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Bloody Sunday (review)

*Sally Richardson reviews **Bloody Sunday: scenes from the Saville Inquiry**, edited by Richard Norton Taylor and directed by Nicholas Kent; Tricycle Theatre, 269 Kilburn High Rd, London NW6 until 7 May 2005*

THE DRAMATIC possibilities of the courtroom have provided a staple of the theatre since Shakespeare's day. Actual cases moreover provide ready-made scripts that often demonstrate that reality can reach heights of absurdity that the human imagination cannot attempt to scale. Some years ago the BBC2 dramatization of the Oz trials showed British justice grappling with the question of just how big a sexually aroused Rupert Bear would be.

There is absurdity aplenty on display at the Tricycle Theatre's new show, directed by Nicolas Kent. The Bloody Sunday Inquiry, chaired by Lord Saville, ran for four years and Richard Norton-Taylor has reduced a huge quantity of material to two-and-a-half hours of drama and effectively provided us with a platter of choice cuts.

To play an actual human being and reproduce real speech with all its stops and starts, ums and ers and non-sequiturs is not easy; the actor has to find a balance between interpretation of a role and mere impersonation. An excellent cast pulled it off with credit.

Particularly good was Charles Lawson as Michael Bridge, wounded on Bloody Sunday. Lawson portrayed a man awkward and ill-at-ease in unfamiliar surroundings, yet unafraid to stand his ground and question the proceedings. It was interesting to contrast the demeanour of most of the Derry witnesses - uncomfortable, emotional and painfully honest - with that of the British generals, at ease and confident on their own territory yet nonplussed when confronted with evidence of army wrongdoing.

The soldiers' barristers (played by Thomas Wheatley and William Hoyland) had their work cut out, in spite of their oleaginously condescending manner to the Derry witnesses. Soldier S (played by David Beames) admitted that the statement he had given the military police contained 'inaccuracies'. Words hadn't been put into his mouth, exactly, but the redcaps had told him what he was to say.

Soldier F (Charles Lawson again, unrecognizable from his previous role) provided the dramatic highlight when confronted with proof that the four 'bombers and gunmen' he admitted to killing

were unquestionably unarmed civilians. Bernadette McAliskey (an excellent Sorcha Cusack) questioned whether there was any point to the Inquiry when the accused were running the whole thing, but this production brings home to us just how vital it is. A state must be capable of self-scrutiny and the actions of its structures open to question.

In the discussion that followed, Michael Mansfield explained that such inquiries will no longer be possible under new legislation being brought in by Blair - a worrying development for democracy and justice. (Jon Snow, chairing, joked that Mansfield found the play so realistic that he had to stop himself from standing up when Lord Saville - played by Nick Sampson - came on stage.)

Eamonn McCann claimed that the real story to pursue is the apparent fast-tracking of General Michael Jackson's army career, allegedly as a reward for arranging the army cover-up.

The Tricycle Theatre have provided an enthralling entertainment at a fraction of the price of a rubbishy West End extravaganza. The programme is a real mine of information, with facts and figures, chronology and primary sources. I am putting mine with my political pamphlets instead of with my theatre programmes.

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