

Institution: Birkbeck, University of London

Unit of Assessment: 29 English Language and Literature

Title of case study: Contemporary Conflict: creative writing and Colin Teevan's political drama

1. Summary of the impact

An influential playwright and screenwriter, Colin Teevan's work and its impact have continued to develop since he joined the Department of English in October 2008. His writing for verbatim/documentary theatre and broadcast scripts has had impacts in the cultural sphere, nationally and internationally, in schools and in military circles. This case study focuses on his work relating to conflict in the Middle East. Drawing on sustained research into international political conflicts, his plays have been broadcast on radio and TV, and performed in stage productions across Britain and the US. One of his plays, *The Lion of Kabul*, was performed to high-level military officers in both England and America.

2. Underpinning research

Since joining Birkbeck's English department in 2008 Colin Teevan has continued to develop his exploration of contemporary war and conflict in writing for theatre, radio and television. He first addressed this subject in the ground-breaking *How Many Miles to Basra?* (broadcast on Radio 3 in 2005; first produced on stage in 2006). He focuses on the paradoxes in Western liberal thinking that have led the US and its military alliances into numerous wars, both hot and cold, since September 2001. At Birkbeck, he is one of a group of researchers working on the history and representation of war, participating in Birkbeck research events such as the conference, 'After the War' (2009) and the symposium, 'Iraq War Culture', on the tenth anniversary of the start of the Iraq War (March 2013).

Teevan's political dramas consider the contradictory relationship between the reality of a conflict situation as experienced on the ground by individuals who might be seen as agents of western culture (a soldier, spy, aid worker, artist, scientist, journalist or political tourist) and the agendas of the echelons above them. In order to prepare for writing such dramas, Teevan carries out background historical and current affairs research. His dramas then emerge from testimony provided in face-to-face interviews with individuals who have experienced the situation on the ground and those in power who make the decisions. Where possible, Teevan travels to the site of the dramas and interviews individuals from every level of society. These interviews have included the destitute, Mossad agents, nuclear scientists, Washington policy makers, EU negotiators and British and US soldiers recently returned from Afghanistan. The dramas themselves emerge from the individuals' actual experiences juxtaposed with the political intentions of those above. In this way Teevan starts from the method of verbatim drama (associated with the political theatre of places such as the Tricycle Theatre in London, with whom he has worked extensively) and then transforms these testimonies into multilayered fictional dramas.

Works featured in this case study includes a play for TV, two radio plays and two stage plays:

- *The Lion of Kabul* (Ref 1) was performed as part of a suite of twelve plays *Great Game: Afghanistan* at the Tricycle Theatre, London, a cycle that provided historical context since the nineteenth century, for the contemporary military intervention in Afghanistan, contributing to public discourse a deeper understanding of the conflict in Afghanistan.
- *Massistonia* (Ref 2), a play commissioned for Drama on BBC Radio 3, based on his own experience, about a theatre director trying to put on a touring production in Macedonia and the

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forces unleashed against him.

- *There Was a Man, There Was No Man* (Ref 3) performed as part of a cycle of ten plays on the history of the nuclear bomb, focused on the current nuclear situation in the Middle East. It examined the contradictory stance of the West in relation to the development of nuclear weapons in Israel and Iran. This was another cycle of 'history plays' designed to deepen public understanding of our contemporary situation, with national and international impact.
- '*The Sandancers*' (Ref 4), a 120-minute episode in the ITV crime drama series, *Vera*, which focused on mysterious deaths in a regiment, known as the Sandancers, returning home from Afghanistan.

3. References to the research

A selective list of Teevan's creative writing in this period:

1. Episode in *Vera*, '*The Sandancers*' 120-minute original drama starring Brenda Blethyn, ITV 1, 3 June 2012. Audience: 5.3 million (now available on DVD)
2. '*There Was a Man, There Was No Man*' in *The Bomb: A Partial History*. Teevan's play was produced in a sequence at a highly successful run at the Tricycle Theatre. Scripts published in 2012, edited by the director/dramaturg Nicolas Kent (London, Oberon Books, 2012)
3. *Massistonia*, 90 minute play, producer Toby Swift, commissioned for Drama on 3 BBC Radio 3 February 2011
4. *The Lion of Kabul*: in *Great Game: Afghanistan*, another cycle of plays commissioned and performed at the Tricycle Theatre, and around the world. The scripts were published in 2009, edited by director/dramaturg Nicholas Kent (London: Oberon Books, 2009)

4. Details of the impact

Teevan's impacts relate to his contributions to the shaping of public discourse on contemporary war in civil society and concomitant impact on cultural life through broadcasting and theatre performances. His publisher (Oberon Books) particularly values his ability to communicate deep knowledge accessibly to audiences and writes: 'If there were more academics as capable as Teevan, the distance between academia and professional theatre would not be so great.' (Testimonial 1). Some of these performances have been staged for senior military figures and the implications of the work debated on *Newsnight* on national television, and have prompted school teachers to discuss the issue with their students.

Broadcasting

Teevan's play *Massistonia* was broadcast on Radio 3 (6/2/2011), reaching over 93,000 listeners. The play was part of a sequence of commissions from Radio 3 and as Senior Producer, BBC Radio Drama, commissioning editor of the series, comments, 'it was the combination of a distinctive idea and Colin's track record of delivering substantial, intelligent and accessible contemporary drama for radio that secured the commissions. The 'international' aspect ... was attractive to Radio 3 too' (Testimonial 2). *Massistonia* was made available on BBC i-Player and has recently (June 2013) been added to audiogo.com's retail list. It has also been broadcast twice by the democratic opposition radio Kanal 103 in Macedonia. *The Sandancers*, an episode commissioned for the ITV series *Vera* (with consolidated viewing figures of 6.5 million) starring Brenda Blethyn was broadcast in June 2012 on the Queen's Golden Jubilee. It was a hard-hitting play and had to be rescheduled owing to bad news from the Afghan front. (Testimonial 3)

Influential theatre collaborations

Teevan has worked on two seasons of political theatre at the Tricycle Theatre in Kilburn, London,

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honing the fusion of documentary and fictional narrative with its director. *The Lion of Kabul* was first performed in 2009 and revived in 2010, and considered one of the standout plays in the theatre's *The Great Game* season, which attracted audiences of 7722. 'The Great Game' was reviewed in *The Guardian*, *The Times*, and *The Financial Times*. On its premiere in 2009, the *New Statesman* wrote of Teevan's play: 'In one of the best plays, *The Lion of Kabul*, Colin Teevan imagines a confrontation outside Marjan's cage between a female UN official of British Asian origin and a smugly fanatical Taliban mullah who refuses to address her except through a male translator, even though he speaks English. She is demanding justice for two murdered Afghan employees. In accordance with the retributive principles of Taliban justice, he proposes handing over the culprits to her, to be fed to the lion. The irreconcilable differences between relativistic western liberalism and hermetic Islamist certainty are expertly explored.' (Source 6)

After the London run, it was staged in Washington DC and toured across America (2010). The play was short listed for an Olivier award in 2010 for Outstanding Achievement and won a Liberty Human Rights award in 2010. As a review of *The Great Game* in *The Washington Post* noted about Teevan's play, 'In a more unsettling vein, Colin Teevan's *The Lion of Kabul* proves a highly watchable slice of blood-soaked life under the Taliban. Set at Kabul's zoo, the play concerns a macabre administration of justice, abetted by the king of the jungle' (Source 7). It toured seven major venues in the US including the Guthrie in Minneapolis, Berkeley Rep in San Francisco and The Public in New York. A second play, *There Was A Man, There Was No Man*, was commissioned for the Tricycle's *The Bomb: A Partial History*, another highly acclaimed themed season which attracted audiences of over 4300. The former Artistic Director of Tricycle Theatre writes: 'Colin Teevan's work was an integral part of two major projects on Afghanistan and the history of the Nuclear Bomb both produced at the Tricycle Theatre over the past 4 years. His plays were seen by thousands of people in both Britain and the USA.' (Testimonial 4)

Both plays gave a number of actors (21 in all) the opportunity to further develop their careers. One actor, as a consequence of her part in *There Was A Man, There Was No Man*, was offered three parts (two theatre, one TV). As she commented, 'Colin's play had not one but two Iranian women as its leads and that is something you rarely encounter in British theatre. I feel it's through this sort of politically minded work that ethnic minority actors get the exposure that is so generally lacking in the mainstream culture' (Testimonial 5). Further evidence of impact came in July 2013, when Colin Teevan and Birkbeck colleague, theatre director Rob Swain, were invited to Afghanistan in autumn 2013 by the BBC Developing World correspondent David Loyn to collect more stories.

Debates in the military and cultural diplomacy

The Lion of Kabul was given a command performance for the British Army (2010) and for officials and their guests in the Defence Department at the Pentagon in Washington DC (later in 2010), initiated and sponsored by the British Council. 'His play about the Taliban in Afghanistan was performed at a command performance for the Ministry of Defence and the British Army in London and for the Pentagon in Washington' (Testimonial 4). General Sir David Richards, Chief of Defence Staff, wrote in *The Times*: 'We talk about the theatre of war but it is rare that a general has the time to watch a proper drama, let alone one that lasts so long, but I found *The Great Game* a fascinating, entertaining, and historically accurate account of Britain's involvement in Afghanistan since the 1840s and well worth the time. More than 200 members of the audience were from across the military and defence, including 15 Sandhurst officer cadets who saw it with me on Thursday. Nothing learnt in the classroom will have had the same subliminal effect as this. It is crucial for us who work out there to have a more nuanced understanding.' (*The Times*, 3 October 2010). *The Lion of Kabul* was also debated on BBC2's *Newsnight* review programme and Channel 4 news in this context in May 2009.

During the two special British Council sponsored performances in Washington DC audience

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members were invited to complete a feedback poll designed by a professor of Public Diplomacy at the University of South California. Of the 100 surveys completed every one reported that they considered the play relevant to their work with the Department of Defence and to the US mission in Afghanistan. All appreciated the opportunity to learn more about the country and very few had read more the two or three books about the region. It was seen as 'an important part of the process by which the Pentagon awoke to the cultural complexities of Afghanistan' (email 02/07/2013: see Source 8). The report describes the theatre performances as an exercise in cultural diplomacy, noting the unusual collaboration involved in putting the plays in front of the Washington audience, 'The Tricycle Theatre, British Council, British Embassy in Washington, Bob Woodruff Foundation and Pentagon are unlikely bedfellows, but their cooperation makes sense given the subject matter.' (Source 8)

Schools

Further impacts of the *Bomb* season were evident in the US where, for example, 'A teacher who worked in a small, rural high school in Wisconsin, responded to *The Great Game* by writing to the Tricycle: "...the show prompted me to think of my own students and how I could use these plays to help educate them about the history, culture, and political realities of Afghanistan in a way that they would find more meaningful. I believe that this is especially important for my students because many of them will join the military as a way to escape their rural, economically impoverished homes"' (Source 6). In the UK, Teevan has received a number of invitations to visit schools to discuss his work.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact**Testimonials**

1. Editor in Chief, [Oberon Books](#) (factual statement)
2. Senior Producer, BBC Radio Drama (factual statement)
3. Commissioning Editor for *Vera* (factual statement)
4. Former Artistic Director of Tricycle Theatre (factual statement) (we can also supply additional statistics from the Tricycle theatre stage manager)
5. Actor who performed in *There Was A Man, There Was No Man* (factual statement)

Other sources

6. [Tricycle Theatre](#) has links to news reports on BBC and Channel 4 about *The Great Game*
7. Article by Peter Marks, [The Washington Post](#), 20/09/2010
8. [Report](#) by Nicholas Cull; additional related documents can also be supplied on request
9. Articles pertaining to the performance of the play at the [Pentagon](#)