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Bloody Sunday, or the theatre of moral corruption

by Douglas Murray

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The legal inquiry into Bloody Sunday, one of the most controversial events of the conflict in Northern Ireland, has been turned into drama. But the play is formulaic theatre for complacent liberals, says Douglas Murray

Throughout 2003 I sat in an air-conditioned room in Westminster, London at the Bloody Sunday Inquiry into the killings of thirteen civilians and wounding of thirteen others on 30 January 1972. During that year, the inquiry (set up by Tony Blair in 1998) heard evidence from members of the British army who had been in Londonderry (Derry), Northern Ireland on that terrible day. 245 military witnesses gave evidence – soldiers, commanders, and those who had killed people.

Though the final report is not yet published, a play – *Bloody Sunday: scenes from the Saville Inquiry* – of the inquiry has already finished its first run at the Tricycle theatre, north London. Though the event provokes great moral and artistic concern, they are not necessarily of the type the Tricycle intended.

The now-concluded legal proceedings took place before Lord Saville, a British law lord, and two Commonwealth judges. Dozens of lawyers representing the families of the dead and wounded, army, paramilitaries and other parties filled the chamber. Two viewing galleries were set aside: one for the families of the dead and wounded (many of whom attended daily) another for the media and general public. By 2003 the story had fallen off the radar of the national press, and other than the few occasions when a celebrity witness appeared, there were only three of us there daily.

The paucity of press interest in the inquiry is understandable. Apart from the cost of covering such an extended inquiry, few media outlets are interested in the convoluted details. When the inquiry returned to Derry, television crews galore descended to observe former IRA commander-turned politician, Martin McGuinness. Members of the families protested, "This isn't the Martin McGuinness Inquiry". Indeed (perhaps sadly) it was not, and one can understand their aggravation: you campaign for twenty-five years to get an inquiry into your brother's killing, and the mass media descend only when a famous terrorist or politician is in the witness box. It is celebrity culture at its most unsavoury end-point.

Skilfully edited by *Guardian* journalist Richard Norton-Taylor, the Tricycle has had great success with a series of these "inquiry dramas", including the Scott "arms-to-Iraq" inquiry and *The Colour of Justice* (from the inquiry into the murder of Stephen Lawrence). They have won acclaim, been televised and enjoyed long national runs. *Bloody Sunday* received five-star reviews in all the British press, played to packed houses, and is returning to the Tricycle later in 2005 for an extended run. And there is an inevitability to all this – rather like reviewing the work of an author who's just died (isn't it "bad taste" not to like it? Isn't there a moral imperative to be "impressed"?)

But there are profound problems with this "inquiry re-enactment" theatre. For a start, the theatre isn't the courtroom, and an important difference is the audience (not just that there actually is one for the two-hour version). The single most striking difference between courtroom and theatre is laughter. In a play you have to relieve tension: in life, let alone an inquiry into a massacre, no such obligation exists.

During the inquiry there were around a dozen amusing things – quips, idiocies or absurdities. The laughter these generated was brief and guilty. But in the theatre people laugh differently. Not, it ought to be pointed out, that this was genuine laughter, the laughter of entertainment: this was the laughter of shared derision and satisfaction – the laughter of intense moral satisfaction. The last time I heard this was at the Hutton Inquiry, when a group of opponents of the war sat watching the screen relay in the High Court, laughing or snorting every time Alastair Campbell said anything at all. This was how the theatre audience reacted to the military witnesses.

And this is where this kind of theatre performs not a service, but a terrible disservice. Theatre is, after all, meant to entertain: where it doesn't entertain it should question and inform. What it should not do is pat itself on the back, congratulating and reinforcing the prejudices of its audience.

A theatre for moral tourists

The Bloody Sunday Inquiry is one of the most complex cases in British legal history. It will certainly be the longest and (at £155 million) the costliest. No one agrees on anything. To get even close to understanding the case before Saville's report is published, there are more than 2,000 witness statements to read, 20-30 million words of written evidence, around 16 million words of oral evidence, countless "bundles" of maps, trajectories, experts reports, photographs, videos and audio tapes.

My copy of the 1972 Widgery Report comes in at under forty pages. How many of the people in the Tricycle who laughed when Widgery (deeply controversial as it was) was mentioned have ever read that report? How many of those who nodded at the scene in which Bernadette Devlin (McAliskey) – played as a forthright Irish folk-hero – had her words relayed, would have nodded along with her when she called for retaliatory murder back in 1972? How many remember she made such a call? How many people leaving the theatre righteously angry at the lack of prosecutions for the deaths of thirteen men in 1972 would have known that for 668 British soldiers killed during the troubles, only 81 people have ever been prosecuted – all now released?

The trouble with this edited version of a controversial inquiry, however, is not just that it depicts IRA terrorism as a mere reaction to actions of the British army, carried out, therefore, by men with no individual moral culpability: nor is it that the one terrorist in the play is shown as a harmless rogue. It is not even that, with its huge non-speaking cast, *Bloody Sunday* is an expensive way of getting cheap effects. The issue goes much deeper. Unknowingly, it taps in to a modern lacuna – a moral lacuna.

If you lead a busy working life and rightly want to keep up to date on issues of your day, you must absorb edited and abridged media. Time is too scarce to know everything.

A humble media, such as is now almost non-existent, knows that its primary duty is to inform. An arrogant media, such as is now rampant, believes its duty is to tell the public not only what is happening, but what is right, giving this to them in the same package. The late Saul Bellow said that nowadays "public virtue is a kind of ghost town into which anyone can move and declare himself sheriff."

The Tricycle is an example of just such a self-appointed sheriff. And it is not the smugness of those who get their fix of "issues" that is the problem. The odious thing about this exercise is that it plugs a gap in the market for those who are cash-rich and time-poor. "Tribunal theatre" is simply filling a gap in the market for no-strings-attached, neatly packaged, moral tourism.

