

Nov 04, 2016 by [Joshua Kurlantzick](#)

The Revolution Will Not Be Televised: On Black Watch and the U.S. Media Bubble ^[1]

A few months ago I had the pleasure of a nice lunch in West Los Angeles with a team from the British Council out from Washington, D.C. The team was led by Ms. Sarah Frankland, Arts Manager, from the British Council.


The topic was theater and public diplomacy. The Council was trying something new in their programming -- bringing what could be a controversial play to the United States. Not only controversial, but a play that addressed one of the most volatile subjects in the U.S. and the world today: The U.S.-led war in Iraq.

The play explored the war from the perspective of the famed Scottish Military Regiment, the "Black Watch." The mission of the USC Center on Public Diplomacy is to explore issues in public diplomacy in a way that is non-U.S. centric. We are as interested in the perspectives of the U.K., China and Brazil, for example, as we are in those of the U.S. State Department. So, obviously, I leapt at the opportunity. And we agreed to co-sponsor an event with them.

The event was a two-pronged effort: to explore what role theater could have in public diplomacy, and perhaps most importantly, to examine the significance of a powerful and historic U.S. ally bringing a controversial artistic statement to the U.S. in an era in which such criticism has been frowned upon by the Bush Administration.

The British Council has taken a bold and inspired move in bringing "Black Watch" to the United States. In an era in which U.S. media coverage of world events has narrowed and dwindled to almost a single narrative, "Black Watch" provides a much needed window into what it means to be part of the global community outside the United States in this era.

The Council went the additional length to put this into context for both policymakers, students and fans of the theater. By convening an international panel of scholars, artists and policymakers with expertise in theater and public diplomacy, the British Council has provided accessible insight into the significance of this important play.

Finally, the Council commissioned a delicious [think piece](#)  written by noted public diplomacy scholar, [Dr. Nicholas J. Cull](#), a faculty fellow at the USC Center on Public Diplomacy, which framed both the significance of the "Black Watch" as a window into Scottish culture and its role as a tool for cultural diplomacy. The document creates a legacy piece for the art, message and power of the play.

I had the honor of watching Black Watch for the first time in Los Angeles with Ms. Sharon Memis, head of the British Council in the United States. I expected the play to be moving and

powerful. But I had no idea that it would deliver what it did. Not only was this a stunning critique on the war in Iraq, but it put a spin on it that was inherently global. The play shed insight into what it meant to be part of a controversial U.S.-led war, and moreover what it meant to be part of a non-U.S. supporter of this war on the world stage: a perspective rarely seen in the U.S. media narrative.

I found myself at times embarrassed by the portrayal of the U.S. as excessive and cowboy-ish in our effort to dominate a brand of war that was inherently unfamiliar. But most of the time I experienced a feeling of togetherness: Finally, here was a narrative that did not present the perspective of the U.S.-alone. But, instead told the story of what it meant to be riding shotgun with the U.S. in this war.

The second time I saw the play was last week in Brooklyn at St. Anne's Warehouse, where I moderated a panel following the play with Christian Science Monitor Diplomatic Staff Reporter, Howard LaFranchi, Joshua Casteel and the play's director, John Tiffany.

The second viewing of the play was far more potent. This time I sat next to Rita J. King, a collaborator of mine who works on building vibrant communities in the 3-D Immersive Web. Ms. King's area of expertise and emphasis is in understanding what the fundamental building blocks are in international and intercultural community-building with an emphasis on the role of the arts and technology. She is working with us on a recent grant from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation.

In conversations after the play, Rita (who's father is a Vietnam Veteran) and I reflected on the importance of art -- especially drama -- as a cultural salve. Moreover, this salve becomes the gateway at which understanding between cultures can be facilitated.

The British Council has taken a risk with the U.S. public in supporting the run of this play in the U.S. But I think it's a risk that has merit -- a critically timed experiment that informs and educates the U.S. public about what it means to be part of the global stage. And for that I thank them.

I feel obliged to close by highlighting a sentence from the review by The New York Times theater critic, Ben Brantley about the play.

In the final marching sequence, as the men moved forward and stumbled in shifting patterns, I found to my surprise that I was crying. For this was no anonymous military phalanx. It was an assembly of men who, while moving in synchronicity, were each and every one a distinctive blend of fears and ambitions and confusion.

They were every soldier; they were also irreducibly themselves. This exquisitely sustained double vision makes "Black Watch" one of the most richly human works of art to have emerged from this long-lived war.
