

## CHAPTER TWO: Newspapers on the Stage (1920 – 2012)

There is a magic to theatre, a kind of enchantment in the way it distils a subject and brings it to a comprehensible essence, then, by revealing hidden meanings, it provokes – through climax and catharsis – an emotional response from the audience. This response varies according to the genre of the play, from laughter to horror, nostalgia to fury, but whatever happens it should provoke argument, discussion, thought and feeling. This chapter, on the form of writing for the stage, looks at how to focus attention through theatre, how putting the story and the characters onto a stage crystallises what is being said and done, which can in turn transform that world into a different kind of reality, sometimes many different realities – pulling in the attention of the audience like a magnet, demanding the suspension of disbelief. In the words of Samuel Taylor Coleridge “that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith.”<sup>1</sup> Robert McKee maintains the audience must always believe in the “world” of your story – saying to writers “the magic of ‘as if’ transports the audience from their private to your fictional world.”<sup>2</sup> The best plays can transfix an audience, keeping it spellbound, it works as a kind of sorcery, different every time, dependent on the actor for its humanity.

There is a parallel between the sensory nature of theatre and the sensory experience of the printed word versus the more detached experience of looking at a television screen or a tablet, which in sheer physical terms distances players from the observers. Reading words on paper is like holding words, whether in book form or magazine or newspaper, like theatre it is a physical experience. The stage itself holds the performers, as though the playwright cups the story in his hands and offers it to the audience.

In this chapter I look at how stage plays work, and consider how other playwrights have approached the subject of writing about the Press. To look at how theatre has treated the story of life on a newspaper over the last 90 years, I have

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<sup>1</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge “Biographia Literaria (1817)”, <<http://www.english.upenn.edu/~mgamer/Etexts/biographia.html>> (accessed 19 April 2017).

<sup>2</sup> Michael Margolis, Interview with Robert McKee- the Storytelling Movie Master <<https://www.getstoried.com/interview-with-robert-mckee-the-storytelling-movie-master/>> (accessed 19 April 2017).

chosen to analyze four plays, written in the period from the 1920s to the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, each reflecting the time in which they were written and the newspapers of their day. These in the forthcoming order are: *The Front Page*<sup>3</sup> (1928), a comedy set in Chicago; *Pravda*<sup>4</sup> (1985), a satire of Fleet Street; *Enquirer*<sup>5</sup> (2012), the verbatim promenade production put on first in Glasgow, then in London by the Barbican Centre; and *Blasted*<sup>6</sup> (1995), realism at its brutal worst set in Leeds;

To look at how theatre represents The Press I shall investigate how it has been done by other writers at other times – so I have looked at how the Press was seen decades before digitalization changed the way the world received its news and reflected on playwrights' efforts to deal with the many layers of "the Press" as it was a decade ago, when we gleaned our global news and its analyses from newspapers, radio, TV and magazines. Theatre was an integral part of cultural life.

There have been surprisingly few attempts to put the life of a newspaper on the stage since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, surprising given amount of attention the controversial practices of modern journalism such as phone hacking and invasion of privacy the celebrity culture has engendered. There are a few notable exceptions - Steve Thompson's lethal immorality tale of power-hungry hacks set in a tabloid newspaper *Damages* (2004),<sup>7</sup> Joe Penhall's three-hander, the comic and irreverent satire *Dumb Show* (2004)<sup>8</sup>, Lucy Kirkwood's *NSFW* (2012)<sup>9</sup>, also a comedy satirising media attitudes to the value of privacy, and Richard Bean's vitriolic political satire about phone hacking *Great Britain* (2014).<sup>10</sup> There are so many layers to the way such a story can be told. The first layer lies in the daily dramas told in newsprint every day, even now that circulations have drastically declined. A play about the Press should reveal the backstories, subtexts and moral dilemmas which make up a day in the life of a newspaper. When the inner workings of organisations were kept hidden, as happened for centuries with newspapers until Lord Justice

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<sup>3</sup> Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur, *The Front Page* (London, Samuel French, 1955).

<sup>4</sup> Howard Brenton and David Hare, *Pravda* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015).

<sup>5</sup> Andrew O'Hagan, *Enquirer* (London: First performed at The Barbican, 2012).

<sup>6</sup> Sarah Kane, *Blasted: New Edition* (London: Bloomsbury, 2003).

<sup>7</sup> *Damages*, Bush Theatre, London, 2 June 2004.

<sup>8</sup> *Dumb Show*, the Royal Court Theatre, London, 4 September 2004.

<sup>9</sup> *NSFW*, Jerwood Theatre Downstairs, London, 25 October 2012.

<sup>10</sup> *Great Britain*, the Royal National Theatre, London, 30 June 2014.

Leveson turned his searchlight on the British popular press in July 2011, for the most part playwrights have imagined the reality rather than journalists telling their own story, although there have been times when they have told it, and many of those plays are satires.

*The Front Page* is a racy farce written in Chicago in 1928 by two American journalists, Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur, who turned their journalistic skills to playwriting; *Pravda*, subtitled a “Fleet Street Comedy”, is a satire about the Fleet Street of the day by master of state-of-the-nation plays, David Hare, in collaboration with playwright Howard Brenton, this premiered at the National Theatre in 1985; then as part of the ‘In Yer Face’ theatre movement, Sarah Kane’s riveting first play, *Blasted*, produced at the Royal Court Upstairs Theatre in 1999 has as its male protagonist Ian, the personification of evil, a blighted, unscrupulous, unlovely and unloving jobbing journalist – reporters on the bottom rung of the hierarchy, writers otherwise known as hacks. In the end his vile behaviour warrants the horrible end Kane imagines for him. David Greig in his introduction to the play claims that: “Kane believes passionately that if it was possible to imagine something, it was possible to represent it.”<sup>11</sup> As it turns out her own father David was a tabloid journalist. Finally, *Enquirer* is a piece of verbatim theatre devised for the Scottish National Theatre in 2011 and produced off-site at the Barbican in 2012; based on over 50 hours of taped interviews of 43 journalists by journalists<sup>12</sup> – it is a bold attempt at mirroring the pace of life in a tabloid newspaper by perambulating the audience around with the action. All four plays are completely different theatrical treatments of journalism, journalists and their attitudes, as well as daily life in a national newspaper. These plays were chosen because each represents a different aspect of this world – a different era, style, language and genre, but what they have in common is a fiercely provocative intent.

One of the first great newspaper plays was *The Front Page*, initially produced in a small theatre in Times Square, New York in 1928. There were four further stage

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<sup>11</sup> David Greig, Introduction to *Sarah Kane: Complete Plays* (London: Methuen Contemporary Dramatists, 2001), xiii.

<sup>12</sup> “Enquirer”, *London Review of Books*, 2012 <<https://enquirer.lrb.co.uk/about/>> (accessed 19 May 2017).

productions. It was turned into a television series in 1949<sup>13</sup>, and in 1974, made into a Hollywood film directed by Billy Wilder.<sup>14</sup> The action is set in Chicago, using a single set, part of its power was that it was written by insiders, by two successful tabloid reporters who had worked for most of the news agencies and tabloids in Chicago, so bringing tough truth to the wry humour. Regarded as a screwball comedy<sup>15</sup>, it was in fact a serious piece of satire drawing attention to racism and sexism. This is not just a funny look at life, but a sharply perceptive comment on how crime reporting works in Chicago. It is a play about hypocrisy and corruption in Government, chauvinism and racism among reporters, and loyalties divided between love and work. An intimate snapshot of Chicago crime reporters by two men who knew what they were writing about. Charles MacArthur, who wrote for *The City News Bureau* of Chicago – the model for the play’s own tabloid, *The Examiner* - and Ben Hecht, already a known poet and lyricist, who would go on to work with Kurt Weill and trumpeter Louis Armstrong, were already friends. Like MacArthur, Hecht wrote for local papers, for the *Chicago Daily News* and *The Chicago Journal*, although from 1918 to 1919 he was war correspondent in Berlin, after which he started a much-read column for the *Chicago Daily News* called “A Thousand and One Afternoons in Chicago”.

His Editor, Henry Justin Smith, said: “His was to be a lens throwing new colours into city life, his the microscope revealing its contortions in life and death.”<sup>16</sup>

Recalling that time in his life, Hecht wrote:

I haunted streets, warehouses, police stations, courtrooms, theatre stages, jails, saloons, slums, madhouses fires, murders, riots, banquet halls and bookshops. I ran everywhere in the city like a fly buzzing in the works of a clock.<sup>17</sup>

As *The Wire* brings the writer’s experiences to life on the television screen, on stage *The Front Page* dialogue is vivid, characters saved from caricature by the

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<sup>13</sup> Franklin Heller, Creator, *The Front Page*, CBS Television, 1949.

<sup>14</sup> Billy Wilder, Director, *The Front Page*, Universal Pictures, 1974.

<sup>15</sup> Keith Call, *Oregon, Illinois*. (South Carolina: Arcadia Publishing, 2005), 97.

<sup>16</sup> Ben Hecht, *A Thousand and One Afternoons in Chicago* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 10.

<sup>17</sup> Douglas Fetherling, *The Five Lives of Ben Hecht* (New York: New York Zeotrope, 1977), 19.

speed and wit of the plot. The story is of how a newspaper reporter nails an exclusive interview with a convicted killer, a man about to be hanged for killing a black policeman. Set at a time when the negro vote is at last beginning to count, the Sheriff and his cronies have realised their share of the popular vote will increase if they hang the man, but in a surprise reversal the prisoner escapes and the star reporter for *The Examiner*, Hildy Johnson, gets the chance to tell his story. But before he gets his exclusive, myriad twists and turns take us from the inciting incident – when the man, Earl Williams, escapes from the gallows – through one crisis after another to an ending which comes like a bolt from the blue. The writers' experience of reporting for tabloid papers informs all aspects of the play, from dialogue and dialect, to character, setting, plot, pace and tricks of the trade – such as how to snaffle a scoop from under the nose of your rivals. The inciting incident happens as the story opens with a group of reporters playing cards while they wait for the hanging of Earl Williams, the homeless man accused of killing a black policeman. The style of the times, the early 1920s, was to have a single setting throughout, in this case the dingy Press Room of Chicago's Criminal Courts Building which overlooks the gallows behind the Cook County Jail. Claustrophobic attention is focused on the stage, intensified because the set remains the same, so the audience sees what is happening in the room itself as the occupants wait for the play's crisis, the hanging, to take place. In fact, the gallows are outside the room of course, and the death happens off stage, but the audience expects to see the hanging take place in the last Act, which it does not. In a final dramatic twist, a phenomenal turning point, the tragedy is averted, the writers following Chekhov's memorable rule of coherence: "if in the first act you have hung a pistol on the wall, then in the following one it should be fired. Otherwise don't put it there".<sup>18</sup>

It is a farce with teeth of steel, full of subversion and surprise, which gave it many successful incarnations. Most of the action is in real time – with between 5 and 20 minutes lapsing between Acts. The tension is all the more explosive as it is set on the night before what is scheduled to be the last hanging before the electric chair becomes mandatory. There is a typically ghoulish sense of carnival humour among reporters from most of the city's newspapers, who are in their favourite club room,

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<sup>18</sup> Ernest J Simmons, *Chekhov: A Biography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), 190.

exchanging ferocious gallows banter as they wait for poor doomed guilty Earl Williams, the negro killer, to be hanged. They are playing low stakes poker, aware of the telephones dotted round the room labelled with the name of the newspaper they work for – hotlines to the office. The dialogue is peppered with poker jargon, scrappy street humour, the kind of overt racism and chauvinism which would be howled off the stage today, but echoes the climate of the time.

There are eight reporters of whom Hildy Johnson is the main protagonist. He is the star writer who wants the exclusive even though at the moment the play opens he is announcing his resignation from the paper. He says he wants to get married and become an advertising executive in New York, but the plot centres on how this dream is foiled. It never happens. The pull of writing, his own ambition, seeing his byline on the printed page, outweighs his commitment to fiancée Peggy at least while the hunt for the scoop heats his blood like a true newspaperman.

Women are dispensable in this man's world, whether they are wives or cleaners, the "scrub lady" Jenny who will not be parted from her broom, or Mollie who shows a rare compassion for Earl Williams as he is waiting to eat his last supper. The play was so successful it led to five further productions, but the language was controversial and not everyone appreciated the swearing. However, it was a direct reflection of daily life in a newspaper office, the way reporters spoke to one another, and it was immediately recognizable to the audience as the journalistic vernacular of the twenties.

At the beginning of the first Act, Hildy describes street walker Mollie as "a soiled and gaudy houri of the pavement."<sup>19</sup> Reporter Murphy retorts: "I took Bob Brody home the other night and he broke his wife's arm with a broom. If I was married to that woman I'd kick her humpbacked." (124) Another reporter, Kruger, says: "Why can't they jerk these guys at a reasonable hour so we can get some sleep? You can't hang a fellow in his sleep just to please a newspaper." (124)

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<sup>19</sup> Charles MacArthur, *The Stage Works of Charles MacArthur*. (Florida: Florida State University Foundation, 1974), 132.

The dialogue is crack-of-the-whip sharp, street dialect which brings a whole new meaning to the term “gallows humour”. Like the television series *The Wire*, which was to follow 70 years later, the rhythm and pace of the language is like rap or jazz, the dialogue of writers whose craft was honed by roaming the streets, hanging out with hoodlums, working on a tabloid. Together MacArthur and Hecht bring to their first stage play the menace of the gutter and the jargon of a paper whose favourite cliché became part of the title: “Hold the front page!”

It is widely held that *The Front Page* was controversial at the time for its use of profane language and references to sex, prostitution and perversion, and, therefore, deemed unfit for a decent audience. Modern critics claim that *The Front Page* “paved the way for the use of such language in theatre”.<sup>20</sup>

A play which examines the institution of the press, cannot ignore the link between the Press and politics. *The Front Page* shows the reporters seeing the Government’s bribery and corruption, but not reporting it; seeing the city fathers try to reel in the black vote in the upcoming local elections by hanging an innocent man, but not revealing it.

We learn from one of the reporters at the start:

This guy Williams is just a bird who had the bad luck to kill a nigger policeman in a town where the nigger vote is important. Williams was a bonanza for City Hall. He gets hung, everybody gets elected on a law and order platform. He’s a divine accident. (127)

As one of the reporters, Bensinger, explains to the re-write man back in his office, in one of the few pieces of exposition in the play:

Now here’s the situation on the eve of the hanging. The officials are prepared for a general uprising of radicals at the hour of execution, but the sheriff still refuses to be intimidated by the Red Menace, that is Friends of American Liberty and other Bolshevik organisations. Sheriff Hartman has just put 200 new relatives on the pay roll to protect the

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<sup>20</sup> Gale, Cengage Learning, *A Study Guide for Ben Hecht's "The Front Page"* (Michigan: Gale, Cengage Learning, 2016), Author Biography.

city against the red army which is leaving Moscow in a couple of minutes. (125)

The technique of keeping heroes off the stage is used twice to powerful effect – in the first and second Acts, starting with Hildy Johnson in Act I, when tension is heightened and sharpened by keeping him offstage until almost the end of the first Act – when he arrives to say goodbye, off to marry the girl, and eschew the life of a Chicago reporter.

The climax to the first Act is the jail break, when Williams escapes, the reporters chase the story and the pressroom is left empty but for Hildy, so that when Williams drops through the pressroom window and explains how he shot the cop by mistake, Hildy realises the Sheriff set him up and *The Examiner* has the scoop of all scoops, which signals the return to work of Hildy Johnson, the conscientious newspaperman.

The play is studded with turning points, reversals and climax. In Act II, 20 minutes later, we learn it is bride-to-be Peggy's birthday, the train awaits, the job awaits, her mother awaits and the prospect of marriage looms. As Hildy avoids the issue and tackles the story, the subplot follows another thread: the Mayor sacks the sheriff for putting 400 of his relatives on the payroll; the Governor sends a last-minute reprieve for Williams and Williams is pushed into hiding in the roll top desk. Mollie the whore is used as a decoy to distract attention from the desk, and in another deft turning point, Mollie throws herself out of the window. This marks the arrival of Walter, Managing Editor of *The Examiner*, a character based on Walter Howie, famously brash and eccentric Editor of Hearst newspapers.<sup>21</sup> The executive has a love/hate relationship with his star reporter, as many editors do, and, like Hildy in the first Act, adds to the drama by appearing only at the end of the Act II, by which time Hildy has started to write again.

The climax of Act II comes as Walter, who has only appeared as a kind of apparition at the end, shouts into the telephone telling *The Examiner* to forget all the

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<sup>21</sup> "The Press: Will the Ice Age Return?" *Time*, August 13, 1945.  
<<http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,792297,00.html>> (accessed 19 May 2017).



other stories – as he asks who cares about the earthquake in China? In Act III, the challenge is to get Earl out of the building and into *The Examiner* to be interviewed in secret. Can they carry the chalice to the altar without spilling the elixir? Walter is pacing up and down, Hildy is typing his heart out, and Earl still crouching under the desk. The shades are drawn, but the lights full up. Walter has ordered a bunch of tough guys to carry the desk, with the killer in it, over to *The Examiner*, but the quest for the perfect scoop throws up its own obstacles – the moon is too bright, the men take too long – Walter forgot to tell them to take taxis, the reporters want the pressroom, Bensinger wants his desk and what might the Sheriff be doing?

It's that three-toed Sheriff I'm worrying about. If he starts sticking his snoot into this – I wonder if I could arrest him for anything? Did you ever get the dope on that stenographer he seduced? (158)

This leads to a résumé of the Sheriff's known misdemeanours, a battle over how to write the story - Walter wants to call the little man cowering in the roll top desk a "bolshevik tiger who jumps snarling from the gallows". (159) The reporters rattle on the door while Walter comes up with ever more ruthless ruses to get rid of them and Hildy has an unlikely emotional crisis over Peggy's disappearance: "I'll never love anyone else again!" (161)

Walter, disgusted, orders him back on the story. The writers use this to show the effect of this anarchy is to reveal the real power of an editor in the office hierarchy- despite a crisis, if you work for a newspaper, the story always comes first. Then just before the final scene, Walter change tactics, does a U-turn and as a peace offering gives Hildy his own watch, with the inscription: "To the best newspaperman I know." (171)

The two men hug nostalgically, Hildy and Peggy exit hand-in-hand. Then, in a final stunning reversal, Walter crosses to the hotline, telephones *The Examiner* and instructs the office to send a wire to the Chief of Police in New York: "Arrest Hildy Johnson and bring him back here...the son of a bitch stole my watch!" (172) We see now not just the almost slapstick comedy, but its incisive satire and the dark quality of the humour.

This edgy darkness is common to most reporters, print and television, who share a kind of sceptical objectivity. Inevitably these characteristics are standout qualities which identify and define journalists, shared by the plays I have chosen as representations of newspaper life as it has been and remains.

The English playwrights Howard Brenton and David Hare's satire *Pravda*, written in the early Eighties about Fleet Street, premiered in 1985. It uses humour in a different way to make the same points, follow the same themes about the state of the Press in our society, and to analyse the kind of job a national paper does in gathering and delivering the news. It is a very different kind of very British comedy. It was written when satire reigned in print with *Private Eye*<sup>22</sup>, on television with *That Was the Week That Was*<sup>23</sup> and on the radio with current affairs sketch show *Week Ending*<sup>24</sup>. It was also when the first big newspaper takeover triggered a monumental change in how journalism worked. In fact, it would signal the demise of Fleet Street as Rupert Murdoch moved his newspapers to Wapping and the Isle of Dogs, fragmenting the cozy camaraderie of editors along "the Street of Shame", as *Private Eye* dubbed it. As tradition gave way to commerce in the 1980's, Hare saw the dramatic value in Murdoch's swashbuckling, but irreversible takeover of *Times* Newspapers in 1981. Noting how Murdoch forced the resignation of William Rees-Mogg, Editor of *The Times* for seven years, replacing him without warning with the more glamorous and less conservative Harold Evans, Hare joined forces with Brenton to write a play about the state of Britain's newspapers, but used the Russian word *Pravda* for its title. In Russian the word means "truth", and Hare and Brenton evoke Marxist polemic by using the name of the leading Russian newspaper which ran from 1918 to 1991, published in Moscow, a propaganda organ for the Communist party and a publication of the Central Committee of the Communist Party. It was closed down in 1991 by President Yeltsin.

The play dissects the workings of a newspaper by poking fun at the people who write and run newspapers through looking at the worlds of three different kinds of newspaper – *The Leicester Bystander*, a provincial weekly, *the Daily Victory*, an

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<sup>22</sup> *Private Eye*, 1961 – present

<sup>23</sup> BBC TV, 1962-1963

<sup>24</sup> BBC Radio 4, 1970-1998

upmarket broadsheet, and *the Daily Tide*, a red-top tabloid along the lines of *The Sun* or *the Daily Mirror*. Using a simple two Act structure and Murdoch's powerful persona on which to build the character of the newspaper proprietor, Lambert Le Roux, Hare and Brenton wrote the character as a caricature, like a pantomime villain, played in its first production with a clipped South African accent, demonic relish and reptilian ferocity by celebrity actor Anthony Hopkins.<sup>25</sup>

Described in the dialogue as "The Foundry of Lies" (113), *Pravda's* key protagonist is the hero whose journey we follow, ambitious young journalist Andrew May, said to be based on one-time Editor of *The Times* Harold Evans. (ibid.) May's fictional ascent to power is as dizzying as his precipitous fall, and his puppet masters are first the owner of an old-fashioned provincial paper, *The Leicester Bystander*, Sir Stamford Foley, whose daughter he marries, and later buys that paper – and then Lambert Le Roux, based on Rupert Murdoch, then proprietor of News Corporation. The critic Frank Rich described *Pravda* as "an epic comedy - part *The Front Page*, part *Arturo Ui*."<sup>26</sup> Trying to emulate the rough and tumble of the newsroom, the language is full of jargon and swearing and Le Roux's dialogue slips from international man of means to irritated News Editor within moments.

The question the play asks is what effect do newspapers have on society, and, crucially, the question everyone wants an answer to - do they tell the truth? In the words of the hero of the piece, journalist Andrew May, Editor of three of the papers during the course of the play, the playwrights' view of what the public think is given a scornful airing. Towards the end of Act II, he says: "This perpetual distortion of the truth. It has an effect. It's insidious. This contempt for balance...British peoples' minds are fogging, clogging...decaying...silting up with falsehood." (103)

Long before the 'post-truth' and 'alternative facts' of today, the play suggests the British papers do not bother with facts if it is not in their interest, and although there is an ambition on the part of May to find a more noble form of journalism, it turns out to be hard to find. The writers subtitled the play "A Fleet Street Comedy", and using a curious blend of irony and farce, declared they were putting Fleet Street

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<sup>25</sup> Carol Homden, *The Plays of David Hare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 88.

<sup>26</sup> Frank Rich, "Highs and Lows of the London Stage", *New York Times*, 14 July 1985. <<http://www.nytimes.com/1985/07/14/theater/highs-and-lows-of-the-london-stage.html?pagewanted=all> > (accessed 10 April 2017).

on the stage –with all its secrets and lies, and used humour to prod holes in the idea of the successful popular newspaper and the journalists who make it work, seeking to expose them through satire. The play premiered at the National Theatre, where Hare was Associate Director, in May 1985. As luck would have it, first night was on the eve of the outbreak of the Wapping dispute between Murdoch and the print unions, which spun it into the limelight, making it the most topical play on the London stage. The crux of the story was unashamedly based on how *The Times* Newspapers were sold to Australian media magnate Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation – an event which shook Fleet Street to its bones and was a major factor in the disintegration of “the Street” as a world centre for world news, the geographical location of some of the greatest newspapers on earth, as the grimy old city street made way for its news gatherers' move to the shiny new buildings of Wapping and the Isle of Dogs in the East End Docklands. These were moves which helped to change the course of newspaper history in this country.

*Pravda* looks at every aspect of this world with forensic glee, from the aristocracy who owned the papers then – the great newspaper families and press barons, such as Beaverbrook, Rothermere, Astor and Thompson, men who, like Randolph Hearst who started Hearst Magazines in America, and built fortunes on their power base – to the reporter, who gathers the stories, and the vendors, who used to sell papers in the street.

Fleet Street was lined with newspaper offices, one after another, linked to the Palace of Westminster, close to the Law Courts and the Old Bailey, complacent in their strengths, dignified by what until then had been unalienable authority. The Street had been for decades the home of newspapers, but Murdoch had no respect for history as he flexed his muscles against the unions, he moved his papers out of Fleet Street to Wapping docks, signalling the end of Fleet Street as it then was. Hare saw this as something to write about, a drama not to be missed.

At the climax to the Act I, Le Roux takes charge of the News Room, Kelvin Mackenzie style (the former Editor of *The Sun*), and the audience gets a dose of his editorial tactics.

LE ROUX: What the fuck is happening? What the fuck is going on here? Christ I've never read such a load of fucking shit! It's shit! It's shit! What a load of fucking shit! God who writes this fucking rubbish?  
(55)

And he tears the paper into shreds.

In his play *A Map of the World*, Hare's character Victor Mehta says: "The act of writing is the act of discovering what you believe."<sup>27</sup> *Pravda* is quite obviously a voyage of discovery for Hare and Brenton. The ambitious fictitious journalist, Andrew May, makes a U-turn from editing an upper-class broadsheet *The Victory*, where he climbs to the top, only to be fired for publishing a libel (about Le Roux), ending up by having to settle for the editorship of a down-market tabloid, also owned by Le Roux. The writer's target from the start is the white middle-class elite as they drift to the Right in Thatcher's Eighties' Britain, probably the audience which kept the play on the stage at the National for over a year, and the audience in its seat for more than two hours at a time. "I myself was thrown by the Eighties" says Hare, who some see as a dissident Liberal. "This play, and my conversations with Howard – was for me a way to understand what was going on (politically)."<sup>28</sup>

It is both a morality tale and a comedy of manners, which, in comparison to the madcap American comedy and breakneck speed of *The Front Page*, has the slow and measured pace of lunch at a gentleman's club. However satirical the intention, the reality is that through the clubby jargon, the shared "in" jokes, the intended object of derision becomes an object of fascination to the audience who delighted in guessing at which character was a caricature of which real-life newspaperman – for instance, Andrew May was Harold Evans, Elliot Fruit-Norton was William Rees-Mogg, displaced Editor of *The Times*, and Le Roux, of course, Rupert Murdoch.<sup>29</sup> Hare said in 1985, when the play was performed at the National: "The kind of comedy we tried to write is one, we hope, of democratic laughter. The audience is invited to dissociate themselves from the tiny clique of the ruling class paraded across the stage."<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Carol Homden, *The Plays of David Hare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 124.

<sup>28</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> *ibid.*, 88.

<sup>30</sup> *ibid.*, 97.

By making such a seductive villain out of the Murdoch figure, Le Roux, *Pravda* ends up virtually celebrating the malign energy of corrupt proprietors, lying business men and self-serving politicians.

Like Hecht and MacArthur with *The Front Page*, Hare and Brenton used a two-act structure and newspaper office interiors to tell their story, but with a larger cast (31 without journalists, news vendors and others) and less “screwball” comedy, the essence of which is “light and humorous incidents involving erratic, eccentric and unconventional individuals”.<sup>31</sup> The play and the film version of *The Front Page* can be seen as American screwball comedies<sup>32</sup>, whereas *Pravda* is a more serious approach to life in the British newspaper world. The story starts with a small local family-owned newspaper, where the political view is conservative traditional, the symbolic story of how Thatcher’s Britain, caught in the grip of voracious capitalism, moves from Left to Right. In the first Act, the local paper is sold by its owner for short-term capital gain. “Dad, you’ve sold the paper for a horse. That’s all”, says the proprietor’s daughter Rebecca drily cynical, to her father Sir Stamford Foley. (25) The shortest scene is the very beginning when there is a less-than-five-minute drawing-room comedy, or flirtation, as Andrew meets Rebecca and she expresses dismay when she finds out he is a journalist (although she goes on to marry him). Her father sells the paper, the hacks get fired and the climax at the end of Scene 2 has deposed Editor Harry reaching for a blunt razor blade to finish his misery as Andrew receives the news that he will be the new Editor.

From there, Andrew moves on to a more prestigious broadsheet, marries Rebecca who follows him to Fleet Street as a freelance writer, and settles in to a comfortable middle-class lifestyle until an error of judgment sees him sacked for deciding to print a leaked document in the days when such a thing was against the law. The play covers key historical events in the story of Fleet Street, including the mass sacking of journalists and most of the advertising department of *The Times*.

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<sup>31</sup> Doris Milberg, *The Art of Screwball Comedy: Madcap Entertainment from the 1930s to Today*, (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland, 2013), 6.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

Using South Africa, rather than Australia, to indicate the man's "otherness" and co-incidentally avert threat of libel, at the start of Scene 3, Le Roux's monologue brings the narrative direct to the audience, as he explains his South African background and passion for nature, and the play flags up the primal competition for power about to unfold.

LE ROUX: What I admire about nature is – animals, birds, plants, they fucking get on with it and don't stand about complaining all the time.  
(27)

The key turning point in the play hinges on a typical piece of Fleet Street skulduggery as one of the several subplots. In Scene 3, Le Roux suddenly reveals his hitherto hidden desire to buy Conservative MP Michael Quince's mother out of her shares in *The Victory*. Quince agrees to a deal whereby he will talk the trustees into letting Le Roux buy the shares and, in turn, this devious alliance will ensure *The Victory* is seen to support Quince's political future. Rebecca Foley, token woman, love interest for May, has most of the best one-liners in the play.

To Andrew, when they meet, he says: "So you're a journalist?" And she replies: "Isn't everybody?" (18-19) Later, in Act II, she says: "Walking into other peoples' lives, that's what I loved best about being a journalist - opening strange wardrobes, looking under beds." (39)

She says to Andrew: "Promise me you'll never tell the same lie three times" (...) "The same lie three times a day. You promise?" (...) "Three times and I leave you." (53) Which she does, in a surprise reversal in the middle of Act II.

The mirroring of their relationship with that of the real-life people the characters are based on, Harold Evans and Tina Brown, titillated the sophisticated National Theatre audience. Harold Evans, made Editor of *The Times* by Murdoch, and Tina Brown, then-editor of the *Tatler*, later of America's *Vanity Fair*, were the golden couple of the media in the Eighties. On stage, they marry at the end of Act I, revealing their secret to Le Roux just as he finishes sacking several journalists whose work has displeased him. By Act II, still set in the newsroom of the upmarket *The Victory*, the scene revolves around the re-writing of a news story about the

women protesting at the building of a new nuclear missile, clearly referring to the Greenham Common protestors. A journalist, Larry Punt, has written a piece which *Fantom*, the *Night Editor*, then rips through, making it sharper, meaner, less respectful of the women and making up most of it as he goes along.

While the Union representative says the workers are unhappy with their pay and conditions and the quality of writing is deteriorating, the writers and editors feel powerless. In this cauldron of discontent, Rebecca hands Andrew a document given to her by the Ministry of Defence – leaking a story about power stations being unsafe. Andrew decides to publish and be damned. Le Roux opposes him, Rebecca refuses to say who gave her the document and Le Roux fires Andrew who swears public revenge on Le Roux, whose editorial style is famously rude.

It is the prelude to more slaughter, more sackings, more blood on the walls. Various groups decide they want to buy an alternative paper, *The Usurper*. They want to own and run their own newspaper. The story covers the most obvious issues taxing Fleet Street in the Eighties: using paradox and contradiction the protagonists want to preserve editorial freedom, but will resort to chequebook journalism to beat their rivals. They buy unverified accusations against Le Roux in the hope of blackening his “whiter than white” name. To earn the reputation of being a decent honest newspaper they will fill the pages with murderous sensationalism to increase the circulation figures.

The final scene is set in the newsroom of yet another newspaper, *the Daily Tide* – this one a red-top tabloid full of tits and bums and down-market stories about soap stars and footballers, and the final twist in Andrew’s quest for media glory is that he has been appointed Editor of the sort of newspaper he most despised at the start of the play, and the issue exercising him to the point of hysterical rage is the state of the breasts of his Page 3 Girl. (112)



Clearly feeling justified in using his play as propaganda, Hare says: “ We’re trying to teach people to decode newspapers because we think there’s a great deal of news management and that what passes for news, isn’t”.<sup>33</sup>

Criticisms of the play are that it actually distorts the truth about the Press. Carole Homden calls *Pravda* “a writers’ revenge” against bad notices, and, most likely, in Brenton’s case, the private prosecution which arose from a television series he wrote called *Romans in Britain*.<sup>34</sup> When Le Roux says at the very end of Act II Scene 5, the end of the play, “Welcome to the Foundry of Lies” (113), the audience has been there already for more than two hours and the title itself has flagged up the fact that the play will reveal an obvious but uncomfortable truth. As Homden says in her analysis: “*Pravda* may be about a political phenomenon but became a conceited comedy for the theatre-going elite.”<sup>35</sup> Le Roux points at himself as the answer to the play’s question, but in the end the key question is not Le Roux and who he is or what he does, but does the play as a whole challenge the audience’s belief in the accuracy of what is reported as fact? The answer is probably not.

Le Roux: Good papers are no good, there’s no point in them. All that writing. Why go to the trouble producing good ones when bad ones are so much easier? And they sell better too.

Andrew May: I’m beaten, I know. The landscape is blasted. Every decent hope people had, blasted. I just cling to this idea of language. That sentence means something. Hang on to the sentence. ‘On the one hand on the other ...’

Le Roux: Editorial freedom, you never used it when you had it. It is fast gone. Why should you deserve freedom anymore? (108)

*Pravda* is about the Press as propaganda, should newspapers be used to push politics and if they are, is what is being pushed the truth? *Pravda*, for all its sophisticated mirroring between plot and life, is not a savage satire, more an affectionate laugh at what is now an ancient institution – less like *Private Eye*’s “Street of Shame”, where real people telling real lies are named and shamed to their sometimes incandescent fury (millionaire banker Jimmy Goldsmith, for instance, had

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<sup>33</sup> Carol Homden, *The Plays of David Hare* (Cambridge Cambridge University Press, 1995), 89.

<sup>34</sup> *ibid.*, 93

<sup>35</sup> *ibid.*, 99

a libel case which almost bankrupted *Private Eye*, whereas now his millionaire sons, ecologist Ben, and Conservative M.P. Zac, court the power of *the Daily Mail*).

*Enquirer*, a verbatim piece of theatre presented in response to the attention focussed on the press by the Leveson Inquiry, was put together and produced in London in October 2012 by John Tiffany, Director of the National Theatre of Scotland and his partner, Vicky Featherstone, now artistic director at the Royal Court in London with the help of author and journalist Andrew O'Hagan. The production had no script, it evolved from over 60 hours of taped interviews of 43 journalists by three "name" journalists – reporters and columnists known to the public including columnist and feature writer Deborah Orr and writer Ruth Wishart.<sup>36</sup> Described as "contemporary documentary theatre"<sup>37</sup>, the words were chosen from the tapes by the team and first presented in Glasgow, in a deserted room with concrete floors, intended to represent a newspaper office – even perhaps an empty newspaper office due to the perceived wrecking of the industry by the threat of the internet. The team of Tiffany, Featherstone and O'Hagan chose this form to tell their story about newspapers as there was no fixed script and the production was "constantly updated to take account of any new stories" – the genre of verbatim theatre addresses news, and incorporates changes as and when events occur.<sup>38</sup> The play ran for three weeks in Scotland, which coincided with Rupert Murdoch giving evidence before the Leveson inquiry, and was subsequently produced five months later in London at a site near Fleet Street.

I saw the London production which was set in a building site, with concrete floors and no chairs for the audience to sit on. It showed not just the decline of a newspaper, but the accusations of corruption, and hacking of mobile telephones and emails highlighted by the Leveson Inquiry into Press ethics, which had just begun and ironically caused newspapers to become the news. Produced by the Barbican with the *London Review of Books* it was performed in an off-site venue of the Barbican Centre, an empty building once a toy factory called "Mother at the

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<sup>36</sup> John Tiffany "One Man's Journey into Newspapers", *London Review of Books*, 2012 <<https://enquirer.lrb.co.uk> > (accessed 13 May 2017).

<sup>37</sup> Will Hammond and Dan Steward, ed., *Verbatim Verbatim: Contemporary Documentary Theatre*, (London: Oberon Books, 2008). 11

<sup>38</sup> "Enquirer", *London Review of Books*, 2012 <<https://www.lrb.co.uk/about/enquirer> > (accessed 17 May 2017).

Trampery”, the audience perambulated around from room to deserted room, following the action (also known as “promenade theatre”<sup>39</sup>). According to critic Robin Soans, in verbatim the audience assumes an active rather than a passive role<sup>40</sup>, in this case becoming part of the conflict, confusion and tension of a day in the life of a crashing newspaper as they followed the actors – specifically the actor using the microphone, narrating the story. At the end, the writer who edited the tapes, O’Hagan, invited the views of the audience, suggesting that like journalists, they sit at the huge table the company had used for the Editor’s conference, a crucial scene I had also used in Scene 2 of my stage play of *Brief Lies* to kick start the day at *the Sunday Eye*, the newspaper represented in my own scripts.

“Watching the hacks get hacked” was one of the headlines<sup>41</sup>, and as a hack it was extraordinary to me to watch the story about hacking being told by some of the people who did it. One of the writers whose words were used, but by an actress not by her – was called Ros Wynne-Jones, she is a war correspondent, writing from South-east Asia, specifically she was caught up in an horrific massacre in East Timor in 1999. She thought she had been ‘thesp-hacked’.<sup>42</sup> Of the 43 journalists who gave material to *Enquirer*, and the number of people interviewed varies according to who is reporting it, only four appear in the play as themselves, their thoughts recorded then presented verbatim in someone else’s voice.

Wynne-Jones had not talked about her experience in East Timor, but it was not good, and she still has flashbacks. After seeing the play in London she was moved to write a review for *The Guardian*.

At times it feels as if *Enquirer* has invited we print journalists to wash our dirty linen in public and then handed us the washing line to hang ourselves with afterwards. At others, it offers both an elegiac hymn to a declining profession and a defence of its values. The fact that all of us involved were complicit in violating our own privacy is the

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<sup>39</sup> Adam Spiers et al., "Flatland: an immersive theatre experience centered on shape changing haptic navigation technology." (2015). Abstract.

<sup>40</sup> Robin Soans, *Verbatim Verbatim: Contemporary Documentary Theatre*, ed. Will Hammond and Dan Steward (London: Oberon Books, 2008), 23.

<sup>41</sup> Ros Wynne-Jones, “Enquirer: watching the hacks get hacked”, *The Guardian*, 14 October 2012 < <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/oct/14/enquirer-hacks-hacked-east-timor-fergie> > (accessed 26 May 2017).

<sup>42</sup> *ibid.*

oldest trick in the hack's black book – and these deep ironies are of course both the point and the power of the production. As a journalist who often writes about the muddled, raw, sad end of human experience, I know the discomfort I felt watching the play is often experienced by people I interview.

I know that feeling - I have to reconstruct it, on stage, on a screen - that somehow the reins have been taken away from you, the writer; what you dictate to the copy taker is not reflected in the piece which appears in the paper. Watching and listening to the hours and hours of tape voiced by 40 or more newspaper writers and having it spoken in the replica newsroom by actors, but not knowing who had said what, was a curious and confused way of telling and listening to the so-called truth. Wynne-Jones described the experience as “deeply surreal” to see her experiences “amplified thoughtfully on stage, someone else telling a story I never tell, in my words...It is one of the subtleties yet to trouble the Leveson inquiry, but all journalism perhaps all theatre too – involves a form of hacking. Reporting is all about eavesdropping. Listening where you shouldn't, re-stringing peoples' words on your own thread.”<sup>43</sup> This was the story I wanted to show not tell – the eternal wrangle between your conscience and the Editor's final decision – in other words, your job.

For the audience, watching the heart-breaking dilemmas of news reporting being played out word for word, hacking and all, *Enquirer* was a demanding (two hours at least), uncomfortable (no chairs, concrete floors), jarring to watch, occasionally funny, always gripping play about the faulty moral compass of the British Press. The flaw of the play to me was that six actors spoke the words of 43 journalists and only three of those journalists are named in the piece, let alone allowing the journalists to actually speak their own words, so you never know whose words are being spoken - a strangely muddled way to convey a truth, or rather, individual truths as seen by the journalists themselves. In his book *Three Uses of the Knife* (1998), writing about what he calls “the end of the play”, playwright David Mamet says: “At the end of the drama the truth, which has been overlooked, disregarded, scorned and denied, prevails.”<sup>44</sup> His theory is that until then everyone is lying. It is only the truth which brings final resolution. In a play which is entirely based

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<sup>43</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> David Mamet, *Three Uses of the Knife: On the Nature and Purpose of Drama*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 68.

on interviews, unlike fiction, the resolution is simply the end of the edited tapes. It is up to the audience to decide who has told the truth, just as it is up to the reader having followed a story in a newspaper.

The genre of verbatim which so realistically invokes the atmosphere of the Editor's conference and the Newsroom chaos, had another well-known proponent, actress Alecky Blythe, who went on to write plays based on words straight from the mouths of people she interviewed. In 2004, after winning the *Time Out* Critics Choice for her first play *Come Out Eli*, she created her own company which she called "Recorded Delivery" "to reflect the performance style"<sup>45</sup>, saying: "Audiences are often amazed by how willing people are to tell their stories."<sup>46</sup> She went on to make a film of her own play about the killing of prostitutes in Harwich, called *London Road* (2015). The taped interviews of the murdered girls' friends and families were sung on film by the speakers in an extraordinary production of what was essentially a horror story, a crime story, a brilliantly innovative development of the genre which truly uses the spoken word by adding the dimension of music. Most plays are a collaboration between writer, director and actors, although the writing of the script is a lonely process. All the plays I have chosen are collaborations, either between two writers, or – as with *Enquirer* – scriptless, but with many voices. In this case, the journalists and the editor, Andrew O'Hagan, who chose which words to use, support one another.

In *Pravda*, the journalist sinks to his knees to survey the wreckage of his career and when the controversial young playwright Sarah Kane wrote her first staged play *Blasted*, it is conceivable that she may have remembered that speech about the "blasted" landscape when she titled her play. Kane herself came from a journalistic background, her father a reporter on a national tabloid, her mother a reporter before she left Fleet Street to have a family. Kane herself signed on with the Basildon Youth Theatre and chose the stage, taking a First in Drama at Bristol (1989-92), where she wrote her first plays, a trilogy of monologues collectively titled *Sick*, which she performed on the Edinburgh Fringe in 1991 and 1992.

*Blasted*, a hugely controversial first play from a new playwright, opened at the

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<sup>45</sup> Alecky Blythe, *Verbatim Verbatim: Contemporary Documentary Theatre*, ed. Will Hammond and Dan Steward (London: Oberon Books, 2008), 80.

<sup>46</sup> *ibid*, 82.

Royal Court Theatre Upstairs, London, on 12<sup>th</sup> January 1995 directed by James Macdonald, who was to become a close collaborator with Kane, and to direct her four other plays.<sup>47</sup> This is a play which could have been a love story, between a middle-aged male journalist and a 21-year-old girl who meet again after a gap in their relationship, in a very expensive luxury hotel in Leeds, several years after their affair has ended. The room is dominated by a double bed, there are flowers on the table and champagne in an ice bucket. The scene appears to be set for romance, or sex at the very least, but romance does not flow as freely as the gin and the sex becomes horribly distorted. The opening line from 45-year-old journalist Ian, reporter from the local Yorkshire paper, prepares the audience for what is to come as he announces, "I've shat in better places than this." (3) The fact he carries a gun is revealed when he comes out of the bathroom dressed in a towel. He tells the girl, Cate, to "tip the wog". (3) Within minutes he has had a bath, downed three gins and shown her the gun before hiding it under his pillow. They have a mildly malicious discussion about race which slips quickly into another about people with learning difficulties, then Hitler, the Jews and queers, thus – the man is a bigot and a boor, and while he dallies with Cate, the telephone rings and he is suddenly dictating a story to the copy-takers at the newspaper he works for.

IAN: A serial killer slaughtered British tourist Samantha Scrace, S – C-  
R- A- C- E, in a sick murder trial comma, police revealed yesterday  
point new par (...) That

CATE: How do they know you're here? (...)

IAN: In case they need me. (12-13)

The manner in which he dictates his copy is so brutal and unpleasant, it reveals his black misogynistic heart. In describing the sadistic murder, Ian explains a beautiful red head with dreams of becoming a model was on "the trip of a lifetime" after finishing her exams, and he ends by reporting a Foreign Office warning to tourists Down Under to take extra care. Copy ends. Then he listens, then he laughs, saying: "That one again, I went to see her. Scouse tart, spread her legs. No. Forget it. Tears and lies, not worth the space." (13)

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<sup>47</sup> David Greig, Introduction to *Sarah Kane: Complete Plays* (London: Methuen Contemporary Dramatists, 2001), xvii.

Callous and insensitive, this is the eternal contract between reporter and editor, or in this case reporter and copy-taker, although unusually throughout the play there is only one call from the office to the journalist. Since the advent of the eponymous smartphone the habit of these controlling calls has increased dramatically, as micromanaging has become easier for those behind the desks.

The play is a tightly focused one Act, three-hander with only five scenes, the last of them chopped into tiny fragments like broken glass shards. In the middle of the second scene, the Soldier is introduced as a figure from the blasted outside world. By the end of Scene 2, a bomb goes off and destroys half the luxurious room and with the explosion, and the new character – another man with a gun, there is a shift in dynamics as Ian moves from aggressor to victim and Ian, who has by implication forced an unwilling Cate to sleep with him, raped her in fact, emerges the victim as the Soldier, crazed by battle, re-enacts war crimes perpetrated on his own murdered girlfriend. In the end, the soldier shoots himself, having chewed out Ian's eyeballs, while Cate is out looking for the food she will eventually share with a dying Ian when she returns to the hotel.

The pace of the first scene is menacing and slow, as though at any moment the man with the gun will turn it on the defenceless blond, but it is a while before he does, and, in the meantime, nothing very edifying passes between them, although the subtext is that it will, or has. Once the bomb goes off in a massive turning point, the wall metaphorically caves in, there is a series of appalling scenes and images of war and death and rape described anecdotally by the soldier, from which some members of the audience are reported to have physically recoiled.<sup>48</sup>

Soldier: I broke a woman's neck. Stabbed up between her legs, on the fifth stab snapped her spine. (46)

Then a beat later, he remembers what happened to his girlfriend:

Soldier: Col, they buggered her. Cut her throat. Hacked her nose and ears off, nailed them to the front door. (46-47)

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<sup>48</sup> Helen Iball, *Sarah Kane's Blasted* (London, New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2008), 38-39.

So, the question is what is Kane writing about – Northern Ireland? Srebrenica? Nigeria? Leeds? Cate has left the stage to lock herself in the offstage bathroom and at this new turning point Ian Jones has shown his Press Card to the Soldier. The Soldier is contemptuous.

Soldier: Ever seen anything like that?

Ian: Stop.

Soldier: Not in photos?

Ian: Never.

Soldier: Some journalist, that's your job. (47)

Kane might be talking to her father, might be telling him in her own way that the tabloid press is not doing its job, not telling people how it really is out there, in the war zones, so she the playwright will.

Many theatre critics were repulsed by what she showed them. *The Daily Mail's* drama critic Jack Tinker famously wrote a piece headlined "This disgusting Feast of Filth".<sup>49</sup> Although he would not have written the headline for his own review, it was in itself an arresting headline and started a tidal wave of scandalized reaction which snowballed until Kane's work was synonymous with horrific images and shock theatre. Eventually she was to get her own back by writing a psychotic sadistic psychiatrist into her third play *Cleansed* (1997) and calling the character "Tinker". As with Hare and Brenton's *Pravda*, another writer's act of revenge.

Kane's work was described by Helen Iball as "an inversion of naturalism".<sup>50</sup> Schneider maintains that in *Blasted*, "disbelief rather than belief is put forward like a dare"<sup>51</sup> as the material is shoved "squarely in your face".<sup>52</sup> Iball continues that it is, "indeed the conceptualization of 'in-yer-face theatre' that has contributed significantly to the landmark status of *Blasted*"<sup>53</sup>, and out of this controversy and her tragic suicide in 1999, there arose a kind of mythology based on the impact of *Blasted* and its ripple effect. Kane in the 1990's was a landmark dramatist.<sup>54</sup> She achieved fame

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<sup>49</sup> Jack Tinker, "This Disgusting Piece of Filth," *The Daily Mail*, 19 January 1995.

<sup>50</sup> Helen Iball. *Sarah Kane's Blasted* (London, New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2008), 3.

<sup>51</sup> *ibid.*, 3.

<sup>52</sup> *ibid.*, 3.

<sup>53</sup> *ibid.*, 3.

<sup>54</sup> *ibid.*, 2.



with a form of brutalism unseen before in contemporary theatre. To read the script is to read a list of atrocities: rape and anal penetration, urination, defecation, cannibalism, cunnilingus, fellatio – and in scene 4, the Soldier sucks out Ian’s eyeballs and eats them. Kane recalls a passage from a book about football hooliganism (a serious social problem in the late Eighties) and gang life which stuck in her own imagination until she finally spat it out onto the stage. The episode in the book is as follows:

He grabbed the policeman by his ears, lifted his head up to his own face and sucked one of the policeman’s eyes, lifting it out of the socket until he felt it pop behind his teeth. Then he bit it off.<sup>55</sup>

She remarked afterwards at how the reviews of the play had trumpeted the shock horror of “cannibalism live on stage”, whereas in fact the entire action was representative, not actual. As she said: “Ian is clearly not eating a baby. It’s absolutely fucking obvious, this is a theatrical image. He’s not doing it at all.”<sup>56</sup>

So, while the headlines were misleading, the tabloids loved the lurid imagery and the audiences came streaming in to experience the new brutalism. With other playwrights of her age and time, such as Mark Ravenhill, Martin Crimp and David Greig, her contemporary in Bristol who has written an introduction to her stage plays, she became part of a rebel movement, taking the work of playwrights like Hare by the scruff of the neck and shaking it. The kind of theatre she was making became known as “In Yer Face Theatre”, and Aleks Sierz in 2001, drew together a group of British dramatists, rather like the Britpop artists with their controversial *Sensation* exhibition, who were creating what he described as a “compelling new aesthetic of experiential drama”.<sup>57</sup> Predominantly gruesome, violent, and compelling, it was a dramatic way to push the audience’s face into the violence and brutality of war, never more than a thin wall away.

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<sup>55</sup> Bill Buford, *Among the Thugs* (London: Secker Warburg, 1991), 241.

<sup>56</sup> Helen Iball. *Sarah Kane’s Blasted* (London, New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2008), 3.

<sup>57</sup> *ibid*, 239.

This a play which challenges naturalist theatrical form, and under the stylistic guise of punk, goth, and Joy Division darkness<sup>58</sup> – the influences which coloured her adolescence - the 20-year-old Kane pushes the boundaries of naturalistic theatre to offer something deeper, more disturbing, more dangerous to the psyche than what seems like the mannered caricatures of Hare’s Fleet Street characters in *Pravda*. To illustrate how thin is the wall between civil war and civilization in peace – a parallel Kane wanted to draw because she herself was so fiercely exercised by the daily horrors of the Balkan wars then in full flood. The images are suddenly shockingly violent.

The luxury hotel room is blown apart in the second scene, tearing a gaping hole in the division between the two worlds, between one dimension and another, showing the abuses of war in a kind of brutal realism which was a complete bending of the rules, “the naturalistic boundaries” as her friend and contemporary David Greig put it<sup>59</sup>, so that the action became ultra-realism, almost unimaginable.

*Blasted* “explodes the central tenets of realist form: the representation of a ‘slice of life’ through a logical connection between characters and action which culminates in resolution.”<sup>60</sup> Despite the brutality enacted before their very eyes, members of the audience remain at a distance, this is a representation of war, not war itself. Kane says: “There is no authorial voice leading us to safety”.<sup>61</sup> As a writer she likes that place of being far from safety. For the audience, it means a vigorous shake-up of preconceptions, and with *Blasted* a reminder that war is not just a headline, not just a bulletin from the front a thousand miles away, it is near and horrible. Kane is careful to draw the line between types of reporting, hence, when the Soldier challenges Ian, he explains:

Soldier: Foreign affairs, what are you doing here?

Ian: I do other stuff. Shootings and rapes and kids getting fiddled by

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<sup>58</sup> Ken Urban, “Sarah Kane” in *The Methuen Drama Guide to Contemporary British Playwrights*, edited and with an introduction by Martin Middeke, Peter Paul Schnierer and Aleks Sierz (London: Methuen Drama, 2011), 319.

<sup>59</sup> David Greig, Introduction to *Sarah Kane: Complete Plays* (London: Methuen Contemporary Dramatists, 2001), ix

<sup>60</sup> Helen Iball. *Sarah Kane’s Blasted* (London, New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2008), 2.

<sup>61</sup> David Greig, Introduction to *Sarah Kane: Complete Plays* (London: Methuen Contemporary Dramatists, 2001), ix.

queer priests and schoolteachers. Not soldiers screwing each other for a patch of land. It has to be .....personal. Your girlfriend, she's a story. Soft and clean. Not you. Filthy, like the wogs. No joy in a story about blacks, who gives a shit? Why bring you to light? (48)

In reply, the Soldier rapes the journalist then sticks his gun up him asking if he has ever done it with a man before. The dialogue of war. A beat or two later, he has put his mouth over Ian's eyes, sucked out first one and then the other and eaten them, on stage. Now he is sitting with a blind journalist, a metaphor for the reportage of war, a scornful account of lies and how they are told. By the next Scene, Cate is back from the blasted world outside, in a series of fragmented snapshot images with almost no dialogue, the audience sees Ian as he is being destroyed by his illness, by fear of the world outside – an imagined world, the images fed by the dead soldier's narrative, by isolation, misery and only in the final moments is there comfort. We see Cate come back, carrying a baby in her arms. When it dies, she buries it, and when she leaves to look for more food, Ian unearths it and eats it. Cate returns to feed Ian's hunger for humanity and life, with bread, sausages and gin, and finally, finally, at the end Ian shows gratitude, saying simply: "Thank you". (61) It is a desolate ending to a desolate story, this is the ambiguous redemption of a journalist who was from the outset a malevolent force but weak, felt in the undercurrents of the first meeting in the impersonal but opulent hotel room, an unmitigated disaster as a reporter of truth.

After *Blasted*, Kane wrote *Phaedra's Love*, *Cleansed*, *Crave*, *4.48 Psychosis* and a short film for Channel Four called *Skin* (1995). The critic for *the Mail on Sunday* wrote about *Blasted*: "Kane has an acute grasp of sexual politics and her dialogue is both sparse and stunning. They will call her mad, but they said that about Strindberg."<sup>62</sup>

Like Strindberg, Sarah Kane wrote on the massive human subjects of love and war, sex, death and family, and used her work as a playwright to share her thoughts, and examine the way our society dehumanizes men like Ian. She also mapped the deepest darkest internal landscapes. She was a depressive, and in

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<sup>62</sup> David Greig, *Sarah Kane: Complete Plays* (London: Methuen Contemporary Dramatists, 2001), inside page.

1998 suffered a serious bout of suicidal depression the effects of which, with her medical treatments, formed the basis for her last play *4.48 Psychosis*, about the struggle of the mind to stay intact, which was produced posthumously in 1999 at the same theatre Upstairs at the Royal Court, where *Blasted* was first shown in 1995.<sup>63</sup>

As David Greig, her friend and contemporary, writes in his introduction to her scripts: *Sarah Kane, Complete Plays*:

To read these plays for what they tell us about the author is to my mind a pointlessly forensic act. The work's true completion comes when the plays are read for what they tell us about ourselves.<sup>64</sup>

Greig is a playwright and his view like Kane's, stems from his own work as much as hers. In the end, art, theatre, writing, is like a bevelled mirror, a way of seeing ourselves and our behaviour anew, a tool for self-knowledge with a little reality distortion around the edge like cut glass. Although, as Peter Brook laments in his book *The Empty Space*, "plays are woefully difficult to write"<sup>65</sup>, good plays are written from a passionate desire to take others through the looking glass. If it works the hardship was worth it.

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<sup>63</sup> *ibid.*, xvi

<sup>64</sup> *ibid.*, xviii

<sup>65</sup> Peter Brook, *The Empty Space* (London: Penguin Books, 2008), 38.