



The National Theatre of Scotland's

BLACK WATCH: Theatre as Cultural Diplomacy

Nicholas J. Cull



Special Thanks

The National Theatre of Scotland's *Black Watch* serves as a catalyst for *British Council Conversations*, a program of events which engage a broad spectrum of audiences in discussing social and political themes arising from the work.

Credit must go to the National Theatre of Scotland for their stimulating production of *Black Watch* and for working tirelessly with our partners to bring it to the US. The National Theatre of Scotland and its production of *Black Watch* were made possible by the generous support of the Scottish Government—our special thanks to them and to the other partners who made the US premiere of *Black Watch* and the dialogue surrounding it possible:

- California State University, Los Angeles, The Center for Contemporary Poetry and Poetics
- Double M Arts & Events
- Royal Holloway, University of London
- St. Ann's Warehouse
- UCLA Live
- University of Glasgow
- University of Southern California Center on Public Diplomacy at the Annenberg School

Foreword

Art has always been central to a nation's attempt to articulate its culture and to define its preoccupations, values, characteristics, challenges and successes. Using approaches ranging from the conventional gift of art to the more complex arena of art-centered capacity-building, cultural diplomacy expands upon these efforts and strives to engage publics abroad with the home country.

Practitioners of public diplomacy—the broader category into which cultural diplomacy falls—have often been criticized for acting as agents of propaganda. However, at the heart of the following paper is the ability of art to explore complex questions in a powerful and creative format, and to act as a driver for dialogue around contentious issues. War, racism, consumerism—all are topics which have been addressed admirably through the medium of theatre in both Britain and America.

This work is the product of Nicholas Cull, a distinguished academic at the University of Southern California's Center on Public Diplomacy. Its intent is similar to that of the British Council and other cultural relations organizations—to stimulate robust debate rather than to arrive at a comfortable consensus. There is no doubt that some of the work discussed is controversial, but the contribution of contemporary art abroad is invaluable in the context of cultural relations, building mutual trust and understanding outside of official political structures.

We would like to offer our special thanks to the Scottish Government, whose generous support was integral to the presentation of *Black Watch*.

Joshua Fouts
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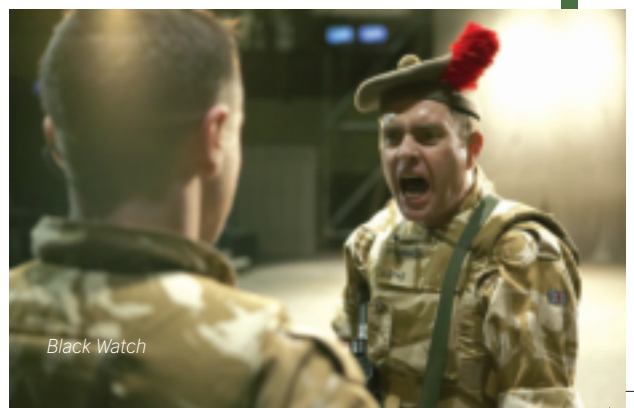
The National Theatre of Scotland's ***Black Watch:*** Theatre as Cultural Diplomacy

Nicholas J. Cull

It happened on 4 November 2004, in the vicinity of a base called Camp Dogwood, sweltering in the centre of Babil Governate, some fifty kilometres south of Baghdad, Iraq. Three young Scottish soldiers of the 1st Battalion Black Watch—Sergeant Stuart Gray and Privates Paul Lowe and Scott McArdle—and their Iraqi interpreter died in the blast from a suicide car bomb.¹ They were part of a force of over eight hundred British soldiers who had recently moved from the relative stability of Basra to the so-called 'Triangle of Death' in Babil to free up American forces for their assault on Fallujah. That battle seemed suspiciously close to the American presidential election. British commentators muttered about young Scots sacrificed on an altar of American politics. The involvement of the Black Watch struck a special chord with the Scottish imagination. The regiment had nearly three hundred years of history including service at Waterloo, Balaclava and the most brutal battles of the Great War. Members of its pipe band had been informal ambassadors for Scotland for generations. Its distinctive dark tartan graced a host of Scottish or would-be Scottish textiles from kilts to tea cosies. It still recruited from the same tough neighbourhoods in Perthshire, Fife and Angus. It offered the perfect metaphor for Britain entangled at America's behest in the Middle East. The whole story was compounded by the coincidental and

monumentally tactless announcement by the UK Ministry of Defence that the Black Watch and the four other individual Scottish regiments were to merge into a single Royal Scottish Regiment. The past and future of the Black Watch, and exactly what it meant to Scotland, was suddenly moot. Thus it was that Vicky Featherstone, Artistic Director of the new National Theatre of Scotland, commissioned rising literary star Gregory Burke to begin work on a play about the story. *Black Watch* is the result.

The National Theatre of Scotland's *Black Watch* is remarkable for a number of reasons. While not the only play dealing with the British or even the Scottish experience in Iraq, its raw intensity and wider implications for ideas of Scottishness, masculinity and war in general set it ahead of the pack. It struck an immediate chord with audiences, taking the Edinburgh Festival (the UK's great annual international festival of the arts) by storm in the summer of 2006. In the autumn of 2007 it began an ambitious international tour, commencing in Los Angeles and New York with runs in Australia, New Zealand and Canada to follow. The tour opens a further aspect of interest, for although the play is implicitly critical of British foreign policy and asks difficult questions about Scotland, its travels are made possible by major funding from the Scottish Government and are supported by the British Council, the UK's international cultural relations agency, which is operationally independent but draws a significant part of its budget through the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in London. It is hard to imagine this happening in other times or other places. In terms of the Great War, it is as if Lloyd George's Britain had somehow produced *Oh What a Lovely War* and sent it to Broadway. *Black Watch* is, then, both an event in the history of British drama and British foreign policy, as a remarkable example of the use of theatre as cultural diplomacy.





Gregory Burke

The Creation of the National Theatre of Scotland's *Black Watch*

At the very same moment that the Black Watch arrived at Camp Dogwood, the National Theatre of Scotland was finding its feet. Although the concept of a Scottish national theatre dated back a century or more, the

National Theatre of Scotland had been created only that year partly as a product of the political devolution of the United Kingdom. The concept was brilliant: a theatre which would commission and present innovative theatrical works for the people of Scotland, but rather than mummify them in a centrally located mausoleum would be a 'theatre without walls' with a brief to take their work out to venues around the country, in halls, industrial spaces, sports centres, wherever a crowd could be gathered and work performed. As the newly appointed Artistic Director and Chief Executive of the National Theatre of Scotland, Vicky Featherstone set out to find subjects for the theatre's first major production, the controversy flared around the Black Watch deployment. Featherstone instantly saw an ideal subject for the theatre, and an ideal vehicle to engage the people of Scotland. Featherstone had limited physical resources at that moment—little more than a chair and a mobile phone and a 'sweetie pot' of money to prime the pumps—but she had a decade of experience at the cutting edge of British drama, as artistic director of the touring company Paine's Plough, and she immediately thought of the ideal writer to commission a dramatic treatment of the Black Watch in Iraq: Gregory Burke, author of *The Straits*, a 2003 play performed by Paine's Plough about the Falklands War as seen through the eyes of teenagers in Gibraltar. She called Burke and found that not only was he eager to accept the commission but was already tracking the story.

In a few short years, Gregory Burke had established himself as one of Scotland's most compelling playwrights, with a terrific ear for dialogue, sense of place and a fascination for the collision of the individual and the impersonal forces of history. Born in 1968 into a Fife family that had sent its share of men into the armed services,

Burke's father worked at the naval dockyards at Rosyth. As so often happens with the most acute observers of a place and a people, he spent his formative years away—his father's work meant that from age eight to 16 he lived in Gibraltar. Returning to Scotland as a teenager in the mid-1980s, Burke was obliged to find his feet in a now alien culture and swiftly re-acquire his native accent. He could never take his surroundings for granted in the same way as his peers.

Burke did not fare well in higher education, dropping out of a degree in Politics and Economics at Stirling University after two years. Instead he read widely in literature and drama on his own, and took a variety of jobs to support his interest. From time to time, when reading or watching a play, he would conclude that he could do as well or better. And so he did. In 2000 he wrote a script for the thriller called *Gagarin Way* and submitted it unsolicited to Edinburgh's Traverse Theatre. At the Traverse, an English-born director and Glasgow University graduate, John Tiffany, recognised its brilliance and staged the play to considerable acclaim in 2001. Burke's career as a dramatist, and his collaboration with John Tiffany, had begun.

Burke and Tiffany—as writer and director respectively—went on to create *The Straits* in 2003. Tiffany became a key part of the National Theatre of Scotland's creative

team, as its Associate Director for New Work. Even without his on-going creative partnership with Burke, he would have had a major role in *Black Watch*. In the event, as the play's director, he was a vital force. Tiffany was especially keen to develop the project as a subversion of Scottish military pageantry. He had a personal distaste for the annual spectacle of the Edinburgh Tattoo and the parading of soldiers as though to disguise their real identity as killing machines.



Black Watch

Vicky Featherstone's commission for *Black Watch* posed a major problem—Burke needed to collect testimony from within an essentially closed group. Others had tried and failed. Burke had the advantage of being from the same place as his interviewees and even having friends in common, but he swiftly learnt that such links were as nothing to the shared experience of serving in the regiment. Burke turned the difficulty to his advantage by writing the process of collecting testimony into the play. It provides an efficient mechanism by which the audience gets to know the core characters—a reason for them to speak about themselves and their experiences—and a source for dramatic tension. As in the stage version, Burke really did use an attractive female TV researcher to make the initial contact with Black Watch veterans. The scene in which an interview turns nasty and the writer is threatened with a broken arm is, however, an invention. Burke jokes that they wanted to show what would have happened if one of the London literati had wandered into a Fife pub and attempted to interview the men.²

While Burke's own interview process produced a wealth of material, the play is more than an ingeniously edited transcript. It is a confluence of multiple talents including those of director John Tiffany, the associate directors for movement (Steven Hoggett) and music (Davey Anderson), set designer Laura Hopkins, sound designer Gareth Fry, and lighting designer Colin Grenfell. They collectively placed flesh on Burke's bones during the rehearsal process, working with a small group of ten actors who were willing to submit themselves to drill instruction from a real Black Watch Sergeant Major.



Black Watch



The team took 'verbatim theatre' to a new level. The verbatim approach had long since demonstrated its ability to bring major contemporary issues to the stage,³ but *Black Watch* showed that the technique could transcend mere reportage and bring its dialogue alive in a truly theatrical world of movement and physicality.

Under Tiffany's direction, the rehearsal room became a nexus of experimentation and research. Cast members viewed DVDs, quizzed witnesses and pulled speeches off the internet and read them into the mix. Using a characteristically British approach, the play grew exponentially through improvisation and adaptation. Visitors to the set included the BBC correspondent David Loyn, who was embedded with the Black Watch during the unit's time at Camp Dogwood. At Loyn's suggestion the team dropped a scene in which the troops play volleyball in gas masks as too relaxed, and ratcheted up the sense of the impossibility of real relaxation in the presence of constant mortaring. Tiffany found that the play became both more theatrically coherent and more accurate as the rehearsal process progressed.⁴



For Burke the play was really brought to life by Steven Hoggett's choreography. Hoggett, who is best known for his work as Artistic Director of the experimental UK troupe Frantic Assembly but who had worked with Burke and Tiffany on *The Straits*, used the soldier's movements to open up the emotional world that is emphatically repressed in their spoken language. In one scene, as the men read their letters from home, they gesture in strange ritualistic movements which speak simultaneously of a desire to communicate, a burden of being mute, a closed Masonic order impenetrable to outsiders and the tenderness of the gesture. As the language is masculine so the movement provides a feminine dimension. The source for these and other physical elements in the staging was the soldiers themselves, or rather the hundreds of private snapshots of the Black Watch in Iraq examined during research for the play. The actors studied the pictures and improvised their own private sign language in response.

The team also found a way to make palpable Tiffany's wish to subvert the Edinburgh Tattoo tradition. The entire performance space for the play was designed to mimic the tattoo ground with the audience on two stands either side of the action. The play is introduced with searchlights projecting the Scottish flag and an announcement of the Tattoo, which is then interrupted by the entrance of the central character. The final scene of the play is a piece of movement in which Tattoo-style formation marching is disrupted by wild running and chaotic tripping, which underlines the impossibility of maintaining the mask of benign military display and lays bare the underlying world of dissonance and social confusion.

Black Watch Speaks

In *Black Watch*, the National Theatre of Scotland set out to create a space to allow the ordinary soldiers of the regiment to tell their own stories. The officers and NCOs are marginal to the drama and the Iraqis never appear. The words 'Bush,' 'Blair,' 'Saddam,' and 'weapons of mass destruction' are never heard. Oil is mentioned. The soldiers say their war is about 'porn and petrol.' The terms Islam and Muslim are mentioned only rarely, as in the context of the need to avoid pictures of the porn inside the lads' armoured vehicle appearing on the TV news and causing cultural offence. The result of this soldiers'-eye view is a play which is pro-soldier—though not pro-war—but which refuses to sentimentalise its subjects. The regiment's language and society seem unrelentingly brutal, but the bond between the men is palpable and movingly drawn. In the closing moments of the play the soldiers deny that they are fighting for any government or country but affirm, 'I fought for my mates.' It is a litany that many soldiers since the days of Sparta would understand, and it has historically been a formidable psychological recruiting sergeant for the army. The desire for brotherhood is a powerful thing. Part of the play's achievement is to document the mindset without reproducing the effect. The camaraderie here is unenviable. It appears like a perverse analogue of class consciousness. Burke approached the play knowing that the Black Watch are raised in the same towns and pit villages as furnished the ranks of the Scottish labour movement. Their regimental spirit, in Burke's hands, seems like an embezzlement of the resource of class solidarity, which has been misdirected to serve the ends of the Imperial and post-Imperial state.

Approaching the War

An awareness of history is never far from the surface in *Black Watch*. The play engages with multiple streams of history—there is the ‘Golden Thread’ of Black Watch lore—captured in a remarkable scene in which one of the men—Cammy—narrates the whole story of the regiment from its beginnings through the American Revolution, Waterloo, Crimea, and the Great War down to the present. As he speaks, he is passed along a line of his comrades, dressed and redressed in the evolving uniform of the regiment matching the moment in his speech. Then there is the second thread of British involvement in Iraq. Cammy’s history lesson ends with mention of the regiment’s presence in Mesopotamia in 1919 and a sardonic ‘Here we are. Again.’ Elsewhere Cammy and a pal discuss Lawrence of Arabia who they note had also preceded them in Iraq (‘Lucky bastard.’). The disorientation of being caught in the flow of a half understood history is nicely mirrored in Cammy’s irritation at having read only the second half of a torn copy of *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*. It is a moment worthy of Beckett.



Black Watch

Beneath everything there is the undercurrent of Scottish history. The play challenges the blithe assumption of the patriotic Scot-in-the-street that Whitehall wages the wars and that Scotland is somehow miraculously un-tainted. Burke says: 'Scotland pretends to have no part of exploitation, yet per-head they produce more soldiers than any other part of the UK. Scotland is not just a victim of conquest. Scotland has been part of the brutal suppression of freedom.'⁵ This whole twist of history is pulled together in the performance of the regimental songs at key moments throughout the play. While originally written as rousing ballads to be roared out in a bar room they are here re-imagined by music director Davey Anderson as laments for the dead.⁶

Other key themes of the Iraq War are here—the role of the media, the relentless boredom of almost every passing hour of the war and the asymmetry between the power of the west and people of Iraq. There is a telling description of a British MILAN anti-tank missile destroying a donkey cart, but the real asymmetry emerges as the men discuss their encounters with their American allies. The men watch in awe as American forces bombard an enemy village with a bewildering arsenal of pyrotechnics and discuss a visit from two absurdly over-pumped Marines eager to trade for regimental souvenirs. The Black Watch trade a redundant pair of extra, extra, extra, extra large t-shirts for a prized 'US army field cot.' The Scots' uncomfortable conclusion is that what they and the Americans are doing is not real soldiering, but 'bullying.' An officer is quoted saying grimly that his men will not find glory in Iraq. One of the last lines spoken in the play by their officer sums up the sense of what has been wasted:

It takes three hundred years to build an army that's admired and respected around the world. But it only takes three years pissing about in the desert in the biggest western foreign policy disaster ever to fuck it up completely.



Kaushik Dutta and N. Tiken Singh in rehearsal for
A Midsummer Night's Dream in India.
Photo: Perou

The Reception of *Black Watch*

At its best, theatre has the power to transcend the physical word and—through a union of movement, speech and sound—transport the audience into a wholly new space. From the opening night of *Black Watch* in an old army drill hall it was clear that this was theatre at its best. The rave reviews were matched by an astonishing level of engagement from the audience. Burke was amazed to note that when the play ended each night the audience simply did not want to go home. A crop of major awards followed. In fulfilment of its mission to be a theatre without walls, the National Theatre of Scotland took the play on tour around the country playing venues including the turbine hall of the hydro-electric plant in Pitlochry and the Highlands Football Academy in Dingwall. The response was such that the Scotland's First Minister, the Rt Hon Alex Salmond MP, MSP arranged a special staging of *Black Watch* as part of the opening of a new session of the Scottish Parliament in the summer of 2007. Despite the difficult language and monumentally anti-social characters, Scotland embraced the soldiers as its own. The next step was to share the play with the world, and introduce *Black Watch* into the realm of cultural diplomacy.

Cultural Diplomacy

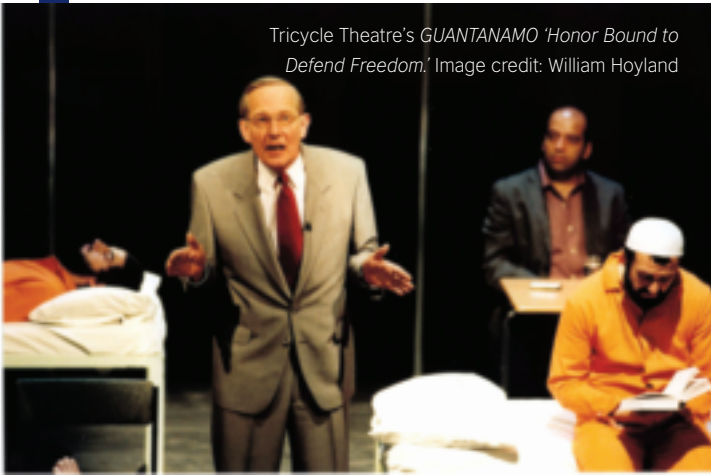
Cultural diplomacy is one branch of what has become known as public diplomacy: the attempt by a state or other international player to shape the world through engagement with a foreign public.⁷ Cultural diplomacy has included language

teaching, exhibitions, book translation, sporting diplomacy and a wide range of performing arts work. France led the way and still spends vast sums on international cultural work; China has prepared a veritable cultural blitzkrieg to coincide with the Beijing Olympics, while contemporary Thailand uses chefs and cookery master-classes to engage the world. Cultural diplomacy is not restricted to nation states. NGOs and other non-state players have conducted cultural diplomacy and even theatre diplomacy. Peter Ustinov's one-man show tours for UNICEF are just one example of an international organisation using culture to both attract attention to its cause and convey elements of its message.⁸

An important recent development in cultural diplomacy is the rise of a sub-state presence. Regions or nations within a larger polity—or even cities—are now using cultural diplomacy to brand themselves and connect with the world in their own right. In August 2000 when the then two-year-old Scottish Government published its first National Cultural Strategy: *Creating Our Future—Minding Our Past*, key priorities included 'Promote International Cultural Exchange and Dialogue.' This same document called for the founding of a National Theatre of Scotland. The evolution of the arts in Scotland and their projection abroad has gone hand in hand.⁹

There is a problem at the heart of cultural diplomacy. While easily aligned with broad foreign policy objectives, cultural diplomacy is best kept fire-walled from regular diplomacy. Cultural diplomacy's credibility springs from this distance and its effectiveness declines the nearer it comes to the official foreign policy apparatus. This has always been the cornerstone of Britain's cultural relations agency—the British Council—established in 1934 to counteract the double threat to democracy from fascism and communism. The British Council has doggedly defended its mandate to present the United Kingdom as it is rather than as a succession of newspaper editors or generations of indignant MPs might wish it to be.

Tricycle Theatre's *GUANTANAMO 'Honor Bound to Defend Freedom.'* Image credit: William Hoyland



Theatre as Cultural Diplomacy

Given the historic role of theatre in helping nations understand who they are in the first place, it was only to be expected that, as nations presented themselves to the world, the dramatic arts would be pressed into service. Theatre operates within cultural diplomacy in four main ways, each with a varying expectation of interactivity with the target public. At its first and most basic level it can be a prestige gift; second, it can be a way of shaping perceptions and informing; third, it can be a mechanism for generating engagement between the originating and target populations; and fourth, it can be part of a strategy to develop the arts and the creative public sphere in the target country.

1) Theatre Diplomacy as a Prestige Gift

As every anthropologist knows, when humans seek to build reciprocal relationships they typically begin with a gift. Notable diplomatic gifts have ranged from innumerable Chinese pandas to France's gift of the Statue of Liberty to the United States. In the case of theatre, the donor country takes an art form which is acknowledged to be the best that the country has to offer and makes it available to a foreign public. Examples of this are legion. This was how the British Council's theatrical diplomacy began, with gambits like the 1938 tour of Mussolini's Italy by the Old Vic.

The prestige gift still has its place. More recent high-profile British Council tours of this kind include the UK National Theatre production of *Hamlet* in Belgrade in 2001 and the presentation of *A Winter's Tale* in Tehran in 2003, complete with 'culturally sensitive' staging to ensure no men and women touched on stage.¹⁰ Thus the export of *Black Watch*, supported by the UK's cultural relations agency, flows logically from the theatre's creation and has been able to tour internationally (along with another hit show from its 2006 inaugural season, a family musical *Wolves in the Walls*) thanks to a £195,000 grant from the Scottish Government.

2) Theatre Diplomacy as Cultural Information

A second more sophisticated form of theatrical diplomacy uses drama to counter stereotypes of the sponsoring country and develop understanding of life as it is really lived. The United States has used drama to live down its reputation for racism, as in 1954-55 when the Eisenhower administration funded a tour of George Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*. A self-confident state will even share works which are explicitly critical of its life. The obverse of this approach is to use drama as a way to distract from the realities of life or even to deceive the foreign audience. Soviet-era ballet tours were clearly intended to counter the country's gulag-grey image with colour and vigour, while touring folk ensembles showcased the traditions of Soviet minorities in an attempt to claim an image of tolerance and diversity for the USSR.

Viewing the latest artistic production can be a line into the lifeblood of a country, for better or worse. The British Council has become especially identified with a willingness to tell the uncomfortable truths about life as seen from Britain through its drama. Controversial episodes include the 1998 tour of Mark Ravenhill's attack on 1990s consumer society: *Shopping and Fucking*. David Blunkett, the Minister of Education at the time, opined, 'I understand it's full of foul language—Shakespeare didn't need that, did he?' The British Council defended the play as 'great British writing.' Audiences generally agreed.¹¹

The tour of *Black Watch* is a clear example of the use of cultural diplomacy to raise an issue of controversy. Given the prominence of the War on Terror and Iraq as a theme in contemporary British theatre—with plays including Victoria Brittain and Gillian Slovo's *GUANTANAMO*, David Hare's *Stuff Happens*, Richard Norton-Taylor's *Justifying War: Scenes from the Hutton Enquiry*, and Simon Levy's *What I Heard About Iraq*—not representing at least one such drama in the British Council's programming would have been a misrepresentation of British cultural life.¹² By sharing such work internationally the British Council is acting as a credible conduit for British culture. It is helping to build a reputation for itself and for Britain as honest and trustworthy, as a resource for future contact with publics around the world.

3) Theatre Diplomacy and Dialogue

At its most complex theatre can be a diplomatic device to open a two way conversation and exchange. This ranges from facilitating the exhibition of the work of others in one's own country to engagement of foreign producers and directors for mutual development to the selection of plays with an agenda to create new discussions and even to challenge taboos. Recent US State Department initiatives have included funds to bring international performers together in locations like the UCLA Center for Intercultural Performance, and support for the Pegasus Players' project, which has brought small groups of youth arts professionals from the Middle East to the US and sent their American counterparts to Jordan and Morocco to create work in dialogue with local youth theatres for one another to perform.¹³

Arts festivals are a long-standing venue for the best inter-cultural cross fertilisation. The connection between festivals and cultural diplomacy was explicit in the creation



Company in rehearsal for *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in India. Photo: Perou

of the Edinburgh International Festival in 1947. The British Council's Scottish representative, Henry Harvey Wood, co-founded the festival with the Austrian-born opera impresario Rudolf Bing.¹⁴ The festival has remained a boon for the British Council's work in the performing arts and for numerous other cultural relations agencies like the Australia Council, which sends its most prestigious or innovative performers each year. The British Council now organises a special biennial Edinburgh Showcase, which brings the best new British work to the attention of an invited audience of approximately 250 international theatre professionals. The British work is made known to a larger audience and the theatre professionals develop their own inter-relationships, largely through the brokering efforts of the British Council.¹⁵

On occasion, the dialogue stimulated by the performance is internal to the overseas audience. In 2003 the British Council took an acclaimed work called *L.O.V.E.*—based on Shakespeare's sonnets and created by the Swansea-based company Volcano—to Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia. In Georgia a male-to-male kiss in the first act triggered a walk-out by sections of the audience on the opening night. The show closed immediately. In Azerbaijan the kiss was greeted with wild applause. In both cases the performance prompted debate and was seen by the British Council as a win.¹⁶

Sometimes the audience to be challenged has been British, as when the British Council has taken classic British work overseas, transformed it by working with foreign artists and then reintroduced the re-imagined work to the UK. The best known recent example of this was director Tim Supple's work in India with Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. A hybrid treatment of the play with a cast of Indian artists, street children and in seven languages, the work first toured India to acclaim and is now touring the UK.¹⁷



Ram Pawar in rehearsal for *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in India. Photo: Perou

Given that the opening of *Black Watch* in the United States has included a range of panels, discussions and invitations to debate what is on stage, the play can also be seen as an open invitation to a conversation. From the form of the play to its political implications, there is certainly plenty to talk about.

4) Theatre Diplomacy and ‘Capacity Building’

There is a final aspect to theatre diplomacy, which falls into the category of capacity building. Accepting that a healthy arts scene is an important part of a democratic public sphere, a number of western countries have sought to encourage and/or ingratiate themselves with rising generations of writers and performers around the world. Several major cultural relations agencies bring the next generation of theatre professionals on study trips to be mentored by their arts establishment. The Kennedy Center in Washington has been an especially significant destination. Britain has also been swift to export its own theatrical leaders to act as mentors in situ. Participants have included Mark Ravenhill and Sarah Kane, the latter the author of the notorious plays *Blasted* and *4:48 Psychosis*.¹⁸ While the tour of *Black Watch* is plainly not intended to develop the theatrical capacities of the western world, exposure to its vivid technique might strike a chord with a new audience and encourage other artists to bring testimony from their own communities to the stage. That, after all, was how Gregory Burke began his career, viewing work by others and thinking: ‘I could do that.’



Panellists debate *Black Watch* during
“The Power of the Stage: Drama as Diplomacy.”

Image credit: Joseph Popiolkowski.

A British Council panel discussion after a performance of the National Theatre of Scotland's *Black Watch* at St. Ann's Warehouse in Brooklyn, NY, 2007.

Image credit: Elizabeth Solaka.



The International Tour

The National Theatre of Scotland approached the prospect of international performances of *Black Watch* with some trepidation. The creators were uncertain whether the work would strike a chord beyond the home community of the regiment and there was the challenge inherent in the international venues: the UCLA Live festival in Los Angeles and a run at St Ann's Warehouse in Brooklyn, New York. Both cities laid claim to the title of global cultural capital and it was difficult to think of a better place to display such a badge of Scottish artistic accomplishment or to seek to begin a conversation around the experience of the Iraq War.

The play needed a few minor tweaks to ease its American passage. The cast subtly toned-down their accents—in British TV terms shifting gear from Saturday night *Taggart* to Sunday evening *Monarch of the Glen*—and one or two words and cultural references were switched for terms more readily recognised by Americans. The team declined to soften the soldiers' use of profanity. The edge of realism remained.

Despite the runaway success in Scotland, the American audience was an unknown quantity. To those who knew the play well the preview in LA in September 2007 was torture, as the familiar rhythm of audience reactions was absent from the opening scenes. Thirty minutes into the LA preview, the National Theatre of Scotland Executive Producer Neil Murray turned to John Tiffany with mounting visions of an early plane ride home and whispered: 'We may have made a terrible mistake...'

However, the audience was responding, just responding differently. The fundamental story of war and its impact on the young men asked to wage it proved universal. Audiences in Los Angeles were enthusiastic and the drama played to a creditable 70% of capacity. Although generally very positive, press coverage on the West Coast was not without reservations. Reviewers seemed compelled to locate the United States within the drama. For the *Orange County Register* the play filled in the details of a war ‘largely hidden from the American public’.¹⁹ The *Hollywood Reporter* observed: ‘Perhaps UCLA Live can be persuaded to present a play about American citizens under bombardment at home by the political struggles of the Middle East.’²⁰ The *Los Angeles Times* somehow missed the critique of military heritage implicit in the play and complained about a ‘whitewashed version of the Black Watch’s past’: ‘There is little grappling with the colonial and mercenary baggage and way too much about its glorious courage and character.’²¹

It was only when the play opened in New York City in October that it recaptured the momentum it had commanded on home turf. Reviewing the play for the *New York Times*, Ben Brantley seemed perfectly in tune with the creator’s intent. Brantley described the play as ‘a necessary reminder of the transporting power that is unique to theatre.’ He noted, ‘Other narrative forms—fiction, memoirs, film, television—could tell the story that is told here. But none could summon and deploy the array of artistic tools that is used with such mastery and immediacy.’ He spoke of weeping at what he saw.²² The rest played out like a montage from an old Hollywood film

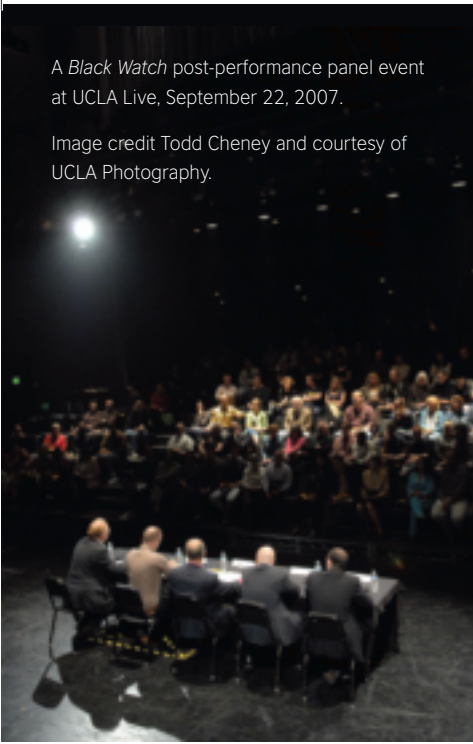


UK journalist Robert Fox speaks with National Theatre of Scotland actors following a *Black Watch* panel event at UCLA Live, September 22, 2007.

Image credit: Todd Cheney and courtesy of UCLA Photography.

A *Black Watch* post-performance panel event at UCLA Live, September 22, 2007.

Image credit Todd Cheney and courtesy of UCLA Photography.



about a Broadway smash: the scramble for tickets; the box office doing \$60,000 worth of business over their only phone line in a matter of hours; the sell-out notices; the plans for return visits. Back home the *Daily Telegraph* online splashed a headline that deserved to spin into centre screen in one of those 1930s optical effects: '*Black Watch*: the toast of New York.'²³

In order to facilitate the development of cross-cultural dialogue around the piece, the British Council staged a succession of collateral events in both Los Angeles and New York. This essay, commissioned by the British Council, is a part of that process. The British Council convened panel discussions with partners including the University of Southern California's Center on Public Diplomacy, bringing production team members, war veterans—including US army interrogator turned conscientious objector, Joshua Casteel—journalists and experts from both countries to engage each other and the audience with the questions raised by the play. In another parallel event, literature students from California State University, Los Angeles, Royal Holloway, University of London and the University of Glasgow connected through video links to discuss the play and the wider literary representation of war. A post-performance panel organised by the New York venue itself brought together U.S. National Guard veterans of the Iraq War Jason Christopher Hartley and Paul Rieckhoff. Both men commented on the universal aspects of the piece. Rieckhoff—a veterans' rights activist—noted: 'I found it to be incredibly powerful, and like nothing else I've seen so far having to do with the Iraq war.'²⁴

General audience responses ranged from surprise at realizing that British troops were deployed in Iraq at all, to an intense and visceral engagement with the piece. Political lines in the play which had drawn little comment in Scotland provoked nightly wild applause in the U.S. Murray, who viewed the play with multiple audiences on both coasts, detected a general mood of 'thank God someone is talking about this.'²⁵

Looking back over the run, the production team and their American hosts acknowledged that, given the self-selecting nature of metropolitan theatre audiences in the U.S., it is unlikely that attitudes to Iraq shifted as a result of the run. The play's approach of questioning the war while striving to understand the soldier is increasingly the default setting of American public discourse on the conflict. But the play presented a powerful challenge to America's own engagement with the story to date and a reminder of what the medium of theatre could achieve. No one doubted that the American arts scene received an unmistakable indication of the rising cultural powerhouse of Scottish theatre and ample evidence of the British ability to separate international communication and engagement from spin and hype. As British Council chair Lord Kinnock said in his own introduction to the panel discussion in New York—this is the sort of the thing that the U.K. should be doing in its public diplomacy. As the New York run came to an end, the National Theatre of Scotland planned further Scottish performances, runs in Coventry, Manchester and London, visits to Australia, New Zealand and Canada in 2008 and to return to the United States thereafter.

For the *Black Watch* the war in Iraq marked the end of an era of soldiering. For Scotland the international exhibition of the National Theatre of Scotland's *Black Watch* is part of the beginning of a new era of artistic self-representation. The play is an invitation to a conversation. That conversation has now begun. How it will develop and what work will be generated in response remains to be seen.

Nicholas J. Cull

Los Angeles, December 2007

End Notes:

- ¹ The interpreter's name was withheld from reports of the incident to protect his family.
- ² Burke and Featherstone, interview with the author.
- ³ Notable examples include Richard Norton-Taylor's *The Colour of Justice* on the case of murdered Black British teenager Stephen Lawrence, David Hare's *Permanent Way*, which dealt with the crisis in British railways or Tanika Gupta's *Gladiator Games*, about the murder of a young South Asian man in Feltham Young Offenders Institute.
- ⁴ Tiffany, interview with author.
- ⁵ Burke interview with the author.
- ⁶ The insight is perhaps unsurprising. Anderson was himself the author of an acclaimed Scottish Iraq War play, *Snuff*, which took the Edinburgh Fringe by storm in 2005. The themes of that play—masculinity in crisis whether one fights in Iraq or stays home in the madhouse of a housing estate—run through *Black Watch*.
- ⁷ The organized export of culture is one means to this end; other tools of public diplomacy range from systematic listening, through advocacy work, to educational exchanges and international news broadcasting.
- ⁸ In the Ustinov case the message was embedded in the actors own eclectic internationalism.
- ⁹ For the strategy see <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/nationalculturalstrategy/docs/cult-01.asp> and on its implementation see *National Cultural Strategy First Report*, 25 October 2001 online at <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/158792/0043111.pdf>.
- ¹⁰ Steve Crawshaw, 'Shakespeare goes to Serbia; Two years ago Britain bombed Belgrave. Now the National Theatre has sent its *Hamlet* as a gesture of peace.' *The Independent*, 18 February 2001, pp. 1, 2; Dan De Luce in Tehran and Jeevan Vasagar, 'Curtain up, veils down: Bard builds a bridge with Iran, *Winter's Tale* blazes trail with Iranians starved of culture.' *The Guardian*, 22 January 2003.
- ¹¹ Lorna Duckworth, 'Blunkett attack on rent boy play cash,' *Mail on Sunday*, 22 March 1998, p. 8; Martin Bright, Richard Brooks and Roger Tredre, 'Blunkett slams grant for 'foul' drama,' *The Observer*, 22 March 1998, p. 3; John McKie, 'How Mark went shopping for a worldwide hit,' *Evening Standard*, 19 January 1998, p. 52. Less controversial activity along similar lines include the much praised 'Londres sur Scene' season of 2000 in which the British Council brought seven pieces of contemporary British drama to three Paris theatres. 'Les Britanniques arrivent!' *The Guardian*, 18 April 2000, p. 16.
- ¹² For discussion see Kate Kellaway, 'Theatre of War,' *The Observer*, 29 August 2004. Discontent over the War on Terror has already been part of the British Council's program as in 2003 when Henry Adam's *The People Next Door* went to Bosnia. That play is a post 9/11 political farce in which three citizens of multicultural Britain struggle to avoid being set at odds by a crazed secret policeman. Joyce McMillan, 'Bosnia holds lessons in nation-building,' *The Scotsman*, 16 October 2004.

- ¹³ See U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, Cultural Programs Division, Grants Awarded 2006 at <http://exchanges.state.gov/education/citizens/culture/grants/awarded.htm>.
- ¹⁴ George Bruce, *Festival in the North: The Story of the Edinburgh Festival*. Robert Hale & Co., London, 1975, pp. 17-24.
- ¹⁵ Brian Logan, 'Edinburgh Festival: Must-sees that you can't see: A secret showcase of top fringe shows is great for theatre companies - but what about audiences,' *The Guardian*, 16 August 2001, p. 11.
- ¹⁶ Peter Aspden, 'Does this look like the best way to sell Britain?' *Financial Times*, 25 July 2003.
- ¹⁷ Mark Brown 'National: Indian summer: Shakespeare classic in seven languages,' *The Guardian*, 1 November 2006, p. 14.
- ¹⁸ Ravenhill has a relationship with the Baltic States and Kane travelled to the Netherlands for the British Council in 1998.
- ¹⁹ Manuel Harlan, 'Theater: *Black Watch*,' *Orange County Register*, 22 September 2007
- ²⁰ Laurence Vittes, '*Black Watch*' Bottom line: Underneath the explosions, shouting and swearing lies a simple story about comrades-in-arms confronting themselves under the guns of war. *Hollywood Reporter*, 25 September 2007.
- ²¹ Charles McNulty, 'A comment on Iraq via Scottish Watch' *Los Angeles Times*, 22 September 2007.
- ²² Ben Brantley, 'To Tell These War Stories, Words Aren't Enough' *New York Times*, 24 October 2007
- ²³ '*Black Watch*: the toast of New York,' *Daily Telegraph* (telegraph.co.uk) 7 November 2007. On 10 December 2007 *New York Magazine* named the play 'Theatrical Event of the Year' in its 'Year in Culture' feature.
- ²⁴ Carolyn Weaver, 'Black Watch Tells Story of Scottish Troops in Iraq' *Voice of America news*, transmitted, 12 November 2007. The creation and transmission of this story by VOA—a U.S. government funded broadcaster—is in its own way an example of how public diplomacy (in this case international broadcasting) can operate in a space separate from government spin and policy.
- ²⁵ Murray, interview with author.

Images labelled Black Watch in this publication are courtesy of the National Theatre of Scotland's original production and are credited to photographer Manuel Harlan.

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