

ARTS

INTERVIEW NICOLAS KENT

Truth stronger than fiction

Alastair Macaulay talks to the director of the Tricycle Theatre in London about the impact of docudrama

It is an indication of our current political climate: the new year brings announcements of not one drama about Tony Blair being called to account for war crimes in a public hearing, but two. On January 15, *Tony Blair on Trial* will be aired on the UK's More4 TV. On April 19, preview performances begin at London's Tricycle Theatre of *Called to Account*, subtitled "The Indictment of Anthony Charles Lynton Blair for the Crime of Aggression against Iraq". News of both has excited international interest. But what is the difference between the two? Simple: the TV drama is fiction.

The Tricycle's, characteristically, will be non-fiction. Edited by Guardian journalist Richard Norton-Taylor, it is the latest of this theatre's now famous docudramas, based on new interviews with politicians, lawyers, diplomats, civil servants, United Nations officials, intelligence experts, journalists and more.

Nicolas Kent, who will direct *Called to Account* and who has been the Tricycle's artistic director since 1984, e-mails me after he has watched an advance screening of *Tony Blair on Trial*, which is written by the satirist Alistair Beaton. "It posits Gordon Brown taking over as prime minister, Hillary Clinton taking over as president, and then some shenanigans in 2012 where Gordon, with a majority of two, gives Tony Blair as a hostage of fortune to Hillary Clinton to be tried in The Hague," Kent says. "It is fun and powerful but is not actually comparable to our project in any way."

This e-mail exchange follows a lunch I had with Kent in his theatre's café during a short break from rehearsals for a new quasi-political play about domestic violence, *The War Next Door* by Tamsin Oglesby. He is excited, almost bubbling, about the prospect of *Called to Account*, as indeed he is about *The War Next Door*. "I do believe the Iraq war is an illegal war," he says.

But we had begun with my asking him whether, for him, theatre had always been linked with politics. "For me, it was always tied in with social justice," he says. "My father was a German refugee; he changed his name here during the war. [Kent was born in 1945.] I came across some anti-Semitism

when I was sent to a private school. The moment of revelation came when I was at Cambridge and heard James Baldwin at the Union proposing the motion 'The American Dream is a Nightmare'... He spoke of racism in a way that made complete sense to me."

Kent recalls how, when the *Romans in Britain* obscenity trial was taking place at the Old Bailey in 1982, he arranged for transcripts of each day's proceedings to be performed at 10pm that evening at the Oxford Playhouse.

"The judge gave warning that we were risking contempt of court. Our lawyer advised us that there could be no décor, no applause or laughter, and that the actors should not inflect their performances. *Newsnight* came to cover it, but their lawyers insisted that any transmission of our performance be delayed 15 minutes while they were clearing things. Eventually the judge ruled that an 11.30pm TV broadcast was enough after the jurors' bedtimes" (Kent is giggling here) "for the performance not to constitute contempt."

That uninflected manner of performing verbatim testimony has become part of the Kent style in docudrama. Many theatre-goers now know how shattering it can be to hear low-key, flat, "untheatrical" courtroom testimony that gradually discloses massive evidence of injustice, prejudice, horror, illegality, death. It has been

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applied now to the Scott inquiry about arms to Iraq (*Half the Picture*, 1993), the Third Reich (*Nuremberg*, 1998), Bosnia (*Srebrenica*, 1998), the Stephen Lawrence inquiry (*The Colour of Justice*, 1999), the Hutton inquiry (*Justifying War*, 2003) and Northern Ireland (*Bloody Sunday*, 2005). A non-Kent Tricycle production that reached the West End and America was *Guantánamo: Honor Bound to Defend Freedom* (2004).

Thanks to these, the docudrama



Nicolas Kent: 'For me, theatre was always tied to social justice'

Tristram Kenton

now constitutes a significant theatrical genre: more important, I believe, than the in-your-face genre of drama pioneered at the Royal Court and other theatres over the past 15 years. And so the 250-seat Tricycle, in unglamorous Kilburn, north-west London, has become Britain's most important home of political theatre.

I ask Kent to what degree he and/or the Tricycle invented or pioneered the docudrama. "Oh, there were precedents. I would never claim the credit. If people say that David Hare is taking a leaf out of the Tricycle book when he writes docudramas such as *The Permanent Way* and *Stuff Happens*, they're forgetting some of his own early plays: *Fanshen*, for example. We all inform each other. But, yes, at the Tricycle we have reinforced a certain excitement."

Kent recalls how, at an early performance of *Nuremberg*, a 70-year-old woman with family experience was so upset by Goering's testimony that she stood up and shouted: "Don't believe him!" "Then she remembered it was a play, sat down, and apologised profusely to everyone," he says.

"But it was perfect evidence of the power of theatre."

Kilburn has long been one of London's most culturally diverse districts. Since Kent had already been involved in political theatre before coming to the Tricycle, I ask if he would have worked the same way wherever he had gone.

"Oh, I couldn't do this anywhere else. I'm in the right place in the right conditions. I have a fantastic board, with some Asian, some Irish, and a lot of black members. They are extremely good, for example, on getting the balance right. At a recent board meeting, two of the black members said: 'Have you been to Ikea recently? You don't hear English spoken there. It's all eastern European. So shouldn't we be staging plays that address eastern European issues?'"

About 20 per cent of the Tricycle repertory is non-political and non-social in emphasis. *The War Next Door* may be read as an allegory about Iraq, but Kent is relaxed if many in the audience will not see that aspect. After that comes a touring production of Harold Pinter's *The Caretaker*.

The Tricycle can only afford to

stage four home-made productions a year. Kent's ambition is to raise the number to six: "We're fundraising right now, just to keep us going at our current rate. I want to enlist 200 people who will give us £1,000 per annum for three years. We need it, just to continue. We know people admire what we do. Now we're saying: 'We need you to put your money where your mouth is.'"

Kent is well aware how deep the Tricycle's political plays have penetrated into British culture. When his 1999 staging of *The Colour of Justice* – about the Macpherson inquiry into the police response to the murder of the black teenager Stephen Lawrence – was shown on TV, "we got 23 per cent of the TV audience. That's huge."

"Recently our wardrobe lady heard from a policeman in Leicestershire that he'd seen it 30 times, because it is a part of police training there. He told her: 'Your bloody show still lives!'"

'The War Next Door' runs from February 1 to March 3 at the Tricycle Theatre, London NW6. Tel +44 20 7328 1000

NEW MUSIC

There's nothing quite like the PLG

Lovers of new music in London owe a large debt to the Park Lane Group, which, for some 50 years, has been offering concert space to young artists, and particularly young composers. Where most of them get nowhere to be heard except at the music schools, which chiefly draw their students' relatives and friends to their "public" concerts, the South Bank can attract some of its wider clientele to new music and new performers – and often with happy results.

The PLG's first featured composers were people like the young William Walton, Elisabeth Lutyens, Lennox Berkeley and Richard Rodney Bennett. As they became household names, or at least safe concert-draws, the PLG turned its attention more to composers and performers who had not yet attracted wide public attention. Now, music-lovers who attend the PLG's intensive annual showcases can hear and decide just who deserves their continued attention.

For some while now, the shyly presiding spirit here has been John Woolf. His current Artistic Committee of critical readers includes the likes of Andrew Ball, Sarah Leonard, Paul Patterson and Guy Protheroe, all of them successful musicians with sympathetic ears for newcomers. In short, we need the PLG; there is nothing else quite like it.

I attended four of their Purcell Room concerts last week. Yes, it is the South Bank's smallest hall, and the PLG audience never really fills it. But new music is caviar to the general – by definition it never draws crowded houses.

Howard Skempton, now almost 60, was the PLG's featured composer this year – a generous choice, even a bold one. He is no modernist, unlike the usual PLG candidates; rather, he is a musician who knows up-to-date music well, but has chosen to write simple, mock-"popular" pieces that require no virtuosi in the band. You can hear the sophisticated musician behind his apparently naive music, but there is no sense of slumming. Personally, though there is plenty of new music I would rather hear, it is a tonic

amid the flood of "intellectual" music that needs you to study the programme notes with respectful assiduity while it goes on.

Besides all the Skempton pieces, the PLG concerts offered some grand modernist and post-modernist pieces. There was Mark-Anthony Turnage's *Berceuse* for cello, which takes its soloist up into the stratosphere to suggest "an evocative and steamy aura", and the late Witold Lutoslawski's 1981 *Grave* for cello and piano. We also had a sterling performance of Elliott Carter's fine cello sonata (1948) by John Myerscough with the pianist Alasdair Beatson, and at the next performance in the PLG's crowded schedule, the mezzo Karina Lucas sang Aaron Copland's 12 Emily Dickinson songs with passionate sympathy, as also Peter Dickinson's ripe settings of raunchy Gregory Corso poems and Anthony Payne's nostalgic *Adlestrop*.

The Heath String Quartet

It was what we need from the Park Lane Group: the new and almost-new, the good and not-so-good

went through the five sharply contrasted movements of György Ligeti's Quartet no. 2 with urbane sophistication, properly knife-edged. The first three of Paul Whitmarsh's *All These Confessions*... were small, still and telling, as sung by Lucas; the fourth was bigger, sombre, even romantic. On violin and piano, Katie Stillman and Simon Lane played Colin Matthews' *Chaconne with Chorale and Moto Perpetuo*, Toru Takemitsu's *From Far Beyond Chrysanthemums and November Fog* to fine effect.

It was exactly what we need from the PLG: the new and the almost-new, the good and the not-so-good. We are regularly in their debt, and much better off for that.

David Murray