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Theatre

## Bloody Sunday

★★★★★, Tricycle Theatre, London

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[The Guardian](#)



The Tricycle's Bloody Sunday. Photograph: Tristram Kenton

"This is not a time for TV-style documentaries about politics," said director Deborah Warner last week. In fact now is just the time when opinion outweighs fact in many of our newspapers. And the Tricycle's latest piece of tribunal theatre, skilfully edited by Richard Norton-Taylor from the four-year-long Saville inquiry into Bloody Sunday, is political theatre at its very best.

It works far better, in many ways, than *Justifying War*, which abridged the Hutton Inquiry. For a start, the Saville Inquiry, re-examining events in Derry on January 30 1972 when 13 civil-rights marchers were killed by British soldiers, is something that rapidly fell off the front pages: partly because of its sheer length and its investigation of 900 witnesses. But, as with *The Colour of Justice* (which dealt with the death of Stephen Lawrence), Norton-Taylor has given the inquiry a dramatic shape so that it gradually reveals the appalling truth.

It starts, as lawyers and witnesses assemble in a room full of document-filled desks and plasma screens, with a reminder of Lord Widgery's initial findings in 1972: that there was a "strong suspicion" some of the demonstrators had been firing weapons, and that, on the army's side, "there was no general breakdown in discipline". Piece by piece, and in riveting detail, this abridged version of the Saville inquiry shows that to be untrue.

Witnesses such as Bishop Daly and one of the local stewards testify unambiguously to armoured vehicles charging down Rossville Street, and soldiers following on foot firing at the marchers. Bernadette McAliskey, then the MP for Mid Ulster, raises the dramatic temperature by claiming that the government

of the day authorised, in violation of its duties, the killing of the citizens. As she points out, after Bloody Sunday a state of open war existed which resulted in 3,000 or more deaths.

This is what this dramatised inquiry brings home: the enormity of what happened in Derry that day and its dire consequences. One listens in mounting disbelief as General Sir Robert Ford, commander of land forces in Northern Ireland, is confronted by a report in which he said it would be necessary to "shoot selected ringleaders among the Derry Young Hooligans". Equally horrifying is the CO of the 1st Battalion of Paras who got "muddled" over whether a sniper had been firing from a block of flats, and who absolved his soldiers of any misconduct.

Pretence and prevarication are gradually stripped away. But the event becomes moving, as well as horrifying, as two soldiers take the stand. One admits that, as an 18-year-old, he was virtually coerced by the Royal Military Police into making false statements about nail and acid bombs being hurled at the soldiery. But another soldier to the last refuses to admit his guilt in killing an unarmed man waving a white kerchief, and has to have an apology to the man's relatives reluctantly dragged out of him.

What, it may be asked, does all this achieve? The short answer is it shows the events of Bloody Sunday were the result of military incompetence and conceivably, as McAliskey maintains, political decisions. The longer answer is it proves that the theatre, in abridging a vast inquiry, can act as a vehicle for truth. And, as with *The Colour of Justice*, one comes away shocked by how those responsible still seem to be in denial.

Nicolas Kent, who has directed with Charlotte Westendra, makes it more shocking by staging it with deliberate propriety. What emerges is the quiet tenacity of the lawyers, led by Nick Sampson as the probing chief counsel. And, although the witnesses are sharply individualised, none lapses into theatrics: the sharpest impressions are made by Sorcha Cusack who, playing McAliskey, argues that those ultimately responsible should be brought before the International Court of Justice, and by Charles Lawson who, as Soldier 'F', grudgingly denies individual guilt.

Theatre is a mansion with many rooms, and there is obviously a place for fictional political drama. But the great merit of this kind of tribunal drama is that it takes us behind closed doors and exposes the way in which a cataclysmic event like Bloody Sunday occurred. It also shows that in theatre nothing is as hypnotic as fact. You emerge from the event, after 2 hours, not only better informed, but feeling that, at its best, theatre is a vital part of a democratic society.