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dublin theatre festival reviews

Bloody Sunday: Scenes From the Saville Inquiry

The Tricycle Theatre

Abbey Theatre Oct 11 -1 5

by **Harry Browne**

Tribunals of inquiry have an unlikely habit of making spectacles of themselves. Hundreds packed Dublin Castle for the highlights of Haughey or Gogarty. Joe Taylor and company took those shows on the road with a hit comedy revue based on tribunal testimony. In Derry the real-life Saville Inquiry filled the splendid Guildhall with movie screens so everyone could see the images and document being discussed, and its boffins devised a highly detailed, 3D virtual-reality Bogside so witnesses could “walk through” their evidence with Nintendo-like verisimilitude. (In reality, that software went virtually unused.)



At first glance, this completely verbatim Tricycle Theatre production seems, incongruously, like a tribunal with the drama drained from it.

The stage setting, essentially a cool, modern, slightly tacky open-plan office that has been twisted and layered into a vaguely courtroom shape, is similar to the genuine Guildhall set-up, but the screens are much smaller (and therefore useless to most of the audience). More importantly, without the visible Victorian ostentation and the proximity to Derry’s crime-scene, we lose any sense that this vast British forensic operation has been dropped uncomfortably on the spot. Here, it’s merely cold and clinical and could be anywhere. With nothing resembling a curtain at beginning or end, it’s our day in court.

Nonetheless, as the stage lights go up and down and witnesses appear in quick succession, the narrative and social tensions escalate rapidly. Disbelief is not so much suspended as evicted: working-class Derry people and soldiers make their various stands, telling their various truths and lies, to the plummy-voiced judge and lawyers. Inevitably, Richard Norton-Taylor’s brilliant editing focuses attention on just a couple of key incidents, but also on broader questions of honesty and memory – the soldiers and generals have practically none of the latter, at least, while the locals have all too much, and we’re invited to reflect if it may be more collective than individual.

The tribunal counsel’s own stirring thoughts about seeking “truth, pure and simple” – though it may be the first casualty of conflict, it has “formidable powers of recovery, even after a long interval”, he says, rather hopefully – are questioned by Bernadette McAliskey (Sorcha Cusack) in the production’s star turn. Her own memory of the day is uneven, and she refers disdainfully to “corruptive memory” which is “my problem with this inquiry”. That, and the fact that it “should be somewhere where the accused is not running the party”.

The house lights at the Abbey stay up throughout *Bloody Sunday*. Apart from involving us, sometimes emotionally, in the role of “the families” every time someone gestures thus in our direction, this permits consultation of the programme for those lucky enough to have one. With a detailed map on the cover and supporting and supplementary documents inside, it is as good a dossier on Bloody Sunday as you’re likely to find. It helps ensure that this riveting “show” produces more clarity about the “truth” of that terrible, decisive day than the clatter of books and films that have gone before.

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