

Interpreting Talking to Terrorists

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Much is happening on stage. It may look at times like just a lot of talk. Even preaching. But Robin Soans (author) and Bairbre Ni Chaoimh (director) are saying much in *Talking to Terrorists*. It takes some time to absorb all the information, as well as the complex messages.

The actors on stage are acting like people talking to an audience. So the audience is put in the role of the audience, a very self reflective place to be. Since all of the script is taken from interviews with those who have been involved in 'terrorism', whether as 'terrorists' or victims of terror, the audience plays the role of the reporter, listening to the stories of twenty nine different people, played by a cast of eight.

At times, the 'reporter' is there on stage, sitting in front of us also listening to the stories, like us, in the role of an audience member. At times he stands up as if the stories are paused and gives us ways of interpreting the stories. He is the interlocutor between terrorists and the public, between the actors and the audience. He is showing the audience how to listen, as reporters or interviewers. In the first half of the play he explains how young people can get involved in terrorist organisations. When the 'reporter' is not on stage, the actors themselves step in and out of roles, turning to the audience and explaining, decoding abbreviations for example. We are challenged to play the role of the ones asking questions. We are in the role of the reporter; actively engaging with these people who are talking.

The interlocutor/reporter gives us different ways to interpret the information we are hearing. He gives a psychoanalytical view of how young people, especially men, get involved in violence: life-threatening situations provide a 'peek experience' and the importance of status and power to a teenager. He gives us a political view, or framework for understanding the War of Terror, in which policies engender a culture of fear which creates the terrorists that they are claiming to protect us against.

We also step into the difficult role of empathising with extreme suffering, as one human to another. We hear of the worst acts that one human can do to another from the mouths of those who experienced the suffering. We hear of being denied of freedom and being locked up for decades. There is an unavoidable emotional connection with these realities, and there is simultaneously a slightly more removed role in the voice of interpretation, from psychological, political and social perspectives.

The audience is repeatedly reminded that they are watching a play. The reporter tells us that 90% of people never go to theatre. That if we were to leave the theatre and knock on 100 doors we would find one person who would be in crisis, and willing to join a violent organisation. The actors look directly at us and explain what they are saying to us.

The audience is given information that the general public was not privy to. Craig Murray (ex-British ambassador to Uzbekistan) explains how the British government accepted intelligence that has been obtained by torture, putting him in such a stressful situation that he suffered serious heart problems. The play unveils the extreme human

suffering behind the British (and American) government's involvement in the war on terror.

We are given much information, and we are given various angles with which to understand the information. So what are we supposed to do with it all? At the end of the play we are left as an audience watching a short skit on stage. All of a sudden the actors are actors and they play out a scene of a young Palestinian girl killed in Bethlehem, recalling an earlier dialogue on Christmas. Her friend and neighbour says how she sees Britain's responsibility in these atrocities, but she doesn't want to blame us for it either. They sing 'Oh Little Town of Bethlehem' and play music on the hand organ (a Harmonium, a reed organ with hand-pumped bellows. It is a European instrument imported and changed for Indian folk music. The sound can be described as moaning). The song is interspersed with verbal ululation that is a universal sound of mourning. By the end of the play, the lyrics of the Christmas carol are emptied of their meaning.

Oh little town of Bethlehem, How still we see thee lie;
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep. The silent stars go by;
Yet in thy dark streets shineth, The everlasting light.
The hopes and fears of all the years, Are met in thee tonight.

Bethlehem looks far from still and its inhabitants certainly cannot enjoy peaceful sleep, except maybe in death, as with this young girl before us. There is no sign of a saviour to be the shining light that will meet the hopes and fears of all the years. Quite the opposite, there seems to be no hope left at all and fear is a political tool. Maybe this music reminds us that we sit in the Western World that sings these songs each year, going along with the cover up of the real human suffering behind the policies of our leaders. And the 'enemies' that face are no different from you or I. Maybe this music reminds us that we are part of the world that simplifies and covers up the humans involved in societal conflict. So that next time we hear the Christmas carol we will remember the ululation and moaning that should accompany it, lamenting the human suffering.

The first lines of the play say that the interviewees whose words make up the script agreed to be open and honest because the stated intention of the reporter (and remember the reporter is the role of the audience) is simply to increase the understanding of the human condition. The play does succeed in increasing the understanding of the human condition for us, the audience. The play is also making a double-edged comment of the power of theatre to be able to achieve this. Through theatre we can increase our understanding of the human condition, appreciate the different perspectives through which to understand conflict, and how 'terrorists' are really no different from you or I. But we the audience are in the 10% of people who actually come to plays, and who ask the questions that will reveal more of the difficult truth that is absent from popular culture. Only a minority of people will ever expose themselves to this experience. Now we see what we have to lament. We have the capacity to see beyond the simple categories our leaders give us, but most of us will never look beyond those categories. So the suffering will continue.

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