



Speaking Out: The Tricycle Theatre's Bloody Sunday: Scenes from the Saville Inquiry

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SPEAKING OUT

Irish audiences will get a look at a much-talked-about new theatrical form when the Tricycle Theatre's latest verbatim production, *Bloody Sunday*, arrives in October for a proposed Dublin Theatre Festival slot. Patrick Lonergan argues that this production may mark a turning point for British theatre about Ireland – and wonders how Irish audiences might respond to the show.

In a London courtroom, Soldier F is being cross-examined about his actions on Bloody Sunday. His answers are depressingly repetitive. What were his orders for that day? He doesn't remember. What was the atmosphere like in his platoon after the shootings? He has no recollection. He accepts that the evidence shows that he killed Barney McGuigan, Patrick Doherty, Michael Kelly, and perhaps William McKinney. But has no memory of doing so. He is adamant, however, that the people he shot were all armed – an assertion contradicted by all available evidence. A lawyer asks the obvious question: if Soldier F can't remember anything that happened on Bloody Sunday, how can he claim with such certainty that everyone he shot had weapons? And with that, he bluntly accuses the soldier of falsifying his evidence.

We're in London's Tricycle Theatre, watching a dramatisation of the Saville Inquiry – the tribunal established by Tony Blair in 1998 to investigate Bloody Sunday. The interior of the theatre has been designed to recreate Derry's Guildhall, where much of the Inquiry took place: there are shelves of ring-binders, weary-looking lawyers, tearful witnesses, and blinking computer screens placed around the room. And we, the audience, are the public gallery. We strain forward, waiting to hear how Soldier F will respond to the lawyer's accusations. He shrugs. "I have nothing to add," he says.

This is a brilliantly theatrical moment: perfectly timed, perfectly delivered, and presented in a way that maximises the scene's dramatic impact. But what makes it particularly powerful is our knowledge that these events actually happened: the real "Soldier F" gave this evidence in November 2003. The Inquiry itself only concluded in November 2004, and its final report will not be published until later this year (at the earliest). In the meantime, the audience at the Tricycle is being given the chance to make up their own minds about what happened in Derry in 1972.

Bloody Sunday is the latest in a series of plays about legal tribunals to be staged by the Kilburn-based Tricycle. Since its dramatisation of the Arms to Iraq scandal in 1994, it's tackled the massacre at Srebrenica, the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry, the Hutton Inquiry, and the plight of British prisoners in Guantanamo Bay. The series has been a great success for the theatre's artistic director Nicholas Kent, and for Richard Norton-Taylor, the *Guardian* correspondent who has edited the transcripts for many of these productions, including *Bloody Sunday*. That success has inspired other docudramas, many of them by leading British practitioners. In recent months, David Hare has used the form to tackle the British rail system in *The Permanent Way*, and the invasion of Iraq in *Stuff Happens*; while Alan Rickman has just finished directing *My Name is Rachel Corrie* at the Royal Court – a play about the 23 year-old American peace activist who was killed in the Gaza Strip in 2003. Such is the enthusiasm for the medium that *Financial Times* critic Alastair Macaulay recently declared that the most significant movement in contemporary English drama is not the violent in-her-face theatre popularised by the Royal Court – but the Tricycle's docudramas.

Whether that claim is justified remains to be seen, but *Bloody Sunday* quickly reveals why these plays are so well regarded. The production succeeds both as drama and as a political intervention, a difficult combination to achieve. It works as drama because it deals with life-and-death issues of national significance – but presents them from the perspective of everyday people. It works politically because the production respects its audiences: they're given the evidence, offered competing sides of the argument, and are then trusted to decide where the truth lies. At a time when politics is marked by spin-doctoring – and when many dramatists celebrate postmodernism's claims that there are no objective truths – this gesture is significant: the Tricycle is asserting that individuals can engage with a public inquiry, and uncover the truth about events of national importance.

Of course, other media – such as newspapers and books – can also allow people to do this. What makes verbatim theatre different is that it can take a five-year inquiry and distil it into two-and-a-half hours of theatre. And because that distillation is transmitted through live performance, events takes on an immediacy and urgency difficult to

achieve in print. Verbatim theatre thus has the potential to be enabling, as well as informative.

But it's also vulnerable to accusation of bias. The fundamental problem with any verbatim theatre is that material must be made stageable, a process that starts with editing. In the case of the Saville Inquiry, the need to do so is obvious: it lasted for five years, and resulted in millions of words of documentation. Transforming this into an evening's theatre requires a lot of cutting and shaping. Richard Norton-Taylor is ideally suited to this job, since he's both a political journalist and the author of other Tribunal plays. He didn't change a single word of testimony, he says; nor did he add any material. Nevertheless, any editor's decisions about what to omit and include will necessarily involve judgements about what is relevant – and this leads inevitably to suspicions that the author has some kind of agenda. The Saville Inquiry heard statements from 505 civilians and 245 soldiers, but in Norton-Taylor's dramatisation, we have five civilians and five soldiers. Does it matter that it's not an accurate reflection of the real figures? Probably not – it makes narrative sense, presenting the case as a clear “for” and “against” argument. But this focus on the British army has led some commentators to suggest that the production distracts attention from the IRA's actions since 1972. Former Tory MP Michael Portillo grudgingly praised *Bloody Sunday* in his *New Statesman* review, and suggested that the Inquiry will offer closure to the Bloody Sunday families. But he wondered what closure there'll be for the families of the “hundreds of soldiers murdered by the IRA.” “Where is the truth for Robert McCartney's loved ones?” he asked.

Of course, every form of media involves the angling and shaping of material. But the theatre medium adds another complication: it aestheticises material as well. Disparate events must be turned into a narrative, which must then be represented visually, in a way that will hold people's attention for some 150 minutes. In *Bloody Sunday* the house lights are left on for the entire production, and no effects are used for dramatic emphasis (although there are blackouts between witness statements). The actors don't return to the stage to take a bow at the end of the performance – presumably feeling that doing so would trivialise the experiences they've been representing. In other

words, the aesthetic at work here is that there are no aesthetics – the production’s creators do all they can to maintain the illusion that we’re not in a theatre. This is of course highly theatrical.

Despite the reservations expressed by Portillo and others, the complexity and intelligence of the Tricycle’s approach has meant that *Bloody Sunday* has been widely praised since it opened in London – even though many newspapers have criticised the Saville Inquiry itself, with its £155 million pricetag, and its divisive debates about whether soldiers could testify anonymously. Remarkably, the most common reaction to the play’s revelations about the British army is not shock, but recognition: journalists see clear parallels between Bloody Sunday and events in Iraq and Guantanamo Bay.

The Tricycle’s success in generating such intelligent and well-informed debate about Northern Ireland sets its production apart from earlier stage treatments of the Troubles. The most infamous production on the subject must be Brian Friel’s *Freedom of the City*, which dramatised Bloody Sunday and the 1972 Widgery Tribunal that quickly followed it. The findings of Widgery are now widely dismissed, but Friel’s attack on the tribunal was deeply unpopular when his play premiered in London in 1973: there were bomb scares at the theatre, accusations that the play was IRA propaganda, and many other difficulties.

English writers also encountered problems when dealing with the Troubles. In 1972, six British dramatists – including David Hare, Howard Brenton, and David Edgar – collaborated on *England’s Ireland*, a provocative take on the history of these islands. The writers attempted to tour their play around Britain but, as Edgar wrote in *The Guardian*, “once they read the script, theatres... found an urgent need to install new machinery or overhaul their central heating (though one theatre said it would take the play if we could add a scene showing the British Army doing something good). As a consequence of this spinelessness... the show did a few Sunday nights and a short run at the Roundhouse [in London].”

Since then, Gary Mitchell and Owen McCafferty have written about the north for London-based theatres, and Martin McDonagh’s *Lieutenant of Inishmore* – with its psychopathic INLA cat-loving hero

– showed that English plays about the Northern conflict are no longer taboo. What makes *Bloody Sunday* stand out is that it doesn't attempt to explain Ireland to an audience presupposed to know nothing about the Troubles. Nor does it use exoticised language or rural settings to mark out Irish characters as different from the English audience. Rather, the play argues forcefully that Bloody Sunday is not just about Ireland, but that it also goes to the heart of British society: its army, its legal system, its government. For this reason alone, the play marks a fascinating new development in British drama about Ireland.

All of these issues make the prospect of an Irish run of *Bloody Sunday* particularly tantalising; it's scheduled to appear at this year's Dublin Theatre Festival, and tours to Belfast and Derry are also being discussed. It will be interesting to see how audiences here respond. The play was, after all, originally designed with a British rather than an Irish audience in mind – and if it does mark a turning point in some ways, it doesn't distance itself entirely from past stage representations of Irish subjects. In fact, it plays interestingly with English audiences' familiarity with drama about Ireland. As an Irish person watching *Bloody Sunday*, I was struck by how some of the characters reminded me of stock Irish stage figures – there's a priest, a grieving woman, and a charismatic but reckless man with a penchant for gallows humour. And indeed there is a British Army general whose buffoonery is also very familiar. There were times when I wondered if this production was using audiences' familiarity with these figures as a narrative shortcut, relying on our predisposition to react to such characters in particular ways in order to convey the material more efficiently. Yet this suspicion soon gave way to disorientation: these are all real people, and their initial familiarity is quickly replaced by an awareness of their complexity, their uniqueness, and (in most cases) their dignity. I found it challenging to encounter figures that seemed stereotypical in a work purporting to represent fact – but it was just as challenging to see a British play that undermined and transformed my awareness of Irish stereotypes.

This was particularly noticeable in the play's treatment of republicanism. The most chilling line in the production is delivered by Bernadette McAliskey, who in 1972 had recently been elected an MP on a Civil Rights platform, and who was one of the leaders of the

Bloody Sunday march. As a result of Bloody Sunday, she says, she has never raised her voice against “the arming and taking of the war to the British government” by the IRA. “I did not have a belief that death was an integral part of the equation of seeking justice in this country” before Bloody Sunday, she explains. Since that day, however, she has believed that death is “part of the equation” in Ireland. “The British Army declared war on the people seeking justice in this country on that day. Three thousand and more coffins followed and years of imprisonment and torture and pain... I cannot forgive the British government for that.”

McAliskey appears to suggest that the British government made a deliberate decision to shoot the Bloody Sunday protestors, and that subsequent actions by the IRA should be seen as a response to this “declaration of war.” These thoughts are shared by many of the other witnesses at Saville, but McAliskey is the only person brought on stage to utter them. Why her? Why not Martin McGuinness? Or a convicted terrorist? One explanation might be the need to work against Irish stereotypes. People who believe that “death is part of the equation” in Northern Ireland are typically characterised as barbarous psychopaths on British and Irish stages – just look at Mad Padraic in *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* or the entire dramatis personae of Stuart Carolan’s *Defender of the Faith*. Having such sentiments uttered by a woman who is well-spoken and well-dressed works strongly against that stereotype. Then there’s the fact that McKevitt is played by Sorcha Cusack, whose celebrity – and whose brilliant acting – places even more distance between audience and subject matter. This distance makes sense in some ways: if audiences are going to deal with this material with an open mind, then the production has to overcome their assumptions about Northern Ireland. I was excited by this production’s movement away from clichéd representations of republicanism – but the material still left me feeling uncomfortable: challenging assumptions is one thing, but perhaps there are times when this production risks eliding or even sanitising republican violence.

We’re back to the issue of aesthetics and editing here. Putting in one character, omitting another, casting well-known actors – all of these actions raise troubling questions. But being provoked to consider troubling questions, and being made to feel uncomfortable are not

necessarily bad things – especially when it comes to politicised material. What we're seeing here are practitioners' attempts to tackle a new theatrical form – working out how to direct, perform, and respond to it. The sense of experimentation and novelty generated by this makes verbatim theatre extremely exciting. And if Norton-Taylor is using received images of Irishness to convey his points, he's also challenging those images, by placing them in unfamiliar contexts. Watching *Bloody Sunday* thus becomes an extended exercise in rethinking one's assumptions, not only about the Troubles, but also about British theatre about Ireland.

For these and other reasons, the production is likely to reignite an already vigorous debate about verbatim theatre in Ireland: we've had lots of newspaper coverage and a Theatre Forum event on the subject already. Much of the discussion has focussed on whether the form could and should be undertaken by Irish theatres and artists. Some reservations have been expressed – about audience conservatism, suitable subject matter – and particularly about funding. The power of verbatim theatre lies in its topicality, but making theatre that responds quickly to public events requires massive resources, and a stable audience. In his Theatre Forum interview, Nicholas Kent illustrated this by discussing the timeframe involved in producing *Guantanamo – Honor Bound to Defend Freedom* in 2004. The last research interview for that play took place on 12 April, rehearsals began on 23 April, and it opened a month later. How many Irish theatre companies have the resources to pull together projects of this complexity on such a short timeframe?

However, there have already been some Irish attempts to tackle the form. Joe Taylor and Malcolm Douglas had some success re-enacting the Flood and Mahon Tribunals as *The Tribunals Show* – presenting material that's often compelling, but which also tends towards humour. Such material is unlikely to have the impact of the Tricycle's work, however. As *Bloody Sunday* shows, audiences respond positively to verbatim theatre when it presents important issues from the perspective of everyday people, to whom audiences can easily relate. Irish audiences are unlikely to identify with any of the main players in the Flood or Mahon tribunals, whose activities are more the stuff of farce than drama. But so many other aspects of Irish life demand dramatisation. What about the inquiries that have

attempted to uncover the truth about the sexual abuse of Irish children? Or the transmission of Hepatitis C to Irish women? Or the countless other inquiries of national importance? With the exception of a once-off dramatisation about the Dublin/Monaghan bombings, such events have rarely been given theatrical attention, and it's hard to accept that lack of resources is the sole explanation. The arrival of *Bloody Sunday* could do much to encourage Irish companies to take up these opportunities.

So what can Irish audiences expect when *Bloody Sunday* arrives? First and foremost, they will see an extremely impressive piece of theatre. But the production's most important achievement is that it reveals the ongoing hold that Bloody Sunday has over life in Ireland – and, fascinatingly, it shows its impact on Britain too.

Is it informative? Unquestionably – but it's also deeply affecting and thought-provoking. So *Bloody Sunday* deserves to be seen, not only as a fascinating experiment in theatrical representation, but also as an urgent intervention into the life of Ireland and Britain. It will certainly further the debate about verbatim theatre on this island – and let's hope that it also inspires work of similar stature from practitioners here.