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Out of crises, a drama

There is no stage action and minimal costumes and makeup. But the 'tribunal' plays staged by London's Tricycle Theatre have proved to be some of the most explosive theatre around. And now they're dramatising the Bloody Sunday inquiry

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At first, I think I've stumbled on to the set of *Waking the Dead*. The walls of the room are lined with photographs of carnage: bodies riddled with bullet holes, clouds of teargas, paratroopers with rifles. People pore over street maps marked with triangles where the bodies fell. It could be any police incident room in north London. In fact, this is a theatre rehearsal space.

I'm here to watch director Nicolas Kent and his actors on the first day of the read-through of *Bloody Sunday: Scenes from the Saville Inquiry*, the latest in the series of documentary plays staged at London's Tricycle Theatre. So far, Kent has recreated the Hutton inquiry, the Matrix Churchill arms affair, the Nuremberg war crimes trial and the Stephen Lawrence inquiry. Most recently, his production of *Guantanamo transferred to Broadway*.

'Actors adore doing these plays because they are so different,' he enthuses. 'It's very unusual for actors to connect so directly with what's happening in the public gaze. And when they engage politically, it's a joyful thing.'

Critics have hailed the 'tribunal' productions as more revealing than any news report. For a start, we can go where cameras are banned. And, thanks to painstaking verisimilitude (every word in the script was spoken by the characters to whom they are attributed), the key players come alive. We see lawyers exchanging notes, water being poured, secretaries looking bored. Lights remain up during the performance, so you can't help feeling implicated as witnesses lie or prevaricate.

'To a certain extent, it's interactive,' says Kent. 'The audience can't be as passive as they would normally be. They can't say, "Sit back and entertain me." They have to listen, they have to bring an inquiring mind.'

The Saville inquiry into the Bloody Sunday shootings was Britain's longest and most expensive legal inquiry. Launched in 1998, it concluded last November, after taking evidence from 921 witnesses and a further 1,555 written statements. The final report is not expected until next year, when the cost is expected to reach £150 million (more than £80m paid to lawyers). So condensing 16 million spoken words into a two-hour play has been a mammoth task for journalist Richard Norton-Taylor (Kent reveals that the opening speech by Christopher Clarke QC lasted 42 days, the longest in British legal history).

No wonder it was necessary for Kent to start rehearsals today with a *Bloody Sunday* masterclass. 'It's almost as if, as actors and director, you are conducting your own inquiry. Forensically, you are finding things out.'

Bloody Sunday is one of the most painful - and contentious - events in recent British history. On 30 January 1972, British soldiers shot dead 13 civilians (and wounded another 13) taking part in an anti-internment, civil-rights march in Londonderry. Prime Minister Edward Heath was panicked into setting up an inquiry, under Chief Justice, Lord Widgery. The initial 1972 inquiry, branded the 'Widgery Whitewash', exonerated the soldiers, claiming they were fired on first and suggesting that some of those killed were carrying nail bombs when shot. It was a crucial turning point in the Troubles, driving many more young men into the IRA.

After a long campaign by families of the victims, a new inquiry was set up in 1998. But witnesses are recalling events from more than 30 years before, when many of us can't remember what happened last week. And while TV dramas such as Jimmy McGovern's *Sunday* and Paul Greengrass's *Bloody Sunday* have heroically reminded us what the families went through, it's easy to confuse fact and fiction. It is the job of Kent and Norton-Taylor to offer a cooler, more objective eye.

The key players are not the ones you would expect. Heath and Lord Carrington, who both gave evidence, are sidelined. Saville stands in for all three judges, but the real focus is on the witnesses: marchers, soldiers and - unprecedented for a tribunal - paramilitaries from the Official and Provisional IRA.

In a break, the cast gossip over coffee and you realise this is something of a reunion. Over the years, Kent has assembled a crack rep company. 'There are tribunal lunches, dinners - if you are in more than eight, you qualify for a pension,' he laughs. Jeremy Clyde is getting a second shot at Michael Mansfield QC, a role he played in *The Colour of Justice: The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry*, while Michael Cochrane (so good as Goering in the Nuremberg War Crimes Trial) is General Sir Robert Ford, commander of land forces in Northern Ireland. Kent jokes he is getting typecast as a thug again.

It is love rather than money that motivates the actors. William Hoyland, who plays Christopher Clarke QC, has been 'kidnapped from the National, where he has a proper paid job each night,' Kent says proudly.

None of the cast is doing impersonations as such, but already from the read-through, it's evident they are capturing crucial mannerisms. Irish actress Sorcha Cusack as Bernadette McAliskey (nee Devlin), who led the march, is bolshy and affecting: 'The clear memory I have is terror, sheer terror,' she recalls, a catch in her voice. 'It was happening in front of your eyes in slow-motion.' Clarke, counsel to the inquiry, is precise, courteous and just a bit fruity (imagine Stephen Fry in a pinstripe). You look forward to his lines, which is just as well, as he has reams of script.

The technique of using direct quotation has become increasingly fashionable, thanks to the success of David Hare's *The Permanent Way* and *Stuff Happens*. But the real challenge is to give a play dramatic shape without distorting the truth. 'There is no stage action,' says Norton-Taylor. 'Everything barring body language is in the words.' Guantanamo, with its prison set of men confined in wire cages, was visually dramatic. A fly-on-the-wall courtroom drama, all desks and computers and Lever arch files, is less gripping.

But Kent and his co-director, Charlotte Westendra, are old hands at making events seem real and urgent. 'You have to play it much faster than a courtroom or the audience lose interest,' he warns the actors. 'Press the accelerator pedal.'

He shows us the scale model of the set, an abstraction of Londonderry's neo-gothic Guildhall, with its strange watery blue light and Victorian architecture, transformed by the Saville inquiry into a high-tech showcase. Every detail is spot on, from the piped music (Vivaldi) used to 'soothe' witnesses to the irritating creaking door. 'No problem; we have one of those,' the Tricycle's stage manager calls out.

Seeing *Bloody Sunday* staged in Kilburn, with its huge Irish population, will be charged, and Snow and Michael Mansfield will be chairing a discussion after opening night. But Kent knows the play has to work for people with the haziest of knowledge. To help us follow the story, plasma TV screens will descend

around the auditorium to show video footage and transcripts of evidence (a mole in the inquiry helpfully sent Kent a CD of all documents).

Despite the high seriousness, there is a lot of laughter. None of the cast is remotely precious. When Cochrane has to double as a bluff Yorkshire paramilitary (the real actor can't arrive for a week or so), Kent applauds his speech, adding: 'Very good, I think there's a chance of Coronation Street'.

He has been waiting to dramatise the Saville inquiry for four years. Now he feels the timing is perfect. 'There's an enormous resonance because of what's happening in Iraq. The Parachute Regiment has not had a wildly good time there, either. I always think it's interesting when people say, "Oh, yes, the British army is second to none. We know how to police situations because we've learnt in Northern Ireland." But if you look at the history of the army in Northern Ireland, it's hardly illustrious. What we're talking about here is basically, in a democratic society, how we control our military.'

The Saville inquiry must establish whether there was a 'shoot-to-kill policy' in Northern Ireland. Jackie Duddy, 17, the youngest and first to die, was shot in the back of his right shoulder as he ran beside a clergyman through a car park. Four others, including a mother of 13, were wounded in the area after 27 shots were fired by six soldiers at nine targets.

Although the play takes place in a courtroom, it is overlaid with the psychic map of Londonderry. Arguably, the most powerful moments come when the soldiers give evidence or, rather, fail to give it. 'To some degree, the second half of the play is a military cover-up,' says Kent. 'I have no recollection,' the soldiers intone, one after the other. It is absurd, Pinteresque dialogue.

Not everyone thinks the Saville inquiry will solve anything. Sorcha Cusack hazards that it is a 'good guy' gesture from the Blair government: 'You sense they have no real interest in it.' Kent is more hopeful. He thinks it may close what many, not only republicans, believe was one of the army's most shameful episodes. What about the £150m price tag? 'I don't think you can quantify cost. If you think about it, it's the price of one weapon.'

Kent insists he never sets out to cause controversy for its own sake. 'We do these inquiries because they're not televised, which I think is shocking in the 21st century. This is called a "public inquiry" and yet we don't use the main media of TV and radio. So we're forced to do it with actors. But I'm pleased to see that more and more inquiries are starting to be televised. So I hope we'll be put out of business eventually.'

· Bloody Sunday opens at the Tricycle Theatre, 269 Kilburn High Road, London NW6, on 7 April. Booking 0207 328 1000