

John Castle: *Bloody Sunday* comments/impressions by M. Slouber

(Written 17 Oct 2005)

BLOODY SUNDAY: Scenes from the Saville Inquiry
The Tricycle Theatre
269 Kilburn High Road
London NW6 7JR

5 Oct 2005 & 7 Oct 2005



THE THEATRE

The Tricycle is an interesting, mixed-use venue housing a movie theater, a restaurant and bar, and the 230-seat theater. From the Tricycle website: *Under its director, Nicolas Kent, the theatre has earned a reputation for presenting work which reflects the cultural diversity of its neighbourhood, in particular, plays by Irish, African-Caribbean, Jewish and Asian writers, as well as responding to contemporary issues and events with its ground-breaking 'tribunal' plays.*



The theater was very small - Set up of the main floor was only 8 rows by 12 seats in dimension. Around that was a slightly raised, horseshoe-shaped section of 2 rows deep. Second floor was a duplication of the horseshoe shaped section on first floor (may have been a few rows deeper in places.) Seating was comfortable car-seat style benches - open seating throughout the theater except the last few rows of the main floor. On the first night, I stayed in my reserved seat in the 7th row, but on the second night I moved forward to row one. Which put me within perhaps 3 or 4 yards of the desk assigned to the "witnesses".



THE PRODUCTION

The stage was small and tightly filled with tiered mezzanines of desks, computers, microphones, shelves of evidence binders/boxes, and all the trappings of a modern hearing room. Flat screen TVs were stationed on several spots toward the front of the stage and on the walls of the theater - Throughout the "trial" evidence photos and documents being discussed were broadcast on these for the benefit of the audience. The program for this production was a work of art - And filled with supporting text, evidence reproductions, etc.



I start my review of the production with the Tricycle's own summary:

On Sunday 30 January 1972, 13 civil rights marchers were shot dead and another 13 wounded when British soldiers opened fire during an anti-internment civil rights march in Londonderry, Northern Ireland. The initial 1972 inquiry by Lord Chief Justice, Lord Widgery - branded the Widgery Whitewash by many - suggested that the soldiers had been fired on first and that there was a strong suspicion that some of the victims had fired weapons. After a sustained campaign by the families of the victims and in the light of new material collected by the Irish Government, a new Inquiry was set up in 1998 as part of the Northern Ireland Peace process. Over the past six years the Saville Inquiry has heard evidence from over 1000 witnesses, including civilians, military, paramilitary, media, experts and forensic scientists, politicians and civil servants, priests and members of the RUC. The findings of this trial are expected to be released to the public in 2005/2006

I was at a certain disadvantage to form an opinion on the theatrical adaptation. For one thing, while I'm not completely ignorant of the details of the Irish situation, my knowledge of specific events and political structures of the time made it difficult for me to catch some details. Secondly, and I think most important, I had no background on the cultural view of the Irish and English people about this incident and the trials that followed over the decades - I had no way of judging the audience or the slant of the script adaptation which clearly would have reactions and messages outsiders such as myself wouldn't understand.

So it was difficult for me to know if the script adaptation was crafted to be neutral or slanted toward the innocence of the civil rights marchers killed. I can tell you that all the military commander witnesses were portrayed as absurd, the soldiers as hostile and liars, and the civil rights marchers/activists as traumatized and deeply wronged, all around. The audience seemed to respond in ways that seemed well on the side of the wronged marchers, and people easily laughed at the absurd statements and portrayals of the British. I also got the impression that this is a deeply seeded issue in the public, but really didn't get a chance to chat with anyone to get the exact feel of it. Compare the situation for instance to that of the assassination of Kennedy in this country - This event permeates our society in profound ways and most of us are completely familiar with it as national history. But how many visitors to our country would get the "magic bullet" reference in conversation? Or even if they got it, how much of all the surrounding emotional and cultural baggage of the situation would they understand? That's pretty much how I felt with this.

I think the "magic moment" for me in this production (which really made me aware of how much I was missing) was a statement made by Bernadette McAliskey, activist and youngest member of Parliament at the time:

"What is very easy to forget about Bloody Sunday is the actual enormity of what it was. Before that day, although people were being shot, I did not have a belief that death was an integral part of the equation of seeking justice in this country. After Bloody Sunday, I believed it was. [snip] The British Army declared war on the people seeking justice in this country on that day."

I found the moment of understanding this speech brought me to rather profound.

THE PLAYERS

I recognized a lot of familiar faces... Michael Cochrane, Sorcha Cusack, Alan Parnaby, Thomas Wheatley, just to name a few. It was a large cast - Other than a couple of main investigators,

most actors only had 5-15 minutes of stage time as they were being interviewed as witnesses. With only two exceptions, I thought all the performances were exceptional. I particularly enjoyed Thomas Wheatley's performance - he had perhaps the largest role in the whole play as an investigator and I found him to be "real" and engaging. I felt everyone really convincingly portrayed real people in a trial situation - not so easy to do with memorized lines from a set-in-stone script. It was also an odd feeling watching a production like this, having come specifically to see an actor perform (not primarily to the production itself.) Watching a "real" trial is a completely different mindset/environment than watching a fictional play and it was impossible to separate one's self from the stage as one can do with a fictional work. There was a certain amount of audience participation expected and a deliberate effort to encourage this feeling.

The only times I felt that perhaps the portrayals might have been handled differently was in relation to three of the military commanders (John Castle, Michael Cochrane, and one other actor.) All of these people were portrayed in what felt like a slightly absurd way... Ever so slightly over the top and therefore, ever so slightly unrealistic. John, not so much as the others... He really crafted his lines so that while they may have been foolish and laughable on the page, *he* didn't seem foolish or laughable. But Michael Cochrane's character had the distinct feeling of the comic idiot to him which seemed incongruous with the seriousness (and supposed realism) of the piece. And the third part in question was more of the "I don't see that huge white elephant in the room" variety, to the point of theatrical absurdity.

Anyway, I don't mean to sound like I'm defending the British Army or that my feelings are in any way sympathetic to them. I just felt like there was a deliberate effort to inject this "bumbling clown" aspect to these characters which I would have preferred to see be treated more seriously. If only in the attempt to portray a realistic/fair inquiry - But then, it may be that the Tricycle was, in fact, injecting their own judgment into the affair - I really couldn't speak to that.

Focusing in on John's performance: There wasn't much. Dressed in a dark, standard business suit, John played Major General Andrew MacLellan, commander of an Infantry Brigade involved in the incident. From what I gathered, he was not on-site at the incident and gave general orders to the brigade beforehand to follow general guidelines of movement which were not ultimately followed. Most of MacLellan's testimony was snappy, verbal dueling with the investigators - much was made over semantics. John used his clear speaking, confident but cowed, scowling persona for this one (think The New Avengers combined with Solitary Cyclist.) He very *carefully* worked a sophisticated laugh from the audience at one point with a line which in Michael Cochrane's hands would have been ridiculous and idiotic. His whole performance was very crisp and *careful*. It may have been only 10 minutes, but it was well worth traveling an ocean to see. The first night I was so nervous and distracted, I really didn't get to enjoy it - It just went too fast and I was too nervous. But on the second night (I was also much closer to the stage) I was ready for him and was able to pay more attention. He was well cast in the military/authoritative role. I will admit a certain curiosity - Could he have handled one of the more "real" characters? With all their stumbling and halting testimonies and casual, real-world mannerisms/reactions? I'd like to see him try it - I'm not sure I'm convinced he could carry it off.



End

Links to professional reviews of this production (as well as production information) can be found here: <http://www.johncastlegallery.com/gallerysubpgs/tricycle.html>