

Nov 04, 2016 by *Gordon Robison*

# Stuff Happens <sup>[1]</sup>

London

Planning this visit to London I emailed a friend from my time in Iraq, a British civil servant, suggesting we see "Stuff Happens". David Hare's new play takes its title from Donald Rumsfeld's infamous reaction to the looting of Baghdad. It is routinely selling out the 1100-seat Olivier, the largest of the three halls that make up Britain's National Theater complex.

"I'm mid-boycott of things like Stuff Happens", my friend replied, adding a few words about how annoying cultural assessments of Iraq can be. I understand this.

Q: How many Vietnam veterans does it take to change a light bulb?

A: YOU DON'T KNOW, YOU WEREN'T #@%&\*\$ THERE!!!"

It was an American soldier in Baghdad who told me that joke.

For those of us who were there, Iraq is becoming like that. So I respected my friend's opinion, did not press the point, and went to the play alone.

By pasting together bits from news conferences, newspaper and magazine articles, Hans Blix's memoirs and Bob Woodward's *Bush at War*, Hare chronicles the chain of political events stretching from the September 11 attacks to Bush's April 1, 2003 landing on the deck of the USS Abraham Lincoln.

There is no mistaking the basic message of the play: the invasion of Iraq was an act criminal both in international law and in the lack of thought and forward planning that accompanied it. Considering that you would need a microscope to measure support in Britain these days for either Bush or the Iraq adventure, it was hardly surprising the audience picked up on this particular aspect of the script. But I could not help wondering how the same play would be received in America.

At a key moment, for example, Blair and Bush talk alone in Crawford, Texas. Several British friends who've seen the play saw this scene as a stinging indictment of Blair's over-eagerness to please the Americans. One even told me Bush emerged from the scene as firm and decisive. Watching it from an American perspective I thought the point was to contrast an articulate, thoughtful Blair with a Bush who had not thought his own positions through and could not articulate them if he did.

There's no mistaking Hare's disdain for Bush and the people around him, but I suspect that where the London audience saw Blair as a slightly pathetic figure an American one would read the same character as bold. Dramatizing the world's reaction to September 11 Hare has an actor quote *Le Monde's* headline "We are all Americans now." In London this drew a snigger from the crowd as did Bush's "You are either with us or with the terrorists" speech to

Congress. One suspects an American audience would react very differently to the same lines.

It isn't a profound play, but it does gather a lot of familiar war-related bits and pieces into a single place. And that, my friend notwithstanding, makes it worth seeing as much to watch the audience as to take in the playwright's work.

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