



## Courtroom dramas

Despite a public school and Oxbridge education, Nicolas Kent felt an outcast because of his family background. As director of the Tricycle Theatre in Kilburn, he has aimed to highlight injustice with plays based on documentary evidence. After successful dramas about Stephen Lawrence and the Hutton inquiry, *Guantánamo* is to open in New York

**Nicholas Wroe**

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In 1998, Nicolas Kent, artistic director of the Tricycle Theatre in Kilburn, attended the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia in The Hague. Kent was there to research his play of the same year, *Srebrenica*, in which he edited for the stage transcripts of the hearings investigating the massacre in that town during the Bosnian war.

A year or so later, when the trial of Slobodan Milosevic was about to begin, Kent received a phone call from the administrator of the court asking if he still had the desks used in the production. "Then he asked if he could send a United Nations lorry to pick them up," explains Kent. "It turned out that the trial was going to be bigger than the previous hearings and they didn't have enough desks. Although we hadn't actually used mahogany, we had reconstructed the furniture very carefully and we did still have them. So the lorry came and as far as I know the desks are still in the Hague being used for the trial of Slobodan Milosevic."

It is, of course, rare for a theatrical production to make such a direct, if prosaic, contribution to the slow workings of history. But throughout Kent's 20 years at the Tricycle he has regularly seen his work go on to exert an influence on public opinion and policy-making.

Kent and the Tricycle have a long and distinguished record of making theatre that engages closely with the demographic make-up of Kilburn and the large local black and Irish communities. But over the past decade, he and the theatre have become better known for "tribunal" plays, as he calls them, in which edited extracts of inquiry or court transcripts are dramatised on stage.

Starting with *Half the Picture*, his reconstruction of the Scott inquiry into the arms to Iraq affair in 1993, Kent has gone on to stage verbatim extracts from the Stephen Lawrence inquiry (*The Colour of Justice*, 1999), the Hutton inquiry into the death of Dr David Kelly (*Justifying War*, 2003) as well as *Srebrenica* and extracts from the Nuremberg war crime trials (1998).

Playing in London's West End and soon to open in New York is the latest of this series, *Guantánamo*, which, in a slight variation, draws upon new interviews with detainees, their relatives and lawyers as well as public testimonies of politicians and commentators. Kent, who co-directs with Sacha Wares, describes it as "the riskiest thing I have ever done in the theatre", because of the break-neck speed that saw it progress from commission to stage in just a few months. "But it needed to be done at that pace," he says, pointing out the ongoing nature of the story. "And even if it had failed as a piece of drama, it still would have been worth the attempt."

In fact, critics have been overwhelmingly positive but, as co-writer Gillian Slovo notes, "artists are very rarely allowed to risk failure these days because everything is about the market. However, Nick understands that this way does not lie good art. Of course he wants the Tricycle to be well attended and he wants plays that are well received. But he also has a real understanding of the political and social responsibility to the people we interviewed. Some of the relatives have written to him saying he has changed their lives and I know for him that is as gratifying as any critical or audience praise the play has received."

Kent's technique in approaching the material of the tribunal plays - apart from *Srebrenica* and *Guantánamo*, all edited by Guardian journalist Richard Norton-Taylor and directed by Kent - is scrupulous in ensuring that words are not changed from the source documents, the chronology is maintained and answers to one question are not put against another.

Seeing him at the Tricycle it is clear that this fastidiousness in constructing the tribunal play texts is equally applied to the minutiae of redecorating the theatre bar or any other of a million day-to-day activities. It is a characteristic that has translated, for some, into a reputation for being demanding. He acknowledges that he can be quick-tempered, irascible and impatient

but, as one observer notes, these are "the genetic traits of a born campaigner. Most of his encounters with people are about getting something that he thinks needs to happen, to happen. And of course he gets frustrated if it doesn't."

Norton-Taylor, laughing, says: "People have asked me 'how can you do more than one play with Nick?' He is very committed and he drives himself and he drives others. Perhaps I can see why people think he is some kind of control freak because his language and his body language can sometimes give that impression. But he is also very charming and funny and as someone who has worked very closely with him, all I can say is that he doesn't seem a control freak to me."

Despite lucrative offers of work elsewhere, Kent has never seriously thought about leaving the Tricycle. According to theatre director Jude Kelly, who for many years ran the West Yorkshire Playhouse in Leeds: "His sort of long-term commitment is often undervalued within the theatre industry. People drift in and out of one's eye-line and become more or less glamorous. Everyone talks about Guantánamo and the Stephen Lawrence inquiry. But there have been years at the Tricycle when he was labouring on, doing very good and important work and not catching that much attention."

She adds, "Nick has doggedly resisted the notion that big is better and change is essential. He has built a trust and relationship with the community around Kilburn and the wider community of Londoners who care about the agendas of the Tricycle. And in so doing he has built something that has become a part of people's lives."

Kent is the first to accept that as a white, Cambridge-educated, middle-class man he is in many ways an unlikely figure to be leading a theatre that has specialised in black, Irish and political drama. But he is not quite the mainstream insider he might at first appear to be. His father was an affluent German Jewish refugee who came to Britain in 1936. "He was passionate about the theatre and the arts although he was an entrepreneur," says Kent. "He was a button merchant and then went into sunroofs and then, after he once played golf, he went into golf balls."

His mother was from Shepton Mallet in Somerset and was an art buyer for Selfridges before moving to the haberdashery section where she met his father. She was married but left her husband and the couple moved in together a few days after war was declared in 1939. "It was obviously a very unusual thing for people to do in those days," says Kent, "and I didn't get to hear about this part of the family history until I was 30."

Kent's father changed his name from Kahn to Kent during the war - "something he later regretted" - and Kent's grandfather was briefly interned when he came to this country in 1939. Nicolas was born in 1945, after his mother had suffered a series of miscarriages and a still-birth, and was brought up in Hampstead Garden Suburb. He describes himself as "a spoilt only child and quite lonely. And I didn't know whether I was English or continental."

At 12 he went to board at Stowe School. Both his parents were atheists and he had not, until then, encountered any anti-semitism. "I was aware my father spoke with a funny accent and he liked things like soft cheese which you couldn't get in England," he explains. "But it was at the time of the Suez crisis and there was quite a lot of anti-semitism around. I became very aware of it and Stowe was hellish."

He says his unhappiness at the school was mitigated by the Vanbrugh house and Capability Brown landscaped grounds, which have left him with a life-long love of architecture. "While I wasn't physically bullied, I was tormented and it did leave a scar. It did nothing to nurture individual creativity and I was very repressed and self-conscious at school. It has taken me many years to find out who I am and the theatre has been part of that."

After Stowe, Kent took a gap year during which he sold pyjamas and shirts in Galeries Lafayette in Paris as well as going to the theatre a lot and getting "a little involved" in a communist party cell. He then moved to Florence for a few months before returning in 1964 to take up a place reading English at St Catharine's College, Cambridge, where he consciously decided "not to be the repressed boy I had been at school. I wanted to open up and enjoy things and I had a wonderful three years."

Kent's theatrical and political lives began in earnest at university. He says a key event was his only visit to the Cambridge union where he saw James Baldwin debate a motion "that the American dream is in fact a nightmare". "Baldwin was extraordinary. He talked about racism in a way that I completely understood." Kent later got to know Baldwin and a rehearsal space at the Tricycle is named after him. A revival of Baldwin's Blues for Mr Charlie has been a recent Tricycle success.

Kent was devoted to theatre by the time he joined Cambridge Amateur Dramatic Club. He says he saw Paul Scofield's King Lear four times but was not stage struck by the glamour of the theatre. "I never queued up for autographs. I always saw it as a remarkable means of communication."

The writer Kerry Crabbe acted in the first play Kent directed, Look Back in Anger, while he was at university. "Nick's approach was more mature than most people's, even then," says Crabbe. "He was much better than many others at administration and the slog of making things possible. That kind of seriousness attracted people to him, although I do remember one woman saying that she wished he'd get drunk just once because when he would occasionally have a glass of wine he would unwind and become more giggly and let that side out. But although he was not someone who trades on charm to get popularity, he had a very loyal coterie of friends."

Crabbe says that even then Kent never thought of theatre as something that is purely entertainment. "He always had a strong social conscience and was one of the first people to do black theatre and colour-blind casting, which is widespread now but wasn't then. He felt he had a duty. The blowback from things like Guantánamo has been emotionally wearing and time-consuming. But he says that is the point of doing the work he does."

Kent's first job in the theatre was as a trainee director at the Liverpool Playhouse in 1967. While there he joined the Labour party and was an active member until his resignation in the mid-90s over, unusually, the BSE crisis. "I just couldn't take it when Robin Cook started following the Tory line in blaming the Europeans for not accepting our beef," he explains. "I am a committed European, it is my heritage, and I think it has been wonderful not to have had a war in Europe for 50 years. I thought if Labour was stooping to xenophobia to gain popularity it was no longer a party I wanted to be in."

He does remain close to Ken Livingstone and advised him to leave Labour to stand as an independent candidate for London mayor. He now sits on the mayor's cultural strategy group and describes persuading Livingstone to agree to provide school children with free public transport to artistic events - "Ken insisted we include the zoo as well" - as one of his proudest achievements.

In artistic terms, Kent's stay in Liverpool was not a success and he was not given a production to direct. His response was to raise £800 in arts grants and tour a Henry James play. "And we managed to pay everyone and make a small profit." Kent went on to work for the film actor George Baker's theatre company and then with Sylvia Syms as artistic director of the Watermill

Theatre in Newbury. They remain friends and Kent called upon Syms to play Mrs Thatcher in *Half the Picture* .

"As a director Nick is not afraid to say he doesn't agree with you," says Syms, "but he also trusts you as an artist. He fires people with an enthusiasm and people put up with him being demanding because his belief shines through so strongly. It sounds a bit sickening because at the Tricycle you're paid nothing and it is pretty revolting and tiny backstage, but it is the best place in the world to work. When we tried to re-do the theatres at Rada, we looked at the Tricycle space because the scale works so well."

In 1970, Kent had two years at the Traverse theatre in Edinburgh where he worked on premieres of plays by CP Taylor and David Hare before becoming administrative director, although he also directed plays at the Oxford Playhouse Company. It was here that he first experimented with verbatim theatre when he staged extracts of the 1979 *Romans In Britain* obscenity trial at the Old Bailey and came close to being jailed when Mary Whitehouse's solicitor claimed, unsuccessfully, that he was in contempt of court.

Just as importantly for his immediate future, it was at Oxford that Kent directed *Playboy of the West Indies*, Mustapha Matura's Caribbean-set re-working of the JM Synge classic. The play provided Kent with a calling card for the job at the Tricycle when the play transferred there. It returns later this year for a 20th-anniversary production. Matura praises Kent for his ear for drama and ability to assemble and direct a talented cast. "And we got a good number of West Indian people to come and see it, which was so important," says Matura. "We proved that you would find a Caribbean audience for Caribbean plays."

Although all Kent's work has a social and political dimension, he has directed lighter work such as the Fats Waller musical *Ain't Misbehavin'* (1995). Carlo Gebler has written three plays for Kent, the most recent being a reworking of Arthur Schnitzler's *La Ronde - 10 Rounds* (2002) - set among participants in the Northern Irish peace process. "All my dealings with Nick have been about how to make something work and how we can make the audience laugh. Theatre is meant to be for pleasure as well as possibly being constructive and he is very good at giving astute, practical and constructive advice. You don't want a director to say things like, 'let the play breathe more'. You want to be told that someone should look out of a window. Nick does that very well."

Kent's early days at the Tricycle were critically acclaimed but almost fatally undermined by the vicissitudes of funding from Brent council. (He says while the current government could still do better, it has generally done well on arts funding.) Then, in 1987 the theatre burned to the ground and four weeks into the rebuilding programme he was told they were 26 weeks behind schedule. But it did re-open and in 1998 a cinema was added.

This ambitious expansion programme has come at a cost and Kent now says they probably should have had two screens instead of one 300-seat cinema. But the larger space is also used for conferences and about a third of the new building is used in the daytime for education projects. In the past year, more than 1,000 events have been held there, of which at least 50% involved socially-excluded local children. Kent is also on the board of a local regeneration initiative and has involved himself with efforts to improve street lighting on Kilburn High Road and increase access to local parks.

He freely admits to being a workaholic and bemoans the fact that, as opposed to working with writers, so much of his time is spent raising the £250,000 the theatre needs each year to keep afloat. He is single, has not had children and also acknowledges that he has not devoted enough time to relationships, saying the most important of these, with a New York-based

American woman who already had a child, ended six years ago. "We would endlessly go back and forth, but after a few years it became too difficult and the relationship didn't resolve itself. Of course when you look back on a life this is a slight regret, but in a way this theatre has been my child, and, I suppose, there is still time."

Kent's commitment to progressive causes has not always been an easy option. As a supporter of the anti-apartheid movement, he found himself in the unenviable position of being picketed as a sanctions buster when he put on *Born in the RSA* (1986) by the Market Theatre of Johannesburg. In fact, Kent had received the explicit, but necessarily confidential, blessing of the ANC but was still obliged to walk through picket lines.

Matura says Kent has made "a wonderful success of the Tricycle and it is a byword for good theatre outside the West End. But I do wish it would be more adventurous now it has consolidated its position in the theatrical community. For a time I thought it might be becoming more Islington than Kilburn, if I may put it like that. But hopefully that was a transitional phase in the process of consolidation and we can now see more local input into the programming."

Kent accepts some of Matura's analysis. "We might have done a few too many revivals recently. But it's not for want of looking for good new black work to do. There does seem to be a paucity at the moment and that is true of finding great new Asian work or white work. It's true there is an endless pressure upon me to do new work. And I relish that pressure although it is difficult to live up to it."

By the early-90s Kent had become increasingly aware that external circumstances were changing. In particular, democracy in South Africa and the Northern Irish peace process deeply affected his black and Irish audiences. "Suddenly there was less focus as to where we were going," he recalls. "It was more difficult to put on a programme that challenged people and was interesting politically and artistically."

The tribunal plays began in 1993 with *Half the Picture* because Kent played tennis with Norton-Taylor. "He would tell me about this fascinating [Scott] inquiry and I knew most people were just getting dribs and drabs. Richard was already writing a book about it so I persuaded him that it could work as a play." The two are working on a version of the Bloody Sunday inquiry, which will be the sixth inquiry Norton-Taylor has edited for Kent to stage. Looking back over this now considerable body of work, Kent picks out *The Colour of Justice* as the most satisfying.

"It really did change things. I don't want to just cause controversy. I want to highlight injustices and move towards a solution. The Stephen Lawrence play was part of the solution. It went to different theatres and was on television and it changed many people's views on the issue of racism. It's even used as teaching material by the Met."

The play also had a remarkable personal coda. Some time after it was staged, Duwayne Brooks, Lawrence's friend, who was with him the night he was murdered, was arrested and charged with attempted rape. When Kent heard about the charges he contacted Brooks's solicitor and offered to put up £20,000 of premium bonds as bail. The charges were later dropped.

Brooks says, "We had met, but he didn't really know me. And if I had done it, it would have reflected very badly upon him. But he still helped me and he put a lot of black people and black organisations to shame. No one else came to help apart from this white guy who put his money on the line. He is a great man and we have kept in touch since."

Kent says what he is ultimately trying to do is to "take a stand against things that I don't like in society and to say how we can change them". He says he doesn't naturally relish confrontation "but I am comfortable with telling the truth as I see it."

He remembers being on an Equity committee in the early 80s that tried to stop Anthony Hopkins blacking up to play Othello. "We thought it was wrong and nowadays it would be thought of as wrong. But we were outcasts because we were supposedly stopping a star performing his art." But nowadays that would not happen." Kent was also instrumental in establishing a directory of African and Asian actors, "so that there were no excuses any more for people to say they couldn't find a black actor".

His commitment to work that deals with contemporary political issues leaves him uncertain, although not overly concerned, as to the longevity of some of the pieces of which he is most proud. "All the writers I've liked to work with have been massively good and important. But I really liked them because they are taking on issues that are happening now." He cites CP Taylor, Howard Barker, Barney Simon and John McGrath, who co-wrote *Half the Picture*. "But I do wonder, like I wonder about the Tribunal plays, whether their work might not survive the next 50 years."

Guantánamo will open next month in New York. "Up until the recent Supreme Court judgments," he says, "if you mentioned the word in the States people thought you were talking about a type of lizard or a Central American country. It'll be interesting to see how it goes down because it is not anti-American, it is anti the way this administration is administering justice and its tactics on the war on terrorism. And the play is not saying all the people there are innocent. It is saying that these people have human rights and the right to due process. The west ignores this at its peril because if you start using the same torture tactics you are accusing your enemies of [using], you undermine the values you are fighting for."

During the early stages of the Hutton inquiry, a request was made to have the proceedings televised. It was turned down, but as one of the lawyers noted, "a small theatre in north London" would show what went on anyway. Kent acknowledges that this ability to go places the cameras can't, and to crystallise the "drips and drabs" of a daily newspaper report into a comprehensive whole, has proved a more powerful medium than he initially expected.

"I remember during a performance of Nuremberg when an elderly Jewish woman in the audience stood up after Goering's speech and began to denounce him. We were all very shaken by that and we were a little worried. I didn't want the technique we use to invade people's emotions to that extent and this woman, who was obviously a Holocaust victim, was afterwards a bit crumpled and very embarrassed. But that is the effect of knowing that these are real people and important contemporary issues we are dealing with. And the staging of them makes them urgent and real and that's why I do theatre. It is still the most extraordinary tool for social change."

## **Nicolas Kent**

**Born:** London, January 26, 1945.

**Education:** 1958-63 Stowe School; '64-67 St Catharine's Cambridge.

**Career:** 1970-72 associate director, Traverse Theatre; '76-82 administrative director, Oxford Playhouse Company; '84- artistic director, Tricycle Theatre.

**Some productions:** 1984 *Playboy of the West Indies*; '86 *The Great White Hope*; '88 *Pentecost*; '95 *Ain't Misbehavin'*.

**Tricycle tribunal plays:** 1993 Half the Picture; '98 Nuremberg; '98 Srebrenica; '99 The Colour of Justice; 2003 Justifying War; '04 Guantánamo.

**Some positions held:** 1999-2001 council member Architectural Association; 2000- member of mayor's cultural strategy group for London.

• Guantánamo is showing at the New Ambassador's Theatre, London. Box office: 0870 060 6627.

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