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## **► To cite this version:**

Marion Coste. ‘Let’s do our thing’: Theatre as a Democratic Forum Opposing the Institutionalised Political Discourse on the War in Iraq. *Études britanniques contemporaines - Revue de la Société d’études anglaises contemporaines*, 2020, 10.4000/ebc.6490 . hal-03930760

**HAL Id: hal-03930760**

**<https://hal.science/hal-03930760>**

Submitted on 9 Jan 2023

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### Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/ebc/6490>

DOI: 10.4000/ebc.6490

ISSN: 2271-5444

### Publisher

Presses universitaires de la Méditerranée

Brought to you by Bibliothèque Diderot de Lyon - ENS



### Electronic reference

Marion Coste, "Let's do our thing': Theatre as a Democratic Forum Opposing the Institutionalised Political Discourse on the War in Iraq", *Études britanniques contemporaines* [Online], 56 | 2019, Online since 21 March 2019, connection on 18 October 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ebc/6490> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/ebc.6490>

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# 'Let's do our thing': Theatre as a Democratic Forum Opposing the Institutionalised Political Discourse on the War in Iraq

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- <sup>1</sup> The protest against the war in Iraq held on the 15th of February 2003 remains to this day the largest demonstration organised on a global scale: around ten million people took to the streets in nearly six hundred cities across the globe to oppose the military intervention of the coalition forces in Iraq. In the wake of this unprecedented wave of protest, *New York Times* journalist Patrick Tyler claimed that there would now be two new superpowers to be reckoned with: 'the United States and world public opinion' (Tyler 2003). The dramatic dimension of this protest echoes the numerous theatrical responses to the war and their emphasis on popular discontent: the plays on the war in Iraq are indeed chiefly concerned with the lead-up to the war and the way the British government justified the military intervention. The opposition to Blair's foreign policy concerning Iraq was reinforced by the government's failure to provide adequate and legitimate justification for the military intervention. In a bid to placate hostile public opinion, Tony Blair adopted a new rhetorical strategy in the days after the February anti-war protest. Until then, the government had argued that, in the name of their 'special relationship', the United Kingdom ought to support the United States after the 9/11 terrorist attack, and that the presence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq justified a military intervention as part of the War on Terror. After the anti-war protests, however, the intervention was depicted by the government as a moral duty to the Iraqi people, trapped in a vicious cycle of oppression under the regime of Saddam Hussein.

- 2 This context of growing opposition to the government's foreign policy, combined with the fact that Tony Blair was prepared to launch the intervention without the authorization of the United Nations Security Council,<sup>1</sup> has galvanised British political theatre. As theatre critic Michael Billington suggests, political theatre was revitalized in the 2000s: 'The main factors in the reinvention of political theatre were disillusion with New Labour spin and dismay at the consequences of the Bush-Blair foreign policy' (Billington 384). The war in Iraq has been the subject of many plays: the most recent, *Chilcot*, written by Richard Norton-Taylor and Matt Woodhead in 2016, proves that British theatre is still very much concerned with the fallout of the war. Each play offers a unique perspective on the conflict: two of the most renowned, David Hare's *Stuff Happens* (Royal Court, 2004) and Gregory Burke's *Black Watch* (National Theatre Scotland, 2006), tell respectively of the anterooms of power in the lead-up to the invasion and the daily life of the Black Watch soldiers stationed at Camp Dogwood. The plurality of themes broached in the many plays about the Iraq War is mirrored by the multiplicity of forms they take, so as to create a theatre that better represents the complexities of the war. While some plays are based on fictional dialogues, such as *Motortown* (Simon Stephens, Royal Court Theatre, 2006) or *Loyalty* (Sarah Helm, Hampstead Theatre, 2011), others, such as *Chilcot*, use the technique of verbatim in which 'the words of real people are recorded or transcribed by a dramatist during an interview or a research process [...] and are then edited, arranged or recontextualised to form a dramatic presentation [...]' (Hammond and Steward 9). Cyrielle Garson defines verbatim theatre as 'an inherently fluid and unstable discursive category rather than a definite genre with a shared documentary project' (Garson 14). The multiplicity of verbatim techniques questions the notion of documentary realism, traditionally associated with this form of theatre, which 'directly imports materials from the "real" extra-theatrical world and maintains the illusion of watching an ordinary, unrehearsed, slice of life' (Garson 14).
- 3 This protean theatre lays the foundation for the emergence of a counter-discourse: the plays about the Iraq War denounce the failures and the duplicity of Tony Blair's government, thus fostering a way of thinking that opposes the institutionalized political discourse. The stage acts as a catalyst for the public opinion's discontent by providing a democratic public forum as well as a popular tribunal where politicians can be held accountable. I will argue in this article that the plays about the war in Iraq therefore borrow from Ancient Greece theatre insofar as it reclaims a social and political function: the theatrical space becomes paramount to the life of the *polis* as it serves as a space where political, social and cultural matters could be examined and discussed. The political theatre focusing on the Iraq War however, does not aim at being revolutionary in the political sense of the term or at bringing about profound political changes: the inevitability of the war and the successive inconclusive inquiries about the role of the United Kingdom in the lead-up to the intervention gave way to a sense of defeatism and disenchantment with the political ruling class. This article will examine three plays: *Called to Account: The Indictment of Charles Anthony Lynton Blair for the Crime of Aggression Against Iraq—A Hearing* by Richard Norton-Taylor and Nicolas Kent (Tricycle Theatre, 2007), *Chilcot* by Richard Norton-Taylor and Matt Woodhead (Battersea Arts Centre, 2016) and *The Vertical Hour* by David Hare (Music Box Theatre, 2006). Each play draws on the characteristics of Greek theatre, whether by form or intent. I will first argue that these plays stem from a need to rectify an imbalance in the democratic process leading up to the war in Iraq and that they answer a cathartic need for retribution and justice. One of

the characteristics of this imbalance is the spin culture that pervaded the government and that many thought misled the country into a war: I will highlight how theatrical responses to the war take on a journalistic approach in order to deconstruct the institutionalised political discourse. Finally, I will show how theatre facilitates the emergence of a counter-discourse, by marginalising this pro-war political discourse and making way for the otherwise unheard voices of those directly affected by the conflict.

## The Cathartic Representation of the War in Iraq

- 4 Aeschylus' tragedy *The Persians*, the first to ever focus on war, provided the *polis* with the opportunity to gather and witness the representation on stage of one of the most crucial moments of its existence—the battle of Salamis, from which the Greeks emerged victorious over the Persians. Staged ten years after the actual battle, the play served as a cautionary tale, warning the *polis* not to repeat the mistakes of the Persians, lest the Greeks suffer the same fate. The representation of war therefore served a social and political purpose, in that it prompted the spectators to reflect on their role as citizens. I will argue that the plays about the war in Iraq aim at recovering this function of theatre, especially since the conflict exposed the failings of Tony Blair's government and called for a discussion among citizens: by ignoring the growing opposition to the war, the Prime Minister left many feeling like the principles of democracy had been flouted.
- 5 The secrecy surrounding the lead-up to the war and the illegality of the military intervention raised political issues that extended far beyond the confines of the *polis*: as he took over as artistic director of the National Theatre in April 2003, Nicholas Hytner declared: 'We cannot call ourselves the National Theatre if next year we don't present a play about the war in Iraq'.<sup>2</sup> Tony Blair's decision to go to war was considered to be of national, even international, importance, and the plays focusing on the matter were not limited to the West End. For its first season, the National Theatre Scotland presented the seminal play *Black Watch* in 2006, which is widely believed to be one of the most influential plays about the war in Iraq. The production subsequently went on several international tours in 2007, 2008, 2010–11 and 2012–13. David Hare's play *The Vertical Hour*, which he wrote as a more intimate companion piece to his famous Iraq play *Stuff Happens*, did not open in the West End, but in Broadway, at the Music Box theatre in 2006. The plays about the war in Iraq therefore gained traction on a national and international scale.
- 6 Each in their own way, all three plays under scrutiny come back to the political and social function of Greek theatre so as to generate healthy debate among citizens. *The Vertical Hour* mirrors such a debate on stage. The play focuses on Nadia, a professor at Yale on international relations and former war correspondent, who travels to Shropshire to meet her boyfriend's father, Oliver, a doctor who leads a reclusive life. The structure of the play chiefly rests upon the heated debate between Nadia and Oliver about the war in Iraq and its political and moral implications for both the United States and the United Kingdom: Nadia firmly believes, for humanitarian reasons, that the war was justified whereas Oliver is fiercely against it. Their confrontation throughout the play, oscillating from the international fallout of the war to the intimate repercussions of the moral principles one chooses to live by, presents the audience with an agonistic relation reminiscent of Plato's dialectic dialogues. Oliver's cynical pragmatism acts as a foil to Nadia's idealism: she talks about the 'liberation' of Iraq, while he denounces its 'invasion'

by the coalition forces. Since David Hare has always been outspoken about his opposition to the war, it is not surprising that Oliver should gain the upper hand in the argument. In *Le miroir et la scène: ce que peut le politique* (2016), Myriam Revault d'Allonnes moves beyond a definition of 'representation' that would narrow it down to an exclusively political and judicial sense, and of us its pictural and theatrical roots. While exploring the polysemy of the notion of representation, she draws attention to the fact that the role of theatre in Ancient Greece was not limited to a faithful depiction of the state of the *polis*, but indeed aimed at questioning it (Revault d'Allonnes 42).

- 7 Act II scene 8 marks a pivotal moment in the economy of the play: Nadia and Oliver, both unable to sleep, meet in the garden in the middle of the night and follow up on their previous discussion on the war. As before, the conversation bounces from deeply personal issues to political and moral matters, highlighting the fact that the political is indeed personal. One of the sources of disagreement between the two characters is Nadia's decision to accept the White House's invitation to advise the President regarding the course of action in the lead-up to the war. Nadia justifies herself to Oliver by claiming that America has a responsibility towards the Iraqi people and that she, as an expert in her field, has a duty to advise her President and assist him in his attempt to restore democracy in Iraq. Throughout the scene, the stage directions indicate that 'her emotion [s] [are] raw' and that she is 'no longer fighting [Oliver]' (159). Taking advantage of her vulnerable state, Oliver drives his point home by imagining out loud what Nadia did *not* say to the President: 'I assume you didn't say, "Be sure to have no plan for civil society. Take no notice of international opinion. [...] Sanction torture. [...] Somehow magically order will come out of chaos"' (160). By subverting her actual advice and by replacing it with the catastrophic consequences of the invasion, Oliver shocks her into the admission that 'We certainly made a mess, didn't we?' (160).
- 8 In the United Kingdom, this 'mess' became the target of several national inquiries, which were meant to look into the diplomatic process undergone by Blair's government in the lead-up to the war. Several of these inquiries were summarised into verbatim plays. The verbatim plays *Called to Account* and *Chilcot* were both put together by journalist Richard Norton-Taylor, who worked for the *Guardian* as security editor until 2016. *Called to Account* played at the Tricycle Theatre from mid-April to June 2007: the play was the result, according to Norton-Taylor and Nicolas Kent, of marked feelings of frustration and injustice in the face of what they considered to be the failure of political institutions to hold Tony Blair accountable for an illegal war. Contrary to other verbatim plays about the war in Iraq, it is not an overview of an actual national Inquiry, but rather the result of a personal project devised by Nicolas Kent and Richard Norton-Taylor: they asked a team of four lawyers, working pro-bono, to cross-examine fourteen witnesses in order to determine whether it would be within the law to prosecute Tony Blair for crime of aggression against Iraq. Richard Norton-Taylor thus describes the genesis of the project:
 

We were talking how frustrated we were there was no inquiry; there was no parliamentary inquiry. The inquiries they had [Hutton, 2003, following the death of Dr Kelly, and Butler, 2004, looking at the intelligence on weapons of mass destruction] weren't followed up... So let's do our thing. (Stoller 177)
- 9 Richard Norton-Taylor therefore saw *Called to Account* as a cathartic process, satisfying the need for reparation in the wake of what he saw as a breach in democracy:
 

I think a lot of the audience for that show saw it as a sort of catharsis; people felt they'd gone on the demonstration and their voice hadn't been heard and they wanted to be part of something that actually put a government on trial for taking

us to a war on inadequate basis.  
(Hammond and Steward 144)

- 10 The cathartic process described here does not equate that which can be found in tragedy; rather, it alludes to the sentiment of justice one can feel at seeing a double of Tony Blair on stage being tried for the war in Iraq. This process is facilitated by the documentary realist frame commonly associated with verbatim theatre: although *Called to Account* is not based on an actual inquiry, Cyrielle Garson argues that 'the documentary realist equation still holds true [as all the] aspects of the legal process [...] were meticulously reconstructed' (Garson 129). The play however offers a 'different documentary realist audience-actor contract, which casts the audience members [as] jurors' (Garson 129). It is this spectatorial position that is seen as cathartic, insofar as it enables the audience to rectify what they might perceive as an injustice. This approach therefore claims to get the audience out of a passive stance and prompt the spectators to become active participants, thus reclaiming the collective roots of political theatre. The opposition between passive and active spectators is analysed in Jacques Rancière's *Le spectateur émancipé* (2008) as part of the attempt at reforming theatre:

[La scène et la performance théâtrale] se proposent d'enseigner à leurs spectateurs les moyens de cesser d'être spectateurs et de devenir agent d'une pratique collective. Selon le paradigme brechtien, la médiation théâtrale les rend conscients de la situation sociale qui lui donne lieu et désireux d'agir pour la transformer. (12)

- 11 In the case of *Called to Account*, such was that need for audience agency that in the first version of the project, Norton-Taylor had thought about holding a vote at the end of the play, so that the audience's opinion could actually be heard and taken into account. The idea was however discarded, as it was thought to be too 'gimmicky'. The play nonetheless directly draws inspiration from Ancient Greece theatre, where the audience assumed the role of the judge: 'There was no hard evidence that Blair could be charged with war crimes. But in *Called to Account*, [...] we presented the facts, leaving, as the playwrights of Ancient Greece did, the audience, in the role of the jury, to make up its own mind' (Hammond and Steward, 113). Paradoxically, the play did not strengthen the audience's anti-war stance, but rather helped nuance their positions when it came to Tony Blair: according to Norton-Taylor, the spectators who believed Tony Blair should be prosecuted realised that the legal situation was perhaps more intricate than they had imagined. One of the prosecution lawyers underwent a similar evolution: 'It was interesting that Philip Sands went through a journey doing this play: I think he was quite certain that Blair could be prosecuted for a crime of aggression against Iraq, and I think he came away slightly less certain of that' (Hammond and Steward 146). The notion of catharsis—seen here as a mere desire for justice—is therefore problematic in this case, as it undercuts the play's aim to present a balanced case and does not leave room for the audience to change their minds.
- 12 One of the most striking facts about *Called to Account* is that it foresaw the actual inquiry later announced by Gordon Brown in 2009: the mission of the Iraq Inquiry was to assess the role played by the United Kingdom in the lead-up to the war. The concluding report was published in July 2016, seven years after the Inquiry was launched. Once again, Richard Norton-Taylor turned to the verbatim technique, ten years after *Called to Account*, and edited the witnesses' statements heard by the Commission. The editing process proved to be a Herculean task, as the final report is 2.5 million word long, which amount to four times the length of Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. To these statements Norton-Taylor added the transcripts of interviews he conducted with Iraqi refugees, British soldiers, and



parents of soldiers who died in Iraq. In the foreword to the play, Richard Norton-Taylor et Matt Woodhead explain that the aim was to summarise the key facts disclosed by the Inquiry so that it would be more readily available to the general public: '[. . .] There is a danger that this valuable evidence will be lost, smothered, and eclipsed by the consequences of the EU referendum vote on 23 June and by spin from all sides. [. . .] *Chilcot* offers audiences the opportunity to assess the key evidence for themselves [. . .]' (Norton-Taylor and Woodhead viii). Paola Botham's analysis of the Tribunal Plays of the Tricycle Theatre could easily be transposed to *Chilcot*, as the play 'act[s] as a sort of amplifier of events already in the public domain' and 'provide[s] [its audience] with a scrutiny that predated the publication of the [report]' (Botham 315). Basing her argument on the Habermasian conception of the public space as 'a site of a struggle for influence among different actors, a few with an established platform (e.g. political leaders, recognized parties and organisations) and others emerging with difficulty "from the public" itself' (Botham 313), Paola Botham contends that the Tricycle Theatre's Tribunal Plays 'can [. . .] be interpreted as a serious effort to reclaim the public sphere, in the sense of making available private testimonies with political significance to a wider audience' (Botham 312). However, within an Habermasian framework, the vitality of the debate taking place in the public sphere does not necessarily translate into social change: quoting *Between Facts and Norms* (1996), Paola Botham stresses that 'within the boundaries of the public sphere [. . .] actors can acquire only influence, not political power' (311). This influence, in the context of plays about Iraq, manifests itself in the breaking down of institutionalised discourse: the plays indeed very rarely stage the battlefield, but rather focus on the political discourse justifying the invasion, known as 'spin', a culture which came to define New Labour.

## 'Lies, half truths, deceit': Exposing the Spin Culture

- 13 The communicational technique of spin, a distinctive feature of Tony Blair's Prime ministership, was widely used in pro-war arguments. The term of spin generally has negative connotations as the technique is based on omissions, sophisms and other rhetorical strategies in order to present a political message in a better light. James Humphreys thus defines the notion of spin:

Spin, once an obscure term of art amongst political professionals, is now used to define an age. Yet its exact meaning remains obscure and fluid. At times, it will be using persuasive skills to present a case in the most favourable light. On other occasions, there is an implication of deceit, through outright lies, or sophistry, or the suppression of contradictory information. (There is also its original usage—the supposedly helpful role of the spin-doctor in glossing a speech for the benefit of busy or ill-informed journalists. (Humphreys 168)

- 14 In the context of the war in Iraq, the culture of 'spin' has taken on an ethical value since for the large part the war was justified by the presence of weapons of mass destruction, which were never actually found: the line between lying and 'glossing a speech' grew thinner. In the lead-up to the war, the roles were quite clearly allocated between the forces of the coalition, according to David Hare: 'America provides the firepower. We provide the bullshit' (Hare 207). The technique of verbatim and its quest for truth seems to be the most appropriate form to expose this political 'bullshit'. The two verbatim plays under study in this article are not strictly speaking Tribunal Plays, one of the most common forms associated with verbatim, but are based on the same techniques of



Brechtian collage and montage which highlight the differences between discourses, arguments, and testimonies by contrasting them, thus prompting the spectator to sharpen their critical judgement. Verbatim plays seem fitting for such an endeavour, as Chris Megson argues: 'the composition of these plays sets up an opportunity for audiences to scrutinise the subtle manoeuvring and thin-lipped evasions that constitute the loquacious speech acts laundered by politicians [and to] expos[e] the performative processes' (Megson 371).

- 15 The composition of *Called to Account* indeed exemplifies those 'thin-lipped evasions' by contrasting Clare Short's frankness with Michael Mates' mincing of words and Richard Perle's vagueness. Clare Short, Secretary of State for International Development from 1997 to 2003, was initially against the war; however, Tony Blair persuaded her to adhere to the party line when Parliament held a vote on the disarmament of Iraq on 18th March 2003. She reveals in her testimony that Tony Blair swayed her by promising George Bush would support a road map for Palestine and that the reconstruction of Iraq would be led by the United Nations. Eventually, Short resigned from the Cabinet on May 12th. In *Call to Account*, she sheds light on the 'spin' culture that permeated the Cabinet: '[...] He's [Tony Blair] a great one for a bit of wriggle room in the way he answers questions' (41). The expression 'wriggle room' underscores the liberties taken with the facts, which *Call to Account* aims at exposing. When asked if she thought Blair was being deceitful or dishonest, Short answers:

Lies, half truths, deceits, hints, I actually think Tony, he doesn't sit down and say I'm going to tell a lie here, he's so much kind of—I can charm my way through this, I can, I can just sort of tell Clare this, or tell the Cabinet that, and get through it and he thinks that's what politics is. He doesn't see it as lies, but I'm afraid it is lies. (39)

- 16 Humphrey's definitions of 'spin' are illustrated by Short's reply, underlining the ethical tightrope politicians are walking: what Blair thinks is presenting his case in the most favourable light thanks to his persuasive skills, is deemed to be outright lies by others.
- 17 Act I ends with Short's testimony, which gives it a preeminent place in the economy of the play. It is directly followed by Michael Mates' statement, which opens Act II. Mates is an MP who agreed to participate in the project of *Called to Account* as a witness for the defence. Charged with the task of defending Blair's decision to invade Iraq, Mates is one to mince words. He pauses several times during his hearing, in order to reflect on the formulation of his answers: 'Sorry, I thought I'd try—be a bit careful' (49) and 'I must be very careful here' (50) exemplify his overly cautious attitude when answering questions. Richard Perle's stonewalling also jars with Clare Short's outspokenness. Perle, who was Chairman of the Defense Policy Board Advisory Committee from 2001 to 2003, is more than evasive when answering the prosecution's questions. When asked what Saddam Hussein could have done to prove that he was not hiding weapons of mass destruction, he replies: 'Well he could have reported in detail about what had happened to the weapons of mass destruction. That would have been... show stuff' (83). The use of the hypernymic noun 'stuff'<sup>3</sup> is telling as it exposes the inadequacy of a political stance that lacks well thought-out arguments.
- 18 The culture of spin is thought to have catalysed the breakdown of trust between the government and the public, and Michael Billington's analysis of political theatre in the 2000s implies that it tackled the subject. One of the most infamous figures of Tony Blair's Cabinet, Alastair Campbell, Director of Communications and Strategy at Downing Street, is given pride of place in the economy of the play. His testimony is one of the

longest of the play, and is placed right after Tony Blair's in order to accentuate the collusion between the two men. Norton-Taylor's editing of Campbell's testimony touches upon the 'sexing-up' scandal in which Alastair Campbell, as the government's 'spin doctor', played a central part. The expression refers to the claim found in the Iraq Dossier (also known as the 'Dodgy Dossier', due to the misleading information it contained) that Iraq could deploy chemical weapons within forty-five minutes. The BBC investigated the claim, and an anonymous British official revealed the dossier had been 'sexed-up', meaning the formulation and selection of information were meant to serve the government's agenda, instead of giving an unbiased assessment of Iraq's arsenal of weapons. In *Chilcot*, Campbell's defence is particularly flippant: '[...] I don't think we were ever saying "Look, Saddam has got these weapons and he can whack them off . . . Cyprus in forty-five minutes," and if one or two of the papers went down that line, they weren't pushed by us' (52). However, Sir Lawrence Freedman, who is questioning Campbell, suggests that the forty-five minute claim was singled out and leaked to the press, so that the headlines would be more striking on the day of the publication of the dossier, therefore implying there was collusion between the Cabinet and the press.

- 19 The culture of spin was largely responsible for the breakdown of trust between the government and the public: by highlighting its mechanism, theatre provides a space where citizens can reflect on the state of politics—and democracy—in the wake of the war. Not only does theatre enable this reflection, it also rectifies a balance in the democratic process by allowing otherwise silenced voices to be heard, making way for a popular counter-discourse.

## Hegemonic Institutionalised Discourse and Marginalised Voices: the Making of a Counter-Discourse

- 20 I contend that British theatre intends to oppose a counter-discourse to that produced by the government. The idea of a counter-discourse introduces the idea of spacialisation: at the centre, there is the hegemonic institutionalised discourse; at the margins, the counter-discourse that opposes it. By deconstructing the political discourse about the war in Iraq, the plays lay the foundation for a response to that discourse. The plays were imagined as an antidote to the media coverage of the lead-up to the war, as the national newspapers and television channels were deemed by some journalists and playwrights to be too lenient towards the government, and thus fall prey to the Bush/Blair propaganda. In that respect, David Hare famously said that '[v]ery, very complicated things are happening that people struggle to understand, and journalism is failing us, because it's not adequately representing or interpreting these things' and that '[verbatim theatre] does what journalism fails to do' (Hammond and Steward 62).
- 21 The plays about the war in Iraq truly come into their own when they marginalise the otherwise hegemonic institutional discourse to make way for voices and perspectives that are usually silenced by the political institutions. Grieving parents, victims of the war, and discordant voices within the government can then finally be heard on stage. *Chilcot* is a striking example in that respect: Norton-Taylor and Woodhead's decision to interview people who have been directly affected by the war enables them to undercut the statements of the decision-makers that were heard by the Committee, therefore

implicitly questioning the efficiency and fairness of the inquiry. This intent is underlined in the foreword of the play: '[. . .] Other voices needed to be heard. We decided to give a platform to these voices through the play' (viii). The importance given to the testimonies of Iraq veterans, families of British soldiers killed during the war, and Iraqis, counters the now familiar pattern of institutions disregarding the voices of the people. Giving a platform to these voices enables the play to confiscate the war from the decision-makers and politicians, and give it back to the civilians who were at the forefront of the conflict. In a bid to restore some sense of democracy, the plays about Iraq therefore reinstate the voice of the people at the centre of the political discussion, while marginalising the ruling elite.

- 22 One of the most poignant testimonies is that of Rose Gentle and Peter Brierly, whose respective sons were killed in the line of duty in Iraq. Norton-Taylor placed the testimonies right before Blair's so that the audience could fully measure the devastating consequences of Blair's decision to go to war. Rose and Peter's testimonies are fused into one, to the point that their experiences become interchangeable: they first describe in turns their sons' departure for Iraq. Rose then recounts how she learned about her son's death: '[. . .] The major said: "There's no way of telling you. Gordon was killed this morning". I couldn't speak. I couldn't register what they were saying. We had to wait two weeks before we got him home' (35). Peter then takes over, and his testimony completes Rose's: 'You sort of go into autopilot. You are numb. Your kids don't die before you' (35). Although giving a platform to the grieving families of soldiers who died during the conflict seems like a much needed shift from the margins to the centre, *Chilcot* takes it one step further by interviewing Iraqis: giving a platform to the voices of the main victims of the war, the play rejects the Eurocentric vision of the Iraq War. In that respect, *Chilcot* seems to break away from an idealised conception of the *polis*: in *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political* (2013), Athena Athanasiou warns us against the 'idealized references to ancient Greek democracy' and reminds us of the 'patriarchal and autochthonic nature of the classical Athenian polis, which excluded women, foreigners and slaves' (Butler and Athanasiou 151–152). In *Dedans, dehors. La condition d'étranger* (2010), Guillaume Le Blanc, drawing on Judith Butler's analyses, argues that the status of foreigner is a social and political construct: insisting on the importance of representing alternative stories, he underlines that the displacement of hegemonic discourse goes against a process of marginalisation: 'Si nous nous représentons une vie étrangère comme habitée par un visage et une voix, comme faisant œuvre avec d'autres [. . .], alors c'est toute la compréhension de l'espace public qui change [. . .]' (Le Blanc 200).
- 23 *Chilcot* opens with the testimony of Nadia, a young Iraqi refugee, who depicts the bombardment of Baghdad: 'As the bombing got closer and more intense, I felt my world crumbling down. It was like seeing death in front of me and just waiting for it to come. The siren sounded and I knew, yeah. That's war' (1). This striking evocation jars with the following extract from the hearing of Sir Mark Allen, former head of the MI6 counter-terrorism unit. The hearing indeed opens with Lord Chilcot's reminder that the session is held in private due to the sensitive nature of the information about to be discussed. Some answers and questions are redacted: in the playtext, the text is replaced with a series of asterisks, and on stage, the rejoinders are drowned out by a piercing noise. Juxtaposing Nadia's poignant testimony with a censored one therefore highlights right from the start of the play the futility of the inquiry: the people directly affected by the war will not get

any answers. This constitutes the governing principle of the play: Nadia's testimony bookends the play, and her final rejoinder undercuts all sense of hope for justice:

I heard shouting, then an explosion at the gate. There was a suicidal guy. He just pulled the trigger. There was fire, parts of bodies scattered and the smell of powder. I saw my students start to run. Then we heard a second one. A car bomb. They were full of life and there they were, lying on the streets of Baghdad. There were our children. They are Iraq's lost generation. Chilcot? No, I haven't heard of Chilcot. (68–9)

- 24 Ending the play with Nadia's evocation of the rise of terrorism in the wake of the military intervention of the coalition forces and their failure to stabilize the country points to the hubris of the Western forces, which intervened in Iraq without a proper plan to rebuild the country after the fall of Saddam Hussein.
- 25 The displacement of hegemonic discourse in *Chilcot* seems to disrupt the realist documentary frame traditionally associated with verbatim theatre. Cyrielle Garson categorises *Chilcot* within a new realist frame which, contrary to *Called to Account*'s meticulous recreation of the legal process of a trial, 'offer[s] a glimpse of its own making process that cleverly avoids smothering the kind of realism associated with verbatim theatre' (Garson 252). Cyrielle Garson goes on to argue that 'new realism discloses the verbatim material in two ways at once as it mediates between two levels of reality, two opposite but complementary theatrical languages' (Garson 234). The fact that the testimonies heard during the Chilcot Inquiry are interspersed with testimonies recorded by Richard Norton-Taylor highlights the process of making the play, as the former are used to question the latter. Cyrielle Garson also stresses that 'actors are sometimes voluntarily cast against type whilst the same characters are even played by different actors at different times' (Garson 231), which goes against the documentary realist tendency to bridge the gap between the context of the original verbatim utterances and the performance. New realism therefore also seems to distance itself from a purely journalistic approach that would claim authenticity. As Paola Botham argues, the 'playwright/editor has a legitimate [...] entitlement to add his/her own artistic voice to the verbatim chorus' (Botham 313). *Chilcot*, while allowing previously unheard voices to take centre stage, also allows the voice of the playwright to emerge.
- 26 The opposition to the institutionalised political discourse in plays about the war in Iraq question the conception of the theatre as a public forum: political British theatre aims at undermining the hegemony of the institutional discourse by exposing its shortcomings, and giving a platform to alternative discourses. This political theatre harks back to the function of theatre as a democratic forum in Ancient Greece, making it revolutionary but without instigating real political change. In this respect, David Hare's readiness to stigmatise political institutions without ever offering alternatives has been criticized. Just like the concluding report of the Iraq Inquiry, the plays about the Iraq War settle for a scathing criticism of the institutions, but never advocate for a major upheaval in British politics. Following John Chilcot's 2017 interview with the BBC, in which he declared that Tony Blair was 'not straight with the nation', James Moore, a British journalist for *The Independent*, has argued that there was a parallel to be drawn between the Iraq War and Brexit, as they are both examples of historic mistakes made by governments that relied on belief, rather than facts. In both cases, theatre has opened up a space for debate but it also has, thanks to the technique of verbatim, put the facts back at the heart of the discussion.

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## NOTES

1. The autorisation of the United Nations was crucial to the British people: the opinion polls showed that had the war been approved by the United Nations, a majority of the public opinion would have supported it. See Marie-Hélène LABBÉ, *Le traumatisme irakien: Tony Blair à l'heure de vérité?*, Paris: PUPS Sorbonne, 2016, 30–7.
  2. David HARE and Mark LAWSON, *The Vertical Hour, The Q&A*, 1st October 2014, last accessed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3xKs4v25ng8> on 2 June 2018.
  3. The hypernymic noun 'stuff' was famously carelessly used by Donald Rumsfeld: when asked by a journalist about the looting of Baghdad, he replied: "Stuff happens!". David Hare used the expression as the title of his play to better highlight the decision-makers' lack of compassion, but also the absence of a sense of responsibility.
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## ABSTRACTS

Tony Blair's decision to sanction a military intervention in Iraq in 2003, alongside the United States, provoked strong reactions on the British stage. The opposition to the conflict, both protean and virulent, led to the revival of the theatrical stage as a popular forum and to open up the dramatic dialogue to philosophy, politics and ethics. This article will examine the political and theatrical endeavours of three plays (*Called to Account: The Indictment of Anthony Charles Lynton Blair for the Crime of Aggression Against Iraq—A Hearing* by Richard Norton-Taylor and Nicholas Kent, *Chilcot* by Richard Norton-Taylor and Matt Woodhead and *The Vertical Hour* by David Hare), as well as their reception, so as to evaluate the characteristics of the political debate on the war in Iraq within the theatre and the value of the counter-discourses it opposes to those of the political institutions.

La décision du gouvernement de Tony Blair d'intervenir en Irak aux côtés des États-Unis a provoqué dès 2003 de vives réactions sur la scène théâtrale britannique. L'opposition au conflit, protéiforme et virulente, a permis de renouer avec l'espace théâtral comme forum populaire et d'ouvrir le dialogue dramatique au dialogue philosophique, politique et éthique. Cet article se propose d'examiner la démarche politique et dramaturgique de trois pièces (*Called to Account: The Indictment of Anthony Charles Lynton Blair for the Crime of Aggression Against Iraq—A Hearing* de Richard Norton-Taylor et Nicholas Kent, *Chilcot* de Richard Norton-Taylor et Matt Woodhead et *The Vertical Hour* de David Hare), ainsi que leur réception afin de déterminer les modalités du débat politique sur la guerre d'Irak au sein de l'institution théâtrale britannique et sur la valeur du contre-discours qu'elle entend opposer à l'institution politique.

## INDEX

**Keywords:** British theatre, Iraq War, verbatim, Richard Norton-Taylor, democracy, dramatic form, documentary realism, new realism, deconstruction, revolution

**Mots-clés:** théâtre britannique, guerre d'Irak, verbatim, Richard Norton-Taylor, démocratie, forme théâtrale, réalisme documentaire, nouveau réalisme, déconstruction, révolution

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