of media manipulations and misinformation back home in London. After all, if the government would "sex up" the reasons for getting into the war, why would it tell the truth about how the war was prosecuted? In fact, though the first act ends with a car bomb, predictably leaving the audience to wonder who survived, the moment of excitement is preceded by one of the soldiers, Freddie, telling Ursula, "Because all you lot are interested in is the story. And to make your stories suit your agenda, you have to have goodies and baddies. And the agenda dictates the army is always painted as the baddy. Yet we didn't choose to be here" (Teevan 2009, 69). However, when the second act begins, it returns to the office, to a debate on the role of the media and a discussion of Andrew Gilligan:

> URSULA: Is Gilligan's source not sound then?
> TARIQ: Excuse me?
> URSULA: The "sexing up" claim.
> TARIQ: Not my source. Not my story, I'm glad to say.
> URSULA: But now your problem?
> TARIQ: You don't give up!
> URSULA: A good journalist . . .
> TARIQ: I understand from my colleagues that their source is reliable.
> URSULA: But do you think it is?
> TARIQ: What I think is neither here nor there. I have no evidence that leads me to believe that my colleagues are anything other than committed to fairness, accuracy, and impartiality in all their reporting.
> URSULA: But you do suspect there's an agenda?
> TARIQ: Nor is what I suspect either here or there.
> URSULA: You've been with the lawyers too long. (Teevan 2009, 73)

Through such moments, the center of Teevan's adventure tale of heroism and futility in the Iraq War returns to the controversy over how the war was justified, the fulcrum of the play resting on the same reports as the documentary work by David Hare and Richard Norton-Taylor. At the same time, what separates Teevan's work, other than the fictional frame, is that his protagonist, Ursula, did not know the story back home, while she was out in the field chasing her own reports. Perhaps like many other reporters in the real world, she found her story on the ground caught between institutional and

governmental crosshairs that shaped themselves in a different context than her actual reporting. Furthermore, the centrality of the debate over WMDs to the reception of Ursula's reporting also makes an argument that there can be no conception of the war in Iraq in Britain that does not rest in the shadow of the forty-five-minutes claim, whether that shadow casts doubt over the government or restricts journalists' ability to question that government. Either way, Gilligan's sloppiness in uncovering the intelligence flaw left a double-edged sword hanging over everyone. And, for Ursula, the cuts were inescapable.

In the second-to-last scene in the play, worth quoting at length, Ursula and Tariq debate their responsibility in how to portray the lives and deaths of the soldiers that Ursula followed through Iraq, and the nature of how the truth is shaped during a time of war:

> TARIQ: The MoD issued a statement saying how these four servicemen died, under friendly fire, escorting three Bedouin through the British zone in order to deliver blood money to save a Bedouin's family.
> URSULA: They shot three unarmed Bedouin dead.
> TARIQ: The soldiers died heroes.
> URSULA: They were heroes, but—
> TARIQ: One when the car went over a mine—
> URSULA: An unexploded American shell—
> TARIQ: One presumed lost in a sandstorm—
> URSULA: After attempting to rape a journalist.
> TARIQ: And the remaining two at the rendezvous which had been inadvertently arranged at an archaeological site Saddam had been using as a weapons dump.
> URSULA: Weapons dump? There were no weapons. It was a two-and-a-half-thousand-year old body dump. And the Allies have just dumped more bodies on it.
> TARIQ: Their story is largely true.
> URSULA: Apart from the bits that are blatant lies. Christ, isn't it our job to report the truth?
> TARIQ: But is the truth so simple—
> URSULA: No, it's complicated, but just because it is complex, does not mean we should avoid it.
> TARIQ: Your version tarnishes the reputation of four military heroes.
> URSULA: They were heroic, but in a much more human way. The public are not idiots. They understand moral complexity.
> TARIQ: The discrepancies you wish to expose strip the men of the dignity the official version affords them. And the Government

would be only too happy to seize upon your contradicting of the official version of events to sidetrack us and the public from the real issues—

URSULA: Which are?

TARIQ: Why we are there in the first place. That's the greater truth. They lied to us. (Teevan 2009, 105-6)

Paralleling the fabricated narratives that the American Army promoted about Jessica Lynch and Pat Tillman, the passage explores the nature of memory, representation, and heroism during war, complicating the idea of what it means to support soldiers and honor their memories in the face of the horrors and moral complexities of war zones. Ursula, like Hare in his portrayal of Powell challenging, but inevitably promoting, the Bush Administration policies, sees the soldier's struggle, rather than their idealization, as the true heroism, a story that at once promotes their bravery, while challenging the sensibility of the war they have been asked to serve in. Tariq, on the other hand, places the narrative complexity of the individual acts of soldiers below the greater cause of challenging the government's justification for the war in the first place, the failure of the Labor government to resist the hyping of the war becoming the more important overriding narrative. However, one must also question Tariq's commitment to this idea of challenging the government, given that his news bureau, presumably, did not issue such challenges before the war, and his statement earlier that it is important to "be careful." The question becomes one of whether Tariq truly believes in the importance of questioning the dissemination of information from the government, or merely follows the popular narratives of the time, focusing attention on the controversies that sell, rather than breaking any stories himself. In this narrative, then, Ursula becomes the heroic image of the crusading journalist, risking her life in the battlefield, and then challenging the bureaucracy back home in order to challenge the truth. Or does she?

As noted previously, one of the soldiers, Freddie, questioned whether Ursula truly cared about the truth of the soldiers' experience, or was merely interested in pursuing a pre-conceived narrative. This assessment is a milder parallel to what Ursula herself says when Tariq begins talking about how strongly he believes in freedom of the press: "And you said three dead Brits and I could have top slot. I've got four" (Teevan 2009, 104). A line like this becomes one where delivery makes all the difference: does it get played as a desperate

last resort to Tariq's need for a sensational story, or is it indicative of Ursula's sensibility? Either way, it represents a desire to present her story at all costs, which once again puts the ethics of her profession on the table, as it seems fair to question where her crusading spirit was before the war. It also places her in the same position as Andrew Gilligan: breaking a story that ended up costing the lives of all of its sources, which also seems like a less than idyllic model of journalism.

Oddly enough, the play does not end in the newsroom, or even on the battlefield, but, instead, in the living room of the squad leader's wife, Jeannie, in order to return some of Sergeant Stewart McDonald's belongings, as well as to give a copy of a recording of Stewart to Jeannie. In the scene, Ursula tells Jeannie,

> I came here because—because perhaps you haven't been told all the details surrounding the death of your husband. I went to Geordie's mother. I had a tape of him reading a letter he had written to her. The letter was never passed on to her. I think because in it he admitted killing a Bedouin at a checkpoint. I felt she should know the truth, but also that she should hear him tell her he loved her, which he hadn't done since he left home. (Teevan 2009, 110)

Jeannie, plainly replies, "You have a great commitment to the truth," stating shortly thereafter, "Please, I have to pick my children up. I must get ready" (111). Though Jeannie does show gratitude when Ursula provides her with one of the recordings of Stewart, it becomes clear as the play draws to an end that Ursula's search for the truth perhaps has more to do with her own needs than the lives of those she affects or any commitment to journalistic ethics. In the final measure, the noblest actions lay dead in Iraq, not alive in any Western newsrooms.

And this has been the new metanarrative for British theater moving forward. Not only are government officials held culpable for misrepresentations of intelligence, Muslims, or the Middle East, so are most journalists shown on stage with them. In Hare's other play touching on Iraq, *The Vertical Hour*, when an American former journalist explains that she gave advice to President Bush on Iraq because of respect for the Office of the President, as well as support for the war, her boyfriend's British father replies, "No doubt you feel that if your president calls, you have to answer that call. If my prime minster called, I'd let it ring. That's the difference" (2006, 31). Whether or not this is actually how British journalists behaved before the war is another question, but it does setup the

moment, later in the play, when the father lectures the journalist, ticking off what he assumes she didn't tell the president, such as "Drop bombs where you like" and "Manufacture intelligence from the most corrupt and dishonest elements in the country. Sanction torture," before finally concluding, "You didn't say, 'It doesn't matter if tens of thousands of people get killed, just so long as they're not Americans'" (85). More recently, Steven Lally's summer 2009 production *Oh Well Never Mind Bye* at the Union Theatre portrayed journalists pulled among sensationalism, ignorance, and a bullying progressivism as they debate representations of the July 2005 subway bombings in London and the occupation of Palestine, with the central debate involving the media misrepresentations—fueled by the British Police—of the shooting of Jean Charles de Menezes.[6] In the play, only one journalist wants to check to make sure the information received from police reports is accurate before running it, while her colleagues push on ahead with the misinformation (Lally 2009). Additionally, what the debate over Palestine referenced in Lally's play underscores is that the need to question mainstream media and political narratives regarding foreign policy has not been diminished by social media or online news sources. In fact, more recent debates over the presence, use, and reaction to chemical weapons in Syria (Rigby and Pickard 2013) and the BBC's coverage of the Israeli assault on Gaza in 2014 (Plunkett 2014) make it clear that a critical theater and media are still strongly needed in the face of more hegemonic voices.[7]

Meanwhile, what began as an attempt to create a New Journalism on stage, has, particularly with the cross to fictional dramas, developed into a condemnation of all journalism. In all of the plays examined here, there are very few good individuals. Perhaps, to paraphrase Ursula, the writers believe that the audiences are capable of understanding moral complexity. However, there also seems to have been a juxtaposition of narratives, from the threat that Iraq posed to a distrust of any journalistic and governmental information. While this skepticism is, likely, a less dangerous framework than attempts at manufacturing war, it begs the question of whether the plays are attempting to raise an alternative set of questions and explore truth, or are merely providing an alternative monolithic dissemination of information. After all, the idea that no journalists or government officials can be trusted—or that this should be represented through strikingly similar sequences of events in multiple works—also presents a homogenous and filtered narrative in pursuit

of a static political agenda. The question remains as to what lies on the other side of this mass skepticism, in a world where some measure of facts is still needed in order to construct ideology, policy, and art. True, in the face of New Labor's failure, perhaps any alternative narrative was needed. However, theatrical questionings of fact are no substitute for a reliable press, and the questions laid out on the British stage, as the recent *News of the World* scandal indicates, still remain present and pressing. Perhaps, in the end, alternative narratives and skepticism on stage are much easier to construct than journalistic or political integrity.

## NOTES

[1] This should not be confused with the equally problematic February Dossier or "Dodgy Dossier," which plagiarized multiple sources, particularly graduate student Ibrahim al-Marashi.

[2] On July 14, 2003, Robert Novak named Valerie Plame as a CIA agent in his column for *The Washington Post*, scuttling her career with the CIA. Many saw this as an attempt on the part of the White House to exact revenge on her husband, former diplomat Joe Wilson, for critiquing Bush Administration policies.

[3] Among other Tribunal plays are *Bloody Sunday* (2006), about the Saville Inquiry into the shootings of protesters in Derry, Northern Ireland in 1972, and *The Colour of Justice*, about the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry.

[4] Interview-based performer Anna Deavere Smith noted the same of her attempt to conduct interviews in Washington, D.C., "[It] was a place . . . where people rephrased my questions a lot" (Quoted in Cheakalos 2000, 188).

[5] It's worth considering if this risk—and perhaps the structural imbalance—are why the Tricycle Theatre chose not to perform any of Tony Blair's testimony to the Hutton Inquiry.

[6] Menezes, a Brazilian national, was shot in a London subway station on July 22, 2005, the day after a failed attempt at another subway bombing. In the aftermath, there were many reports about suspicious behaviors and clothing, though the 2008 inquest would later reveal that police had not even shouted a warning before firing on Menezes.

[7] As I complete revisions on this article, Britain is still responding to the Chilcot inquiry into the Iraq war, making it likely that the debate over the entry into the Iraq war, the intelligence used to justify the war, and the media coverage will be thrust back center stage. In fact, Richard Norton-Taylor and Matt Woodhead decided to preempt the report, staging the play *Chilcot* at the Battersea Arts Center in June 2016, one month before the report's release.

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