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Courtroom drama

Scott, Macpherson: Richard Norton-Taylor is no stranger to turning exhaustive public inquiries into plays. But his latest, about Hutton, posed very different problems

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Taking us where no TV cameras had been: inside the Hutton inquiry. James Woolley (Lord Hutton) and William Chubb (Andrew Gilligan) in *Justifying War* at the Tricycle Theatre, London. Photo: Tristram Kenton

Why turn a recent public inquiry whose revelations hit the front pages almost every day through the summer holidays into a play? The question went through my mind, briefly, when Nicolas Kent, director of the Tricycle Theatre in London, urged me to edit evidence from the Hutton inquiry. *Justifying War* is the latest in what Nick calls the "tribunal plays". They follow *Half the Picture*, taken from evidence to the Scott arms-to-Iraq inquiry, *Srebrenica*, based on evidence to the UN war crimes tribunal about the systematic murder of 7,000 Muslim men and boys in July 1995 by Serb forces, and *The Colour of Justice*, a play extracted from the Macpherson inquiry into the death of the black teenager, Stephen Lawrence.

These pieces were well received by both critics and audiences. It was as if theatregoers were screaming for plays with strong contemporary resonance and political relevance. They seemed to strike a chord. But this time there was a big difference. The arms-to-Iraq and Stephen Lawrence inquiries went on for many months - years in Lord Scott's case - and few people followed them at all closely. The plays were staged quite a long time after the event; this time the gap is much shorter. Isn't the evidence still fresh in our minds? Should we now not just wait for Lord Hutton to report?

Nick convinced me. Here, after all, is a scandal going to the heart of government, touching on such a basic question as going to war on false pretences and offering unprecedented insights into the minds of people normally hiding behind the curtains of Whitehall.

Then came the real challenge: how to boil down six weeks of oral evidence into a little over two hours. The problem was not what to put in, but what to take out. Despite past experience I seriously underestimated the difference between writing for a newspaper and writing for the stage, even though we were dealing with precisely the same raw material, precisely the same words.

The craft, the instinct, of the daily newspaper or broadcast journalist is to seize on the most striking revelations - ie, news - using a free range of epithets to drive home the point and then adding as much context as required. Each day is different and not necessarily connected. The value of a play is that you can put together in a single piece of work what, on the face of it, might seem a simple enough disclosure-a-day saga, but which, in fact, is much more complicated. The different threads of the evidence before Hutton - the original BBC allegations about the government's dossier on Iraq's weapons of mass destruction programme, the developing battle between the BBC and 10 Downing Street, the treatment of David Kelly by the Ministry of Defence and how elements in Whitehall wanted to use him, tensions within the BBC - had to be brought together and explained. And, unlike journalism, every single word in Justifying War and the other tribunal plays was spoken by the characters to whom they are attributed (though they may help the audience by explaining a person's job title, for example).

We wanted as much verisimilitude as possible. Though the actors are playing the parts of real, identified, individuals, they are not impersonating in the usual meaning of the word. They are getting as close to the real characters they play as possible - some came to the inquiry. We were all aware of the dangers of caricature.

Since there is no action, no sudden exit stage rights or enter stage lefts, everything, barring the body language, is in the words. Not even those rehearsed for the witness box and questioned by well-prepared lawyers talk in soundbites. The language, the use of words, by characters in Justifying War, as in Half the Picture, is full of subtleties and nuances as they try to protect themselves, dissemble, or pass the buck. The characters defend themselves and blame others even though they are, mostly, on the same side. Most of them exaggerate. Few, if any, tell the full truth. All this came out during the Hutton inquiry not in neat two-minute exchanges, but over hours of questioning by lawyers. There was also irony at Hutton, intended and otherwise, as well as reading between the lines - a favourite Whitehall pastime.

The difficulty was avoiding a disjointed script that concentrated on the exchanges which I as a journalist instinctively wanted, and including every witness mentioned in every Hutton story I had written for the Guardian. This, I soon began to accept when faced with Nick's protests, would not make good theatre. The actors, too, detected problems with the original script which now, I trust, has a beginning, middle and end, interweaving the different plot lines.

I hope this confirms my belief that the theatre is a medium, complementary to newspapers, which by capturing a different kind of audience, or a similar audience in a different way, can lead to a greater understanding of how we are governed and what is being said and done on our behalf. Hutton is not expected to report until the new year, but I hope this sharpens the appetite and reminds us of what lies behind it all.

At the end of the hearing, Dingemans said the inquiry had raised issues for "other institutions" to pursue. He had parliament, above all, in mind. But why not the theatre as well?

· Justifying War opens tonight at the Tricycle Theatre, London NW6. Tel: 020 7328 1000.
www.tricycle.co.uk