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PRESS, PATROLS AND POWER: THE BRITISH ARMY IN RECENT UK THEATRE

In British playwright Sarah Kane's *Blasted* (1995)¹, Ian works for a tabloid newspaper for which he provides stories such as a “murder ritual” involving the abduction and stabbing of teenagers, that he sensationalises with capital letters and emotive language such as “sick” and “lunatic”². In *Body Horror*, John Taylor states that the media does not simply report murders, massacres and war; it transforms them into newsworthy stories³. Whereas images in the press and media might appear to depict human bodies at the limits of grief and agony, the most atrocious pictures are withheld by the powerful institutions that govern States⁴. Moreover, the power of the market obliges the press and media to exclude the most detailed, close-up and offensive images, and to feature only those that adhere to the conventions of public decency. Added to this, in times of war, images of the dead bodies of troops tend to be omitted, since they do little for army or civilian morale⁵. But whilst the press carefully shapes words and images into products for consumption that will thrill and not entirely revulse audiences, Kane's depictions of the atrocities of war are raw and naked.

Shakespeare's History Plays, notably the *Henry* plays (1590-1592) and *Richard II* (c. 1596), formally introduced war and the army into British theatre, and they continue to be present to this day. Notable examples include experimental theatre-maker Joan Littlewood's *Oh! What a Lovely*

1. Sarah Kane, *Blasted* [1995], in *Complete Plays*, London, Methuen, 2001.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 12-13.

3. John Taylor, *Body Horror: Photojournalism, Catastrophe and War*, New York, New York University Press, 1998, p. 2.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 2-3.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 9.

War (1963), playwright Edward Bond's *War Plays* (1985), and Sarah Kane's *Blasted* (1995) which expose grim truths about war that the powers – that be political or military – tend to conceal from the general public, preferring to promote images of triumph rather than ruin. British theatre was initially a little slow in responding to the 9/11 attacks on the USA and the ensuing War on Terror resulting in the invasions and occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq⁶. However, since around 2005, an unprecedented number of playwrights have addressed the subject of war and terrorism: Caryl Churchill's *Drunk Enough to Say I Love You?* (2006) is an oniric, or nightmarish, allegory of the "special relationship" between the USA and Great Britain; Richard Norton-Taylor's *Justifying War: Scenes from the Hutton Enquiry* (2004) and *Called to Account: The Indictment of Anthony Charles Lynton Blair for the Crime of Aggression against Iraq – A Hearing* (2007), edited by Richard Norton-Taylor and Nicolas Kent, are compiled from word-for-word transcriptions of judicial enquiries into the war in Iraq; *War Correspondence* (2003) was a season of short plays held at the Royal Court Theatre on the subject of war, to which Martin Crimp contributed *Advice to Iraqi Women*, and Caryl Churchill contributed *Iraqdoc*. Specific examples of the army in recent British theatre include the co-authored play cycle *The Great Game* (Tricycle, 2009), a historical chronicle of the multiple military invasions of Afghanistan; Igor Stravinsky's *The Soldier's Tale* (Old Vic, 2005), staged in an Iraqi-UK collaboration; and Katie Mitchell's staging of Euripides's *Iphigenia at Aulis* (National Theatre, 2004), where Agamemnon agrees to sacrifice his daughter Iphigenia if the gods create wind which will enable his battle fleet to sail to Troy⁷.

Here, I analyse Gregory Burke's *Black Watch* (2006)⁸, Roy Williams's *Days of Significance* (2007)⁹ and Mark Ravenhill's *Shoot / Get Treasure / Repeat* (2008)¹⁰. Each play was written or staged during a period in which British troops were deployed both in Afghanistan, assisting the US army in fighting the Taliban, and in Iraq, where they had aided the invasion in 2003 and patrolled Iraq's second city, Basra. Moreover, each was staged by a national theatre, whether the Royal Shakespeare Company, National

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6. See Jenny Hughes, "Theatre, Performance and the 'War on Terror': Ethical and Political Questions Arising from British Theatrical Responses to War and Terrorism", *Contemporary Theatre Review*, vol. 17, n° 2, 2007, p. 149-164.
 7. Making an oblique yet clear reference to the US-led invasion of Iraq, the National Theatre's publicity read, "Just how far will a military leader go to save face and secure a military victory in the East?"
 8. Gregory Burke, John Tiffany, *Black Watch*, BBC DVD, 2008; *Black Watch*, London, Faber and Faber, 2010.
 9. Roy Williams, *Days of Significance*, in *Plays 3*, London, Methuen, 2008.
 10. Mark Ravenhill, *Shoot / Get Treasure / Repeat*, London, Methuen, 2009.

Theatre of Scotland, or Royal National Theatre. I ask how the British Army is represented on the contemporary UK stage. According to Taylor, the media and press tend to sanitise images of warfare, so as not to turn away valuable audiences and readerships. While British troops are in action on the battlefield, how might the UK's national stages either replicate or reject modes of representation deployed in the press and media, that tend to be dictated by government, military and economic powers?

Days of Significance, written in a naturalist style typical of Roy Williams and staged by the Royal Shakespeare Company, starts as a bunch of mates comprising a number of squaddies on leave, spill beer over each other's heads, wrestle each other to the ground, vomit on each other's shoes, urinate on each other's feet, pull each other's trousers down¹¹... However amusing this scene might be, placed immediately before the soldiers' departure for Iraq, it throws the legitimacy of the US-led coalition's claims to moral superiority, into serious doubt. The lack of responsibility and direction displayed on the streets of a small UK town becomes a microcosm of the chaotic absence of organisation manifested during the occupation of Iraq.

Problematically, whilst the war is portrayed as a shambolic mess rather than a victory, thereby questioning the authority of the US-led coalition, the soldiers themselves become heroes, thereby reinstating the powerful image of the British Army. Two of the mates, Jamie and Ben, patrol the streets of Basra. They come under fire and take cover in an alley, along with Sergeant Brookes, who has been shot. Though wincing and groaning, he shrugs off his injuries with manly bravery. The injured Brookes is unable to move, but Ben insists, "We ain't leaving him" (*sic*). Along with another soldier, they attempt to carry him, but collapse under his weight. Brookes then "realises what he must do. He crawls his way back to the wall. He removes his dagger from a side pocket and takes a deep last breath before stabbing himself in the stomach with it"¹². His samurai warrior heroism is matched by the bravery of Ben, who then hails a battle cry, upon which all the men run from cover. Ben loses his life, but neither his death, nor Brookes's, were in vain, since they saved their comrades' lives.

This heroic image is attenuated somewhat. The newspapers expose images of abuses in Iraq, in which Jamie is implicated. But in the play's closing moments, Jamie also confirms his status as hero. His girlfriend Hannah suggests he reveal that others were involved in the ill-treatment

11. Directed by Maria Aberg and produced by the Royal Shakespeare Company, it premiered as a promenade piece at the Swan, Stratford-upon-Avon (2007), before transferring to the Tricycle, London (2008).

12. Roy Williams, *Days of Significance*, p. 237.

of detainees. He retorts, “Grass on my mates? Dishonour myself as well as my unit?”¹³. To this image of the loyal hero, Williams also adds the image of the suffering victim. In the last scene, Hannah declares her intention to accompany Jamie to court: “I’ll go. I’ll go. Every day. I’ll hold his hand. I’ll listen as he gives evidence taking all of the blame. Sit and watch, as they all take turns crucifying him, march him off to prison for five years”¹⁴. Jamie is “crucified”; he “takes all the blame”; he is a sacrificial scapegoat. In other words, he is a victim. For theatre scholar Christian Biet, a victim is a hero by another name:

[...] en ce début de XXI^e siècle, la guerre semble s’être focalisée sur les témoins et les victimes. Si, naguère, les medias et les arts sollicitaient plutôt le témoignage de ceux qu’ils voyaient comme des héros et s’ils les célébraient en rappelant poétiquement leur geste épique, leur discours fait maintenant place au témoignage des faibles, des dominés, des vaincus, des « oubliés de l’histoire », comme pour contrevenir à l’héroïsation historiographique dont auraient été coupables les perfides précédentes. Le témoin contemporain berce sa nostalgie, exprime sa souffrance, la calme en la verbalisant, et on le sollicite pour cela même. La victime-témoin souffre, absolument, et sa souffrance est tout¹⁵.

Williams does not dispense entirely with the epic hero – the brave warrior, loyal comrade, brother in arms – that, for Biet, has all but disappeared from twenty-first-century culture. Williams enhances heroisation through victimisation, in turn bolstering the image of the army as a powerful, just institution. For Biet, “the victim[’s] suffering is everything”. The pathos provoked by Williams for the suffering heroic individual forecloses on the historical, political and economic contexts of the war, notably the highly questionable legitimacy of the Iraqi invasion, or the way in which young men’s lives are cynically seen as dispensable by governments that choose to go to war.

The hugely successful *Black Watch*, written by one of Scotland’s foremost playwrights, Gregory Burke, and directed by John Tiffany, was one of the inaugural shows of the new National Theatre of Scotland, founded in 2006¹⁶.

13. Roy Williams, *Days of Significance*, p. 265.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 277.

15. Christian Biet, “Éprouver la guerre au théâtre et au cinéma”, in *Les mises en scène de la guerre au XX^e siècle. Théâtre et cinéma*, David Lescot, Laurent Véray (eds.), Paris, Nouveau Monde, 2011, p. 17.

16. It premiered at the Drill Hall at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival and subsequently enjoyed an international tour.

The play, which tells the true account of the eponymous Scottish regiment's involvement in the Iraq War, portrays a shambolic spectacle of a chaotic war, whilst simultaneously, and problematically, celebrating martial power.

The production of *Black Watch* opened with a traditional spectacle of Scottish pride: a projection of the saltire – the blue and white Scottish national flag – swept the stage as a brass band blared. This, and the traverse seating, evoked the Edinburgh Military Tattoo – a pageant of marching bands and artillery displays taking place just a few hundred yards away at Edinburgh Castle. However, in *Black Watch*, this exuberant fanfare was interrupted by searchlights illuminating scaffolding watch towers. Any jubilant celebration of war that the military tattoo might portray, was adulterated. This spoiled, soiled, image of war is reinforced by dialogue, in part comprising verbatim interviews conducted by Burke with Black Watch veterans, whose words feature in scenes where a writer interviews them in a pub over a game of pool. In answer to the writer's question, "So what did [the war] tell you?", the play's central protagonist Cammy replies in his thick Scottish accent, "That I didn'ay want tay be in the army any more"¹⁷. The Iraq War was an unsolicited act of aggression with which the veterans take no pride in being associated. The pub scene then shifts to Iraq, as gunfire scatters the lads and the stage is plunged into darkness. Out of the pool table appears a dagger that rips through the baize. Two soldiers in desert combats emerge. As well as being a deft theatrical scene transition, this image, evocative of the soldier who bursts into the hotel room in Sarah Kane's *Blasted*, portrays the war in Iraq as a fetid wound that has been opened.

Whilst the Iraq War is condemned, it is paradoxically presented in a manner that is impressive and enticing, rather than sordid. Burke and Tiffany consequently provide a spectacle of military power. Huge explosions fill the air, as the US Air Force bomb Iraqi insurgent positions. Jets streak overhead, as the mates holler, "Fucking cowboys", and banter with devil-may-care humour¹⁸. War in the production became a *son et lumière*, an action movie. Choreography, costume and rousing music enhanced this alluring image. In what has become one of the production's signature scenes, a red carpet was rolled out and, as Cammy narrated the proud three-hundred-year history of the Black Watch, he was dressed, bedecked and adorned by his fellow soldiers in the ceremonial kilts, sporrans and tam o'shanter worn over the centuries, and snapped to the flash of cameras¹⁹.

17. Gregory Burke, John Tiffany, *Black Watch*, p. 7.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 40.

19. For an excellent discussion of fashion in the play, see Joanne Zerdy, "Fashioning a Scottish Operative: *Black Watch* and Banal Theatrical Nationalism on Tour in the US", *Theatre Research International*, vol. 38, n° 3, 2013, p. 181-195.

Critic Rebecca Robinson claims that this fashion parade should be taken as an ironic mockery of militarism, as “superficial spectacle rather than literal description”²⁰. The production nevertheless ended in a pageant of military splendour. The entire cast marched in unison to the sound of bagpipes and drums set in a modern arrangement evocative of Hollywood movies like *Braveheart*. This crescendo of patriotic military celebration, composed of dance, song and costume, created a vibrant piece of physical theatre that portrayed the soldiers as proud Celtic warrior heroes, and enhanced the image of a powerful, righteous fighting force.

The production provided images not only of military pride, but also, like *Days of Significance*, of soldiers as victims. The tank in which the soldiers are patrolling is hit²¹. In a scenario reminiscent of the scene with Sergeant Brookes in *Days of Significance*, the soldiers must await back-up. We learn later that a suicide bomber has killed himself and three soldiers – a scene based on a real-life episode of the Black Watch’s tour of duty in Iraq. Whilst Burke claims that he wanted to show “what Iraq is like for the troops on the ground”, the production heavily aestheticised these deaths²². The three soldiers were propelled upside-down into the air by a huge blast. Their faces and clothes streaked in blood, they floated, one by one, to the ground. The three suspended victims were backlit in an ethereal patriotic blue, their silhouettes, arms outstretched, like an inverted Christ and the thieves at Golgotha. Gracefully, like angels, they floated to the ground. In a moment also evocative of Christ’s crucifixion, they were taken down from their suspended positions and carried over the shoulders of their fellow soldiers. Firstly, this aestheticisation of the murderous attack, whilst creating a theatrically striking image, elided the horror of war that, according to John Taylor, the combined powers of governments and the media succeed in omitting. Visual critic Georges Didi-Huberman writes, “*En mettre plein les yeux: c’est le contraire exactement de donner à voir*”²³. Images that impress can lie about the truth. The truth is surely that war is dirty, messy and certainly not something at which one would choose to gaze. Secondly, like *Days of Significance*, these soldiers are portrayed as innocent sacrificial victims, martyrs to their cause. The Commanding Officer laments the fact that “there will be no victory parade” for his men, further reinforcing the

20. Rebecca Robinson, “The National Theatre of Scotland’s *Black Watch*”, *Contemporary Theatre Review*, vol. 22, n° 3, 2012, p. 392, 397.

21. Gregory Burke, John Tiffany, *Black Watch*, p. 53.

22. Gregory Burke, John Tiffany, *Black Watch*, BBC DVD.

23. Georges Didi-Huberman, “En mettre plein les yeux et rendre *Apocalypse* irragardable”, *Libération*, September 21, 2009, www.ecrans.fr/En-mettre-plein-les-yeux-et-rendre,8148.html (accessed October 22, 2013).

image that, even if this war is pointless, his men are still heroes, since war is heroic²⁴. The National Theatre of Scotland's first artistic director, Vicky Featherstone, echoes this: "War is based on glory. And there is no glory in an illegal war [...]. My heart broke for what we were doing to [the soldiers]"²⁵. By highlighting the vulnerability of individual troops, the collective power of the army is paradoxically strengthened, since its righteousness is reinforced. *Black Watch*'s images of bombing, kilt-wearing swagger, heroism, pride and the noble death of innocents, celebrate army power and warfare.

In a study of violence, Slavoj Žižek makes a distinction between "subjective violence" and "objective violence":

At the forefront of our minds, the obvious signals of violence are acts of crime and terror, civil unrest, international conflict. But we should learn to step back, to disentangle ourselves from the fascinating lure of this directly visible "subjective" violence, violence performed by a clearly identifiable agent. We need to perceive the contours of the background which generates such outbursts²⁶.

Days of Significance and *Black Watch* present the "fascinating lure of this directly visible 'subjective' violence". Images of individual soldiers' heroism and victimisation treat the immediate causes and effects of terror and conflict, omitting to examine the wider implications of war. According to Žižek, we must avoid "the overpowering horror of violent acts and empathy with the victims", that "inexorably function as a lure which prevents us from thinking". Rather, we must cast "dispassionate" "sideways glances" and conduct patient, critical analysis²⁷. *Days of Significance* and *Black Watch* were both produced by national theatres – the RSC and NTS. Just as Taylor observes that graphic images of dead home troops are omitted from the press and media during wars in the interests of decorum, it is perhaps "improper" for a national theatre *not* to laud its troops and the army's power whilst the nation is at war. And yet, Mark Ravenhill's *Shoot / Get Treasure / Repeat*, co-produced by the Royal National Theatre, paints a far more devastating and damning image of war, and exposes the "objective violence" of political and economic powers that precipitates the "subjective violence" of war. This play thus testifies to the manner in which, *in toto*, the national theatres of the UK permit theatre-makers and spectators to cast "sideways glances", to engage in the kind of critical reflection that constitutes Žižek's "objective" analysis of violence.

24. Gregory Burke, John Tiffany, *Black Watch*, p. 58.

25. Gregory Burke, John Tiffany, *Black Watch*, BBC DVD.

26. Slavoj Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections*, London, Profile Books, 2009, p. 1.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

Shoot / Get Treasure / Repeat is, in Ravenhill's words, "an epic cycle of short plays"²⁸. The army features in several of the plays, including *War and Peace*, discussed here²⁹. However, no heroism, pride or self-worth is on show. Rather, soldiers are out-of-place, uncanny, not so as to portray them as fragile, vulnerable victims, but so as to highlight the inherent wrongness of war, not mentioned by Williams or Burke.

In *War and Peace*, seven-year-old Alex is visited by a headless soldier. Typical of Ravenhill's theatre, recognisable realities – a child's bedroom – are shot through with expressionist symbols. The soldier has no redeeming features that might enable spectators to celebrate him either as a hero or victim. The previous play, *Fear and Misery*, presents Alex's parents Harry and Olivia, who display all the trappings of middle-class life: they are hedge fund managers and drive an SUV. The production of this particular play in the series took place in the fashionable bar of the Royal Court Theatre, around a genteel dinner table³⁰. In *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, Žižek states that the 2001 terrorist attacks on the USA had the intention, or at least the effect, of awakening "Western citizens, from our numbness, from immersion in our everyday ideological universe"³¹. In other words, "'irrational' violence should be conceived as strictly correlative to the depoliticisation of our societies"³². In Ravenhill's *War and Peace*, it is not terrorism that bursts into the protected middle-class world of comfortable consumerism, but the War on Terror (although the play references no specific war or period). From the safety of Europe or the USA, from the seats of military power, there is a tendency to perceive war as removed from our daily lives. Here, war infiltrates and irreversibly impacts on apparent peace.

Žižek highlights the "irrational" violence of terrorism that rouses the happily affluent from their depoliticised slumber. Ravenhill stages situations where this middle class is shaken not by terrorism, but by the very wars that enable it to retain power. Across *Shoot / Get Treasure / Repeat*, the argument is made, that war is intimately associated with capitalist power. Ravenhill's intimations are vindicated by the fact that the invasion of Afghanistan was provoked by a terrorist attack on the World Trade Center, at the time, the pre-eminent symbol of the United States' economic might. The ensuing wars

28. For a detailed account of the productions, see Marguerita Laera, "Mark Ravenhill's *Shoot / Get Treasure / Repeat*: A Treasure Hunt in London", *Theatre Forum*, vol. 35, January 2009, p. 3-9. The plays were staged at venues across London (2008), from a Victorian warehouse in Shoreditch, to a café, a park, to the Gate at Notting Hill, Royal Court, and National Theatre.

29. Each play is named after a major work, whether play, film, novel or pop song.

30. The plays, directed by Dominic Cooke, were staged together.

31. Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, London, Verso, 2002, p. 9.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 133.

made available billion-dollar contracts for US and European companies who provided weapons, security and infrastructure. Moreover, war and terrorism sell newspapers and attract television audiences, contributing crucially to the media industry, as Kane's *Blasted* exposes. The soldier says to Alex:

[...] everything exists because of me, because I go out there and I fight the fucking towelheads. [...] And if we can't fight them fucking towelheads then this is over, right – yeah? Yeah? This place, gated community, hedge funds, that's over unless I'm fighting the fighting³³.

Rather than only presenting the “subjective violence” of war – the shelling, maiming, wrecking – Ravenhill delves deeper than Williams and Burke into the “objective violence” that provokes wars, for instance, the relationship between the comfortable materialist life of those in economic control, and the sordid reality of the wars that sustain this life.

The “soldier with his head blown off” who walks through the wall of Alex's bedroom is no revered or celebrated unknown warrior; no mythical, mysterious headless horseman of Celtic myths or German folk tales. Alex tries to insist on the same kind of sanitisation of war that Taylor critiques. As the soldier, whom Alex has just shot, writhes in pain, he tells him not to swear in his bedroom, and complains that there is blood on the duvet. But at every turn, the undesirable, unthinkable, seeps like blood through the desired decorum. There is nothing sanitised or censored, sensational or salacious about Ravenhill's image of war. Alex describes the soldier as “disgusting”, “filthy”, smelling “of alleyway”. The soldier has been abandoned by his girlfriend and mates, and sleeps in an alleyway³⁴. In ways far starker than Williams's and Burke's, Ravenhill's image of war is brutal, miserable, degrading.

The headless soldier appears to symbolise the inevitability of war. He visits Alex because he wants the young boy's head so that he can serve another tour of duty³⁵. Alex's head becomes a symbol of the youth, strength and wealth of a nation upon which war depends in order to sustain itself. Reciprocally, wars are fought to safeguard a nation's political power and economic wealth. War becomes an eternal and universal fact, as the soldier affirms: “Live without food, live without money – you can do it, it's hard but you do it. Live without family, live without friends – that's easy. But live without war? No human being's ever done that. Never will. It's what makes us human”³⁶.

33. Sarah Kane, *Blasted*, p. 58.

34. Mark Ravenhill, *Shoot / Get Treasure / Repeat*, p. 51, 53.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 59.

36. *Ibid.*, p. 54.

Fighting becomes predestined, inescapable. This is illustrated by the fact that the play ends with Alex, who represents the new generation, shooting the soldier in the arm, and uttering the words, “And the soldier went but Alex kept his gun. And the war went on”³⁷. Unlike *Black Watch*, whose spectacles of pumped-up masculinist bravado celebrate military power, Ravenhill’s expose war as destruction, degradation, debilitation.

The headless soldier who eternally haunts the living and hunts for fresh heads in *Shoot / Get Treasure / Repeat* could be perceived as a pessimistic indictment of the human propensity towards destruction. The head – the Enlightenment symbol, and physical, bodily seat of knowledge, logic and reason – is removed, ceding to a Dionysian orgy of uncontrollable violence. And yet, of all the depictions of the army examined here, Ravenhill’s paradoxically provides the most politically affirmative and progressive. Ravenhill’s evocations of war involve dreamlike or nightmarish elliptical juxtapositions of the everyday and supernatural, the prosaic and poetic, in contrast with Williams’s and Burke’s more realist depictions and recognisable characters. Ravenhill nonetheless provides a more candid, honest image of the horrific ravages wrought by war. In his meditation on the political significance of tragedy, UK literary theorist Terry Eagleton writes, “Tragedy can be among other things a symbolic coming to terms with our finitude and fragility, without which any political project is likely to founder”³⁸. Ravenhill presents human suffering and vulnerability without resorting to the uplifting chivalry and heroism displayed by Williams and Burke. He thus challenges the powerful triad of government, media and economic power that dictates everyday representations of war, and that Williams and Burke tend to replicate. In addition, and finally, rather than constituting a fatalist or pessimistic submission to the inevitability of war, Ravenhill’s focus on perishability becomes the foundation of a politics and ethics. By so intimately linking war to capitalist power, Ravenhill proposes an exit from the cycle of violence that he establishes: if capitalist consumerism ceases to be the default economic model, then perhaps wars will cease to be such a ubiquitous feature of our reality...

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37. Mark Ravenhill, *Shoot / Get Treasure / Repeat*, p. 62.

38. Terry Eagleton, *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic*, Oxford, Blackwell, 2003, p. 15.

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