



**Interview**

## **The Saturday interview: Nicolas Kent**

*Stuart Jeffries*

**The artistic director of London's Tricycle Theatre is leaving after a 28-year tenure. So what next for the man who put real-life politics, from Iraq to last year's riots, on stage?**

Sat 18 Feb 2012 00.04 GMT

**O**n his first day as prime minister, David Cameron signed, as is customary, a so-called letter of last resort. Nicolas Kent explains what happened next. "That letter was put in a safe, the safe put in another safe and that safe put in a submarine." The letter instructed the nuclear submarine commander what to do, Kent explains, "if London is destroyed and the whole cabinet vapourised."

This is the story explored in *The Letter of Last Resort*, the play being staged during Kent's final season as artistic director of London's Tricycle Theatre. For 28 years he has made it Britain's leading stage for political theatre, and a place with an international reputation out of proportion to its 235-seat size. Kent is going out with a bang, not a whimper. In David Greig's play a Trident submarine commander opens his instructions after Britain has been devastated by a nuclear strike. What has the prime minister instructed him to do? "If it says retaliate, the prime minister has committed a war crime, because he's written the letter in cold blood saying murder millions of people," argues Kent. But who did Cameron imagine, if he indeed did, should face retaliation? Iran? France? "Heaven knows," he says.

The play is one of a new season of 10 short pieces in a series called *The Bomb*. Kent is staging it because he was challenged by Lib Dem peer Shirley Williams, who served as Gordon Brown's nuclear proliferation adviser. "She said you've got to do something about nuclear proliferation - we're going to renew Trident and we're not going to have the debate." That was Kent's kind of challenge - to catalyse a public debate about a neglected political issue through challenging drama. "It's not happening in parliament, it's not happening in newspapers, on television, in cinemas. Somebody's got to do it."

Kent gets a buzz from being that somebody: "The core of what I want to do is telling you about how we live now, maybe about social injustice or human rights." Auden wrote that poetry makes nothing happen; Kent thinks theatre must, if it's to be worthwhile, change the world, if only a little. "When we did a play about Stephen Lawrence, people suddenly understood what it is to be a parent of a 16-year-old black boy and realise he has a shorter life expectancy than his white counterparts. Or when we did *Guantánamo*, and it added 0.00001% towards the sentiment that leads to some people being released."

"I grew up in the shadow of the bomb," says the 67-year-old. "I was born in the year the bomb was dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. I remember being at school when a master came in during the Cuban missile crisis, and asked: 'What are you going to do *if* you grow up?'"

Isn't all that historical curio? "Absolutely not. A lot of young people under 30 know or care little about the bomb, and yet we're about to embark on a Trident renewal programme which will take an enormous amount of money. I think it's £80bn. It could be spent on the health service. Or theatre. Imagine if it was spent on theatre!"

Eighty billion for theatre in this glum era of fiscal probity - a beautiful dream. Kent is resigning from the Tricycle for the sake of £350,000 grant cuts that he fears will make his theatre's future miserably bleak. He's had enough: "I would have spent my last years here making cuts and trying to raise money - I would have left exhausted. Why would I do that when maybe I can find other things to do with my creative energies?"

The theatre is enduring a triple whammy - cuts from the Arts Council, the London councils and Brent council. "We'll have £350,000 less to spend next year than we have this year, on a grants budget that was about £1.2m. The Arts Council and government said they were not going to salami slice. That's precisely what they're doing."

But, really, in this age of austerity, so what? Shouldn't state-subsidised, leftie theatre for Guardian-reading bien-pensants tap deep-pocketed, bleeding-heart philanthropists to bankroll the shortfall? "We already raise half a million each year from private donations," says Kent. Donors include Labour peer Bob Gavron and theatre impresario Cameron Mackintosh. "Bloomberg have also been good to us over the years, and so have other anonymous donors."

Still, smaller theatres such as the Tricycle, he says, are suffering disproportionately. "I'm very, very angry about the way the regions and local London arts organisations have been treated. The large institutions - and I have nothing against the larger institutions, may they continue to flourish - have had a 14.9% cut on a budget that does not rely for the most part on local-authority funding. Our cut is more like 20%. And added to that, they have enormous amount clout with both commercial sponsors and philanthropic givers who want to be associated with big national institutions.

But why should anyone care if regional or local London theatres suffer? "No one seems to understand the ecology of British culture," he retorts. "Everything is interlinked - if you stop giving money to grassroots organisations, the whole thing starts to perish. If you invest in the arts, it will bring a huge amount of money back. And by arts I mean regional theatres, dance

companies, orchestras. Our plays are done around the world, our actors are in Hollywood films. The second-biggest earner of foreign currency for this country is tourism, and the second reason people give for coming here is theatre.

When Kent arrived at the Tricycle in the early 1980s, he wanted its programming to reflect local diversity through new work by black, Irish, Jewish, Asian and South African writers. "The arts are a wonderful tool, I think, in celebrating the cultural diversity of a city like London. We do an Irish play and get some black audience; we do a black play and get some Irish audience. And we understand each other better as a result. If you ask me what the most important quality in life is, I'd say empathy. What theatre does best is to put people in other people's shoes. I suppose theatre is a quest for total empathy."

Kent readily agrees that this idealistic vision was a consequence of the antisemitism he suffered at Stowe public school. "Oh, definitely. I was teased and I didn't deal with it very well." His father was an affluent German-Jewish refugee who came to Britain in 1936 and, during the war, changed his name from Kahn to Kent. "Those experiences made me empathise with those on the receiving end of Islamophobia, and it made me empathise with being black."

That sensibility is reflected in not just some of the plays he's staged, but also by his work on the Afro-Asian committee of Equity. "For a long time we were trying to get people to do colour-blind casting, which we still don't get. When did you last see a production of Dickens on the BBC with black people who aren't servants? And yet, on stage, Hugh Quarshie played Hotspur 30-odd years ago, and Henry VI has been played by black actors."

His most groundbreaking work of recent years at the Tricycle has been what he calls the "tribunal plays", based on transcripts of hearings and inquiries. They came about after Kent played tennis with the Guardian's security editor Richard Norton-Taylor in 1993. "Richard told me, every Sunday for weeks, the most incredible stories from the Scott inquiry [into arms sales to Iraq]. I thought people weren't discussing it, so maybe we should put it out there."

How did he know edited transcripts of hearings would make good theatre? Kent cites *The Biko Inquest* and Eric Bentley's classic *Are You Now or Have You Ever Been*, about the McCarthy hearings, as dramatically effective precursors. Kent had also staged a tribunal play before. When he was artistic director of the Oxford Playhouse in 1982, he staged the failed prosecution at the Old Bailey of director Michael Bogdanov for obscenity in putting on Howard Brenton's *Romans in Britain* at the National Theatre (on the grounds that it depicted a homosexual rape) as the case unfolded. "The court closed on the second day to decide whether we'd committed contempt of court by putting it on stage. The judge ruled we hadn't, because we were in Oxford and the jury was in London, so they were too far away to be influenced. So we got away with it that time."

The Tricycle's first tribunal play, *Half the Picture*, in 1994, by John McGrath and Norton-Taylor, was based on the Scott inquiry. Since then there has been *Justifying War*, based on the Hutton inquiry into the death of Dr David Kelly; *Srebrenica*, based on the UN hearings about the massacre of Bosnians in 1995; *Bloody Sunday*, based on the Saville inquiry; *The Colour of Justice*, based on the murder of Stephen Lawrence; *Honour Bound to Defend Freedom*, about the Guantánamo Bay detention camp; and *Called to Account*, about Blair and the invasion of Iraq.

But aren't these dreary agitprop plays preaching to the converted? "I don't do agitprop theatre," retorts Kent. "I want people to be challenged and make up their minds. Once I've chosen the subject, I do it without bias. My bias comes in the choice of subject - that shows where I stand."

Last year he took a stand and commissioned Gillian Slovo to make a drama about the riots, composed of everything from taxi drivers' tweets to interviews with politicians, police, teachers, lawyers and victims. "I had an argument with a friend who said: 'You'll just do it so it looks like the rioters are right and the police wrong.' But I said: 'No I won't. We'll put both sides of the argument.'" But why did we need a drama about the riots based on interviews? "I did it because the government didn't set up an inquiry, and they should have done. They did with Scarman [the report into the 1981 Brixton riots] and a lot of good came out of that."

He is succeeded at the Tricycle by director Indhu Rubasingham. "I know that in the first year the Arts Council will rally round and help, but I think after that it's going to be incredibly difficult for her."

Kent worries about his own future too. A self-confessed workaholic, he expects to feel creatively thwarted. "I'm leaving here now and I don't feel there's anywhere I can go and do the work. It's like writing a book for whom there isn't a publisher. It's frustrating - I'm 67, though I don't feel any different from how I felt at 30. I'm full of ideas."

He wants to make a drama based on the true story of a Soviet submarine that, during the Cuban missile crisis in 1962, was depth-charged by the US Navy. "It almost started world war three. The commander wanted to fire one of his nuclear missiles, and had the authority to do so from the Kremlin." He also wants to work on a drama about why so many young black men die in custody. "Why there are no inquiries - nothing?" Typical Nicolas Kent: going where everybody else disdains to tread, aiming to use theatre to make us confront uncomfortable issues.

And then he pauses, wondering if he should blab his future plans to the Guardian."Oh, mention what you want. Nobody's going to pinch those ideas, are they? Nobody does what I do."

*The Bomb is at the Tricycle Theatre until April. [tricycle.co.uk](http://tricycle.co.uk)*

#### Topics

- Theatre
- Saturday interview
- Michael Bogdanov
- Indhu Rubasingham
- interviews