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# Exception and the Rule: Agamben, *Stuff Happens*, and Representation in the Post-Truth Age

The contemporary post-truth environment imposes limitations and ethical considerations upon the political theatre-maker's ability to highlight political leaders' exceptional acts of deception. By unpacking and applying Giorgio Agamben's writing on the State of Exception to post-truth political performances, Alex D. Wilson discusses in this article how political deception is an exceptional act of sovereign power and how the state of exception is an inherently performative phenomenon. The inherent challenges this state of affairs presents to the theatre are discussed with particular reference to David Hare's *Stuff Happens* (2004), which, it is argued, falls into its own state of exception in terms of its approach to truth. Alex D. Wilson is a PhD candidate in Theatre Studies at the University of Otago, who recently completed an MA which explored ethical authorship of British theatrical work produced in response to the 2003 Invasion of Iraq. He is the artistic director of Arcade, a Dunedin-based performing arts company.

*Key terms:* political theatre, Giorgio Agamben, state of exception, *homo sacer*, Iraq War 2003, George W. Bush, David Hare.

POST-TRUTH POLITICS is a prevalent concept in broader social and political discourse in the wake of Brexit and the 2016 US Presidential election. Both of these events were noted for controversial campaigns run by political actors who, in an attempt to sway potential voters, made statements that lacked adequate fact-checking and created a culture 'that distrust[s] experts and the mainstream media'.<sup>1</sup> Mark Andrejevic argues that the political opacity shown throughout these campaigns was demonstrative of the 'post-truth' political era, where political powers do not 'propose an authoritative counter-narrative' but rather a multitude of media platforms to

engulf any dominant narrative in possible alternatives, to highlight the indeterminacy of the evidence by promulgating endless narratives of debunkery and counter-debunkery: not to 'cut through the clutter' but, on the contrary, to suck critique into the clutter-blender; not to 'speak truth to power' but to highlight the contingency, indeterminateness, and, ultimately, the helplessness of so-called truth in the face of power.<sup>2</sup>

Post-truth politics, therefore, render truth as a political tool, where truths can be invented despite lacking evidence and, furthermore, create an environment wherein it is difficult to determine what is fact and what is fiction.

What this state of affairs illuminates is that citizens in democratic societies exist in a world of simulacra, in which it may be difficult to discern between 'objective' truth and the realities concocted by political leaders. This led Naomi Klein to label 2003 the 'Year of the Fake', as it was

a year that waged open war on truth and facts and celebrated fakes and forgeries of all kinds. This was the year when fakeness ruled: fake rationales for war, a fake President dressed as a fake soldier declaring a fake end to combat and then holding up a fake turkey. An action movie star became governor and the government started making its own action movies, casting real soldiers like Jessica Lynch as fake combat heroes and dressing up embedded journalists as fake soldiers.<sup>3</sup> Saddam Hussein even got a part in the big show: He played himself being captured by American troops.

A prevailing theme of Klein's 'Year of the Fake' is performance: falsities masquerading as truths: George W. Bush announcing 'Mission Accomplished' in a staged moment wearing a fighter pilot 'costume'; Saddam Hussein portraying a living embodiment of the 'Axis of Evil' threatening America.

Sara Brady argues that the Bush administration's deception of the public was created through performance. Appealing to Richard Schechner's theories on 'make-belief', Brady argues that the Bush White House performed in a manner in which 'the audience are supposed to believe that what they are seeing and hearing is real'.<sup>4</sup>

The intermeshing of politics and performance has implications for the health of democratic societies that depend on the flow of accurate and non-partisan information to function, but also provides 'the grounds for an extension beyond the rule bound universe' on behalf of our political leaders.<sup>5</sup> The co-opting of performance as a strategy for deception by political leaders allows them to behave exceptionally (fighting unjust wars) and is also exceptional behaviour (the act of lying).

The term 'exceptional' is used here in reference to Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben's writings on the state of exception. Agamben states that in a state of exception the sovereign determines their own exception to the rules that traditionally dictate how democratic societies operate. An environment in which performance is being co-opted by the state to deceive its citizens and where any notion of the truth is muddled and opaque presents a challenge to political theatre-makers, especially to those who seek to critique political power. How can they critique politicians' exceptional behaviour without resorting to such behaviour themselves? There exists an ethical concern for political theatre-makers who disrupt the truth claims of politicians while simultaneously erecting truth claims of their own.

Theatre itself has always been a place of exception, albeit different to the one described by Agamben. Barbara Formis argues that theatre's 'state of exception is produced on condition of isolating the stage from the

surrounding world: the individuals acting on stage are supposed to comport themselves as if no one were watching'.<sup>6</sup> For instance, Brutus can kill Caesar on stage but we know that no real crime has been committed. However, if theatre creates work that attempts to break that isolation from the surrounding world, by offering counter-narratives to debunk those offered by political elites, should theatre-makers not ensure that their own work reveals its own constructedness and mediation? In short, if performance is being co-opted by political actors, how do artists ensure they are not guilty of the same manipulation of truth as the politicians they are holding to account?

In this article I will use Agamben's theories on the state of exception as a conceptual framework to analyze deception employed by political power and its links to performance. This presents an ethical quandary for theatre-makers who wish to hold political power to account. Some theatre-makers do not resolve this issue. David Hare, for example, with his 2004 play *Stuff Happens*, responded to the 'post-truth' political environment that clouded the 2003 invasion of Iraq; I argue that as a result Hare was also 'exceptional' in his use of the truth.

## The State of Exception

It might seem unusual to use *Stuff Happens*, a play from 2004 discussing the 2003 invasion of Iraq, to analyze post-truth politics and performance. However, while the term 'post-truth' might be part of the contemporary zeitgeist, it originated during the George W. Bush administration, which had also been accused of a similar lack of transparency regarding truth claims. Eric Alterman coined the term in *When Presidents Lie: a History of Official Deception and its Consequences*, a 2004 analysis of Bush's foreign policy, in which he described the US government as operating within a 'post-truth political environment'.<sup>7</sup>

The administration was criticized for its decision to initiate the Second Gulf War in 2003, based on questionable claims that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction; and when these weapons were not found, instead

of 'providing a "dominant" narrative of what had happened, the administration did its best to exploit the fog of war to throw up a series of often contradictory explanations' ranging from humanitarian reasons to eliminating Al Qaeda.<sup>8</sup>

The political machinations of the Bush and Blair governments in the run-up to the invasion of Iraq were defined by Jenny Hughes as 'a politics of exception' in which 'declarations of exceptions to the rule, supported the spread of war into new territories and the indefinite detention of prisoners of war held without recourse to legal representation'.<sup>9</sup> While Hughes's examples of politics of exception were carried out in the Middle East and against foreign 'enemy combatants' in indeterminate spaces such as Guantanamo Bay, politics of exception were also enacted closer to home. Judith Butler notes that the twenty-first-century Western political environment is coloured with 'heightened nationalist discourse, extended surveillance mechanisms, suspended constitutional rights, and developed forms of explicit and implicit censorship'.<sup>10</sup>

### Transcending the Rule of Law

The exceptional political actions described here are evocative of Giorgio Agamben's theories on the state of exception, wherein the sovereign (or political leaders and their institutions) can transcend the rule of law, purportedly for the good of the body politic. However, instead of these actions being used in exceptional circumstances, Agamben comments that the state of exception in the contemporary political space is the 'dominant paradigm of contemporary politics' and has 'reached its maximum worldwide deployment'.<sup>11</sup> This environment allows political leaders to have considerable control over their citizens and the overwhelming ability to privilege particular information: in short, to construct their own version of the truth.

The state of exception was first conceptualized by political philosopher Carl Schmitt. A proponent of Nazi ideology, Schmitt argued in his 1921 book *On Dictatorship* that, in exceptional circumstances, the executive

branch should be freed from the normal legislative constraints. Such exceptional circumstances are determined by the sovereign, a role that Schmitt defines 'as he who decides on the exception'.<sup>12</sup> The sovereign, in a time of crisis of their own choosing, can operate outside the law and societal norms by consolidating their own power in order to protect law and order. Agamben uses Schmitt as a point of departure in his works *Homo Sacer* (1998) and *State of Exception* (2005).

While Schmitt claimed the state of exception was a necessary tool of contemporary statehood, Agamben argued that the state of exception represents a dangerous constitutional crisis.<sup>13</sup> It is important to note that the state of exception is different from a state of emergency; most nation-states have laws regarding what constitutes a state of emergency and what additional powers the sovereign can have in such circumstances while limiting the length of time these additional powers can be used. However, the state of exception 'is not a special kind of law; rather, insofar as it is a suspension of the juridical order itself, it defines law's threshold or limit concept'.<sup>14</sup>

While Schmitt could imagine the exception working within a judicial context, Agamben argues that the state of exception creates a 'space without law'.<sup>15</sup> This, Agamben claims, is 'the paradox of sovereignty [which] consists in the fact the sovereign is, at the same time, outside and inside the juridical order'.<sup>16</sup> If the sovereign is the one who can proclaim the state of exception, then they exist outside the legal system. However, in functioning in an established role such as President or Prime Minister, they are still attempting to exist with the juridical order.

The state of exception presents the sovereign as operating 'inside the legal order and outside it, since its power remains effective even when the validity of the existing legal or constitutional norms is suspended'.<sup>17</sup> The state of exception exists in an indeterminate space, which Agamben refers to as a zone of anomie,<sup>18</sup> between politics and law, and which he views as dangerous as it allows for the creation of 'judicial measures that cannot be understood in legal terms and the state of

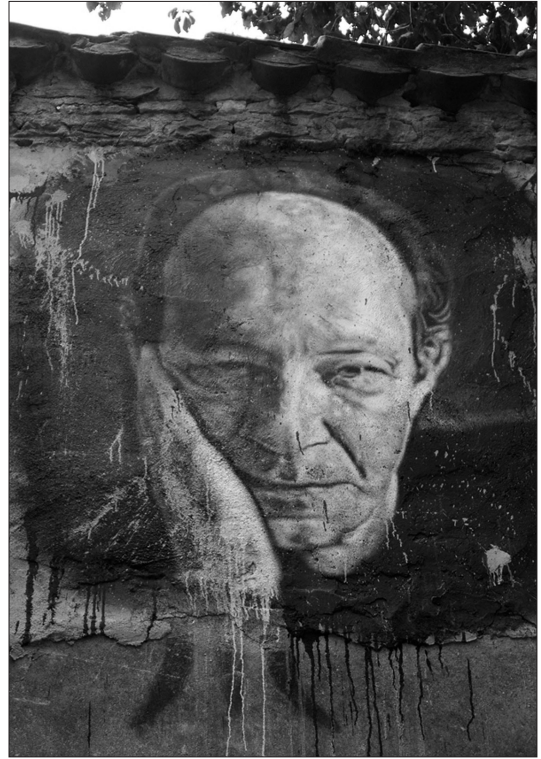
exception appears as the legal form of what cannot have legal form'.<sup>19</sup>

Agamben argues against Schmitt's thesis that the state of exception can be inscribed into law. There is a paradox: the state of exception is not a 'state of law', but rather a 'space without law'.<sup>20</sup> Under a state of exception, the sovereign undergoes an 'expansion of powers', that cannot be restrained through legal means, which confers 'on the executive the power to issue decrees that have the *force* of law'.<sup>21</sup> They are not laws, as they have no bearing on the legal order, but they are understood and are implemented as laws. For Agamben, this reduces society to a 'kenomatic state' that is defined by 'an emptiness of law'.<sup>22</sup> Within the state of exception, there is a

zone of indifference, where inside and outside do not exclude each other but rather blur with each other. The suspension of the normal does not mean its abolition, and the zone of anomie that it establishes is not (or at least claims not to be) unrelated to juridical order.<sup>23</sup>

This *anomie*, Agamben points out, is dangerous as it 'threatens radically to alter – in fact, has already palpably altered – the structure and meaning of the traditional distinction between constitutional forms'; the true reach and limit of sovereign power, therefore, is mysterious and impermeable.<sup>24</sup> In this context any actions committed by the sovereign are outside the legal order; there is no legal framework to judge the actions of the sovereign, suggesting that 'the state of exception appears as the threshold of indeterminacy between democracy and absolutism'.<sup>25</sup> In short, sovereigns choose to behave exceptionally, but the state of exception is a political phenomenon 'in which all legal determinations are . . . deactivated'.<sup>26</sup>

The state of exception exists, Agamben claims, purely to bridge the binary between *anomie* and *nomos* (law). However, when the state of exception blurs the distinction between these binary forces, 'the juridico-political system transforms itself into a "killing machine" as the sovereign can commit exceptional acts of violence without obstruction or recourse'.<sup>27</sup>



Street art depicting Giorgio Agamben at the Abode of Chaos in St.-Romain-au-Mont-d'Or, France.

### The Theory of the *Homo Sacer*

In referring to the political system becoming a killing machine, Agamben is evoking his theory of the *homo sacer* – a human stripped of legal rights. Agamben lifts the term *homo sacer* from Roman law, wherein, if a Roman citizen committed crimes that affronted the gods, they were removed from civil society and could be killed by anyone without penalty. If the sovereign operates exceptionally, the political or juridical order of society is suspended and those individuals whose rights are transgressed by the sovereign are excluded from the law.

Agamben refers to such an individual as *homo sacer*, or bare life, an individual who is defined in legal terms by their absence from the legal order; 'included in the juridical order solely in the form of its exclusion (that is, of its capacity to be killed)'.<sup>28</sup> The sovereign can strip the rights of individual citizens, exclude them from society, and render

them, like the sovereign, to exist in a zone that is both inside and outside the law. All life and its protection and relation to the legal order is based on the whim of the sovereign and therefore the state of exception operates as a 'sphere in which [the sovereign] is permitted to kill without committing homicide'.<sup>29</sup>

Agamben identifies the sovereign and *homo sacer* as 'the two poles of the sovereign exception',<sup>30</sup> and, as Nicola Rogers suggests, these poles lie in 'an unlikely symmetry' where *homo sacer* is excluded from political life by the mechanisms which the sovereign administers to consolidate their power.<sup>31</sup> The *homo sacer* needs to be identified and their humanity stripped, to allow the sovereign to consolidate their own power. In this instance, the exceptional sovereign and the *homo sacer* are a symmetrical and correlative phenomenon. Matthew G. Hannah notes that, in the present century, the majority of citizens are now potentially *homo sacer* and 'the salient issue . . . is the fact that a tiny, organized group may remain unexceptionable'.<sup>32</sup>

By privileging suspect information with the force of truth, sovereigns are also, in turn, reducing their citizens to *homo sacer*, stripping their 'right to receive information' unadulterated, a right that is enshrined, for example, in the first amendment of the US Constitution.<sup>33</sup> Legal scholar Quinta Jurecic explores the relationship between truth and the state of exception, referencing the behaviour of Donald Trump, suggesting his use of 'alternative facts' places the speaker

outside usual systems of evaluating truth and meaning, just like the exception places the sovereign outside the space of law. . . . [Lying] like the declaration of the state of exception, can't be verified or constrained.<sup>34</sup>

A sovereign's use of information can be seen to be analogous to the treatment of its citizens. Like the citizen fluctuating between *homo sacer* and *non homo sacer*, legitimate and illegitimate life, information fluctuates between truths and falsehoods. In this case sovereigns can position themselves as founts of truth, privileging some knowledge over other knowledge, excluding unwanted facts

from discussion, or ignoring facts entirely. For the sovereign, being able to give information the force of truth is a powerful tool for controlling the populace while pursuing hidden agendas.

### Lying and 'Suspended Life'

Many academics have written about the Bush administration's use of military tribunals as an example of the state of exception wherein terrorists, or 'enemy combatants', are prisoners with their rights suspended indefinitely, and claim that the tribunals are indicative of Agamben's theory of *homo sacer*.<sup>35</sup> It is reasonable to contend that the life of twenty-first-century citizens who are willfully misled by their sovereign and cannot anchor themselves to a discernible reality is also suspended life.

The suspension of life and the wider twenty-first-century experience is similar to Agamben's description of a 'camp' which he defines as 'the space that is opened when the state of exception begins to become the rule'.<sup>36</sup> In this sense he is referring to the creation of a 'spatial arrangement' that remains outside the normal order, specifically referencing the camps of Auschwitz and Guantanamo. However, in defining what constitutes a camp, Agamben argues that we must look behind the acts committed in the camps to understand the political procedures that allow rights to be stripped away:

The correct question to pose concerning the horrors committed in the camps is . . . not the hypocritical one of how crimes of such atrocity could be committed against human beings. It would be more honest, and above all more useful, to investigate carefully the juridical procedures and deployments of power by which human beings could be so completely deprived of their rights and prerogatives that no act committed against them could appear any longer as a crime.<sup>37</sup>

Matthew Hannah suggests that while Guantanamo Bay 'may represent a space of exception', where sovereign power is 'able to dominate life within the walls of the camp', then the sovereign must have some level of dominance over 'the territory outside the walls' of Guantanamo Bay.<sup>38</sup> For Hannah,

the procedures and deployments of power described by Agamben 'are not merely "juridical" in character; to an important extent, they are a matter of concrete territorial control',<sup>39</sup> defined as the ways in which the sovereign can control our lives so that they can act exceptionally.<sup>40</sup> These systems of control include border crossing and surveillance systems. I would add to that list systems that promote deception and propaganda. The inhabitants of Guantanamo and the citizens of the West are both, to different extents, *homo sacer*.

I do not wish to conflate the experiences in a concentration camp and experiences of those in a contemporary Western setting. Rather I wish to suggest that the sovereign who mediates and disseminates 'truth' to a captive populace is also holding them in suspension. Those labelled terrorists are exceptional and can be freely tortured, while those who are identified as being part of the 'reality-based community' can be deceived without sanction. Hannah concludes that, against a backdrop wherein citizens are willfully misled regarding the fact that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction, evidence is issued that has the 'force' of truth and a mass surveillance network of domestic citizens is created, in the twenty-first century 'the vast majority of citizens already are virtual *homines sacri*'.<sup>41</sup> In this way, the camp of the twenty-first century lacks corporeal form, operating on a metaphysical level and is inherently performative.

### The State of Exception and Performance

According to Hughes the state of exception is generated through practices of performance and theatre which enable the casting of grandiose imagery to legitimize and enact expansive powers.<sup>42</sup> The creation of such imagery, in turn, allows for further exceptionalism and deception. She suggests that 'war and terrorism make powerful interventions into our social worlds' by capturing the public's attention. She further argues that such events only become 'coherent' when interpreted by the top levels of government through 'institutionalized imagination', which in turn

authorizes the sovereign to justify acts of war.<sup>43</sup> Exceptionalism rests on performance, the ability to 'create threats', 'identify frailties', and invent evidence.<sup>44</sup> Hughes lifted the phrase 'institutionalized imagination' from the 9/11 Commission report which called on the American government to exercise its imagination in identifying potential threats to the nation.<sup>45</sup> Brett Nicholls agrees, arguing that

at the most mundane level, the spectacular-democratic state has become suspicious of what it cannot see and it explains this ocular obstruction in the most violent scenario it can imagine. . . . This crisis potential, and the production of fear that is associated with it, has become a permanent situation. In many respects, this crisis potential engenders today's spectacular democratic state's increasing control over and command of contemporary subjects.<sup>46</sup>

The sovereign state is prepared to identify and label any potential bogeymen hidden in the shadows. The identification of potential threats in turn endorses further exceptional behaviour which, for Agamben, creates an environment in which 'it is impossible to distinguish the transgression of the law from the execution of the law'.<sup>47</sup> Hughes argues:

Performance and exception are intimately linked: a state of exception is produced by means of a performance . . . and thus power is both made and contested in an embodied and performative zone that is not securely definable or fixable.<sup>48</sup>

Barbara Formis points out that theatre exists in its own state of exception:

It is to the extent that the fictive illusion aims at exceeding the constraints of the presupposed 'reality'. A crime accomplished on stage is not immediately perceived as such. This state of exception is produced on condition of isolating the stage from the surrounding world: the individuals acting on stage are supposed to comport themselves as if no one were watching.<sup>49</sup>

These descriptions evoke Schechner's idea of the liminal space wherein a person is 'betwixt and between'.<sup>50</sup> For Schechner, performance rests on this idea of liminality which is to be 'inter', to exist between, on the way from something towards something else;

being 'inter is exploring the liminal'.<sup>51</sup> The sovereign, therefore, goes through Schechner's idea of transportation, wherein the sovereign, the performer, lives a double negative which 'takes place between not me . . . not not me'.<sup>52</sup>

Schechner defines this as a performer being not Ophelia, but they are simultaneously not not Ophelia. Similarly, the actor is not the actor, but they are not not the actor. Like the performer who is stuck between the roles of actor and Ophelia, the sovereign is stuck between democratic leader and dictator.

In a state of exception, political leaders must cast themselves in the role of the sovereign, which, for Mark Salter, is inherently performative, as the sovereign must simultaneously perform 'as protector against the collapse of all community' while hiding 'the inherent violence in this primary contract'.<sup>53</sup> While operating within this role, José Muñoz argues that the sovereign 'stages the state of exception to naturalize and justify unchecked and abusive manifestations of power amid a general scene of savage social asymmetry'.<sup>54</sup> The exception in which the sovereign operates is also performative, when the exception means to deny the fixed original identity or understanding of a role or concept and suspend a rule-bound universe, creating new identities and understandings that are unfixed and ever changing.

Sovereign power is something, according to Shirin M. Rai, that must be 'constructed and reproduced, in part, through ceremony/ritual through which new meanings of power are inscribed'.<sup>55</sup> This, according to Rai, occurs in unexceptional sovereignties, for instance in the reopening of parliament after an election. These performances and rituals are 'deployed both to awe and to put beyond contestation the everyday workings of institutions and in so doing secure the dominant social relations that obtain within it'.<sup>56</sup> Through the generation of grand imagery as described by Hughes, following Rai's theory, the sovereign, in turn, is constructing new meanings of power: as the protector from the powerful external forces that aim to harm everyday life, a sovereign's behaviour is unquestionable and beyond reproach.

## Pinter, 'Art, Truth, and Politics'

Hughes concludes that the state of exception's grounding in performance raises grave 'ethical and political questions' for any theatrical work that wishes to respond to exceptional governmental actions.<sup>57</sup> Since the 'establishment' co-opts the language of performance, in doing so it emphasizes the exceptional nature of theatre.

Harold Pinter in his Nobel Prize lecture, 'Art, Truth, and Politics', outlines how both theatre and politics exist within a state of exception regarding each discipline's treatment of truth. Theatre-makers, due to the nature of their form, can be less rigid with the truth. Pinter outlines that truth in art is a hazy commodity as 'truth in drama is forever elusive' and we 'stumble upon the truth in the dark'.<sup>58</sup>

However, once you have discovered truth in drama, he argues, 'sometimes you feel you have the truth of a moment in your hand, then it slips through your fingers and is lost'.<sup>59</sup> In James M. Harding's outline, 'Pinter understands his role as an artist to be that of illuminating the elusiveness of truth vis-à-vis an artistic search for it'.<sup>60</sup> According to Pinter, we understand the stage to be a place where 'there are no hard distinctions between what is real and what is unreal, nor between what is true and what is false', which evokes Schechner's ideas of the 'double not', described above.<sup>61</sup> Theatre, to function, depends on the audience investing in this paradox where reality and masquerade coincide.

However, in politics, Pinter argues, it is unacceptable to allow the real and unreal to be blurred together; 'as a citizen, I must ask: What is true? What is false?'.<sup>62</sup> For Pinter this uneasy situation allows political power to take advantage of its citizens and operate exceptionally as

the majority of politicians . . . are interested not in truth but in power and in the maintenance of that power. To maintain that power it is essential that people remain in ignorance, that they live in ignorance of the truth, even the truth of their own lives. What surrounds us, therefore, is a vast tapestry of lies, upon which we feed.<sup>63</sup>

Pinter argues that for him to hold on to both these concepts of truth simultaneously, he must draw 'a clear line between his understanding of truth as an artist and his understanding of truth as a citizen'.<sup>64</sup> As an artist, he can treat truth as an elusive and malleable substance, but as a citizen he must speak truth to power.

What becomes problematic, however, is when these two realms start to co-exist, when the artist and the citizen and these two concepts of the truth begin to merge. When theatrical work overtly references and makes connections with the contemporary world, promising an illusory connection to the real, then theatre is, like the truth claims of the sovereign, crossing into a state of *anomie*. Such theatrical work exists between fact and fiction; between theatre, a form fuelled by imagination, and documentary, a form fuelled by the real.

### State of Exception and *Stuff Happens*

Using Agamben's theoretical framework on the state of exception offers a powerful way to evaluate the exceptional relationship political theatre-maker's work has to the truth. With the re-emergence in popularity of various incarnations of the Theatre of the Real, such as documentary theatre post 9/11, the merging of political truth and artistic truth is seen most clearly.

Theatre-makers are turning to these forms, according to Jenny Hughes, to establish authentic or reliable frames of reference for thought, feeling, and action in a highly mediatised society. She observes that 'in an era ruled by theatricality, the theatre is rediscovering its true role: . . . exposing the truth'.<sup>65</sup> However, documentary theatre has been criticized for how the form promises an illusory connection to the real while not acknowledging the form's mediation. These criticisms are indicative of my wider concerns here, namely the ethical concerns behind authors dismantling claims to truth while erecting truth claims of their own.

This uncomfortable state of affairs is seen in David Hare's 2004 play *Stuff Happens*, a play that looks behind closed doors at the Bush administration in the period leading up to the invasion of Iraq. For Hare, the decision-making process leading to the invasion was guided less by honest, candid diplomacy than by the Bush cabinet's underhand coercion and manipulation of their opponents in the United Nations and the public. The George W. Bush of *Stuff Happens* evokes the role of the Agamben sovereign, carrying out exceptional acts and wilfully misleading the public into believing that these very acts are in the name of freedom. Hare blurs the lines between truth and fiction in his work, blending verbatim testimony with imagined dialogue.



David Hare in discussion with director Nicholas Hytner during rehearsals of *Stuff Happens*. Image credit: Ivan Kyncl / ArenaPAL.





Alastair Campbell (Don Gallagher) in discussion with American diplomats in *Stuff Happens*, written by David Hare and directed by Nicholas Hytner, staged at London's Olivier Theatre, 2004.

While his play portrays how the 'Coalition of the Willing' offered contradictory and changing narratives in the lead-up to the invasion of Iraq, its construction is also a contradiction, mixing the real with the invented.

Hare attempts to disrupt the record's account of the decision-making process by imposing his own narrative upon the events. He mixes together verbatim and imagined dialogue based on his independent research, the sources of which he has not revealed. At no point in the play does Hare indicate clearly which parts of his play are factual and which are fictional. Hare attempts to use his work's divergent sources as a legitimate theatrical device to uncover clandestine political machinations.

However, *Stuff Happens* becomes an exercise in hypocrisy on the part of Hare as he endows himself with an exceptional relationship to the truth. As Jay Gipson-King points out, what this means is that *Stuff Happens* is operating on three levels of reality: the first being verbatim dialogue; the second being informed speculation taken from unnamed sources; and the third scenes of pure imagin-

ation, where no one knows what really happened except for the people who were there.<sup>66</sup> The distinction between these levels of reality is not revealed; the audience is unaware which words are verbatim and which are invented. Hare's truth claims, like that of Bush, to carry the *force* of truth, but in reality could be hearsay or pure imagination.

### A Troubling 'Authenticity'

For that reason, *Stuff Happens* suffers from a troubling authenticity in that Hare's words carry the force of truth without being truthful. It is my contention that Hare is guilty of the same deceptive tactics as the politicians he wishes to critique, and his audience is Agamben's *homo sacer*, individuals suspended from the judicial order and lacking adequate tools to critically engage with the work. *Stuff Happens*, therefore, exists in an anomic space between fact and fiction. While Hare takes on the role of the sovereign, his misled public take the role of the *homo sacer*. By preventing his audience from critically engaging with his work's construction, Hare enters into an exceptional relationship with

the truth, where verbatim dialogue, his research, and his imagination are all treated with the same level of authenticity.

*Stuff Happens* is marketed as a documentary play, wherein recorded dialogue is used to 'reproduce 'what really happened' for presentation in the live space of the theatre'.<sup>67</sup> There is a presupposition that what Hare is presenting is truthful. However, the relationship of *Stuff Happens* to the record and the strength of its claims to truth are precarious. The author's notes of *Stuff Happens* outline the troubling authenticity of his work:

The events within it have been authenticated from multiple sources, both private and public. What happened happened. Nothing in the narrative is knowingly untrue. Scenes of direct address quote people verbatim. When the doors close on the world's leaders and on their entourages, then I have used my imagination.<sup>68</sup>

In this note we see the same paradox regarding the state of exception, where Hare allows his claims regarding his work's authenticity to inhabit an anomic zone between fact and fiction. He positions his largely fictional work to be interpreted as a documentary, ultimately leading to the unfortunate comparison that 'like the politicians he satirizes, Hare insists he is shedding light on hidden truths, but then fabricates his own evidence'.<sup>69</sup> Stephen Bottoms estimates that 'about 80 per cent' of the text is imagined.<sup>70</sup>

### Differing Accounts of Authenticity

What further complicates the truth claims within *Stuff Happens* is Hare's own shifting description of his play's authenticity. To begin with, the author's note itself is contradictory and opaque. Jay Gipson-King points out that Hare's claims that the play is not a documentary 'contradicts [his] insistence upon [the play's] accuracy'.<sup>71</sup> Sara Soncini observes that Hare's reassurance that 'what happened, happened' sounds similar to the dismissive Donald Rumsfeld quote that inspired the play's title, while the disclaimer that nothing in the narrative is 'knowingly untrue . . . could have come from the mouth

of a Blairite spin doctor'.<sup>72</sup>

Hare's reluctance to name his sources, provide any verification that they exist, or produce any evidence to bolster his claims, further complicates his work's relationship with the record. The fact that there are so many questions regarding the evidence of Hare's claims is somewhat ironic considering that *Stuff Happens* concerns itself not only with the manipulation of the truth but also with falsifying evidence.

Hare has subsequently made differing claims regarding the play's truthfulness, saying in different interviews that the play is 'three-fourths' fiction,<sup>73</sup> that it is mere 'speculation . . . but my speculations are very well sourced, from multiple sources', and that the events of the play 'were a theory only'.<sup>74</sup> Gipson-King points out that these differing accounts as to the authenticity of *Stuff Happens* reveal that Hare is stuck between 'the impulse of the artist, who wants to take credit for the creative aspects of the play, and . . . the pride of the researcher, who wants his findings taken seriously'.<sup>75</sup> If Gipson-King's conclusion is correct and Hare desires to claim credit for both his research and his art, this still does not excuse his insistence that the play is completely truthful. For instance, when the play opened in the United States, Hare claimed that, 'if you want to know what happened with Blair, and Bush and Powell and company, and you want to get it all in one evening, you have to go to the play'.<sup>76</sup>

Yet, Hare's own version of what 'really happened' also changed when the play transferred from the National Theatre in London to Broadway. He altered parts of the play to reflect new evidence that came to light, while also making the figure of Colin Powell less sympathetic, having been previously criticized by British reviewers for 'taking too benign a view of Powell'.<sup>77</sup> He has defended his play's truth claims, saying 'nobody who was a participant in those events has ever questioned my version of them . . . nobody has ever stepped forward and said I've got it completely wrong'.<sup>78</sup> But then why would they? Why would any of the players who knew the inner workings of the

events depicted in *Stuff Happens*, of whom there are precious few, acknowledge a play that accuses them of deception, especially when, due to its construction, the play can so easily be dismissed as fiction? This was the case when Conservative MP Ann Widdecombe dismissed the play as propaganda, comparing it unfavourably to Leni Riefenstahl's Nazi propaganda as art subverted for political reasons.<sup>79</sup>

### *Stuff Happens* and the Real

The blurring of the three levels of mediation in Hare's play creates an uneasy situation, particularly because the play is concerned with how political power mediates truth and meaning. *Stuff Happens* creates a tension where 'the story's "actual" linguistic scandals become inextricably confused with Hare's own rhetorical manipulations'.<sup>80</sup> Hare cannot claim 'he is shedding light on hidden truths' when he 'fabricates his own evidence'.<sup>81</sup>

Gipson-King claims that the interplay between the different sources allows Hare's work to exist in an anomalous void, pointing out that 'the charge of inaccuracy cannot be levelled at a play that claims to be fiction,

while Hare's insistence on the use of reliable sources gives even the imaginative scenes a weight of authority'.<sup>82</sup> By juxtaposing the meta-references of well-known speeches against invented ones, Hare authenticates his imaginings.

Daniel Schulze argues that audiences are left with the notion that 'I knew the speech before, so this one must be also true, I just haven't heard it'.<sup>83</sup> Donna Soto-Morettini observes that the verbatim dialogue in *Stuff Happens* is all lifted from public speeches which are 'designed to be delivered and received as authoritative' and never seem 'off the cuff'.<sup>84</sup> These speeches are carefully constructed by speechwriters and are merely public relations exercises. Therefore, all of the play's dialogue is constructed and does not provide any greater access to the 'real'.

Soncini argues that the use of known characters in Hare's play also adds extra veracity to Hare's claims and that 'the factual public face of the characters confers veracity on the private imagined one'.<sup>85</sup> This credibility was emphasized in the National Theatre's staging wherein the actors who played the principal parts – Bush, Blair, Rice, Cheney, Rumsfeld, and Powell – never doubled their



Prime Minister Tony Blair (Nicholas Farrell) attempts to negotiate with his opposite number by phone in *Stuff Happens*, written by David Hare and directed by Nicholas Hytner, the Olivier Theatre, 2004. Image credit: Ivan Kyncl / ArenaPAL.

roles. The decision to have these actors play only one character reinforces the idea that these actors are analogous to the 'real' individuals they are portraying. The use of real people adds extra credibility to not only the words they are speaking but also to the existence of the fictional characters in the play and the opinions they possess.

Hare has five characters who provide 'viewpoints', which are lengthy monologues created to allow Hare to provide commentary on events. Soncini argues that 'it is not clear from the text whether these are real people whose identity is left undisclosed, or invented characters in their own right'.<sup>86</sup> In the National Theatre production Soncini notes that there was no attempt at 'differentiating these characters based on their ontological status either through style [which] remained in the mimetic register throughout' or in the mode of delivery, since 'direct address was equally used by historical figures and unidentified characters'.<sup>87</sup>

### Between the Ethical and the Aesthetic

The relationship of *Stuff Happens* to the real is further complicated by its use of verbatim dialogue and appropriation of techniques from documentary theatre, a form that is not without its own troubled relationship to the real. Innes argues that 'the way documentary drama – and, in particular, verbatim theatre – is promoted and understood by its audiences, assumes that the material is factual, is treated objectively, and is represented accurately'.<sup>88</sup> Suzanne Little, however, argues that documentary theatre exists on a continuum between the highly ethical and the highly aesthetic. She posits that this presents an issue for verbatim theatre-makers, as a highly ethical production can 'drain the drama from theatrical representation in attempting to perceive a perceived truth' while a highly aesthetical production can 'exploit and manipulate the source material'.<sup>89</sup>

In a discussion of the ethical issues in documentary theatre, Bottoms refers to Derrida's essay on Artaud, 'The Theatre of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation'. Derrida suggests that traditional text-based

theatre is 'theological' in that the god-like author is 'absent and from afar is armed with a text and keeps watch over, assembles, regulates the tie or the meaning of presentation' while perpetuating the illusion that he 'creates nothing . . . because he only transcribes and makes available for reading a text [that] maintains with what is called the "real" . . . an imitative and reproductive relationship'.<sup>90</sup>

Taking this theory of theological presence, Stephen Bottoms applies it to documentary theatre which he claims is 'double illusory', as it presents to its audience 'speech of "actual people" involved in "real events"'; however, labelling the work verbatim 'obscures the world-shaping role of the writer in the editing and juxtaposing the gathered materials'.<sup>91</sup> He critiques *Stuff Happens* for its lack of self-evident signifiers that reveal the play's mediation.

Comparing the play to Moisés Kaufman's *Gross Indecency: the Three Trials of Oscar Wilde*, he argues that documentary plays must 'acknowledge their dual identity and thus ambiguous status as both "document" and "play"; without doing so, documentary theatre is in danger of becoming 'a disingenuous exercise in the presentation of "truth", failing (or refusing) to acknowledge [its] own highly selective manipulation of opinion and rhetoric'.<sup>92</sup> For *Stuff Happens* to satisfy Bottoms's demand that documentary theatre acknowledge its dual identity, Hare needs to show the three levels of mediation present in his work, but Hare has not signified any of the three.

### Behind Closed Doors

The scenes behind closed doors are invented by Hare, but, according to his author's note, we are assured that they carry a level of credibility and create an illusion that Hare has acquired 'a certain aura of privileged information'.<sup>93</sup> However, such scenes contain both verisimilar discussions of Powell's opposition to the war and at the same time borderline cartoonish scenes, such as George and Laura Bush putting together a jigsaw as

the President's cabinet proudly look on. This creates a situation where 'it is impossible to tell with any reliability where factual reportage stops and political caricature starts: under Hare's all-seeing gaze, both acquire equal status as (dramatic) truth'.<sup>94</sup>

When asked by Will Hammond and Dan Steward whether he 'makes any distinction' between real and imagined dialogue, Hare claimed that his mediation is self-evident, paraphrasing his own author's note that scenes of direct address quote people verbatim, while behind closed doors the events are completely imagined.<sup>95</sup>

However, in performance, this distinction is obscured. As Soncini argues, the distinction is 'limited entirely to the paratext [the script]', so in performance 'the boundaries between the actually spoken and the 'not quite spoken' tend to become blurred.<sup>96</sup> What constitutes 'behind closed doors' is unclear in the performance's staging, which in the case of the National Theatre's production, comprised a bare stage with minimal set and props, making it difficult to ascertain when the actors are in public and when they are in private. But even in the paratext, it is unclear exactly what constitutes 'direct address'. There are many moments when the characters speak to the audience or break the fourth wall which are almost certainly imagined. For instance, a meeting between Bush and Powell, in which Bush tells Powell he is proceeding with an invasion of Iraq without approval from the United Nations:

AN ACTOR: Later, Bush recalls:

BUSH: It was a very cordial conversation. I would describe it as cordial. I think the log will show that it was relatively short.

AN ACTOR: White House records show that the encounter lasted twelve minutes.

*Bush, alone, looks at us a moment.*

BUSH: I didn't need permission.<sup>97</sup>

Instead of actively revealing his work's construction, Hare utilizes techniques that enforce *Stuff Happens's* perceived authenticity while veiling his own mediation. Hare employs a technique that Innes describes as

'constant commentary' where, in Brechtian fashion, actors step out of role, to give context to proceedings, often quoting names, titles, and exact dates. The act of having actors, out of role, commentating on these events, creates the sense that these are truly being replayed in performance, emphasizing the desired 'documentary feel' of the material and enforcing the perceived authenticity of the play. For example, close to the start of the play:

*Another Actor steps forward:*

AN ACTOR: Stuff. Happens. The response of Donald Rumsfeld, the American Secretary of Defense, when asked to comment on the widespread looting and pillage that followed the American conquest of Baghdad – Friday, April 11th 2003.<sup>98</sup>

Hare's Rumsfeld appears and proceeds to deliver his 'stuff happens' speech, a speech that is well known to the public and can also be found in the public record. This use of narration could serve to mark what is fact over what is fiction in the play; however, Hare uses this device throughout, regardless of the source material. For instance, at the beginning of Scene Four, Bush's cabinet discuss invading Iraq for the first time, a scene surely invented by Hare:

*Bush, fastidiously punctual, is already in place, sitting alone at the head of a torpedo-shaped table.*

AN ACTOR: The new administration hits the ground running. Ten days after his inauguration, on January 30th 2001, President Bush presides for the first time at a meeting of the National Security Council. . . .

BUSH: Now let's move on. Iraq.

O'NEILL: Iraq?

AN ACTOR: Paul O'Neill. Secretary of the Treasury.

O'NEILL: Iraq?<sup>99</sup>

In both instances, 'The Actor' uses precise dates and titles, the use of which, Bottoms argues, 'lends a spurious aura of being "verbatim" authority to the characters' subsequent words – words that Hare has presumably invented'.<sup>100</sup>



Matthew Wilde, Associate Director, oversees rehearsal as Hare examines research material in the background during rehearsals of *Stuff Happens*. Image credit: Ivan Kyncl / ArenaPAL.

### 'Theological Presence'

While it could be argued that verbatim theatre achieves a new form of political efficacy, as described in Hare's essay contained in the play text for Robin Sloane's *Talking To Terrorists*, this does not conceal that 'his masculinist rhetoric casually obscures the fact that realism and reality are not the same thing, and that unmediated access to "the real" is not something the theatre can ever honestly provide'.<sup>101</sup> It is quite clear that Hare's role as the author of this work is particularly pronounced, and that his 'theological presence' is problematic.

The various levels of reality that exist in Hare's work, coupled with the lack of mediation in *Stuff Happens*, therefore create an environment in which an audience could be wilfully misled. Some commentators have argued, as will be discussed below, that Hare's interplay of these levels of reality asks his audience to 'be wary of reifying material evidence as an indisputable carrier of truth'.<sup>102</sup> However, Hare's audience is unaware of what evidence is real and what is imagined.

Agamben argues that in a state of exception there are 'two poles of the sovereign exception'.<sup>103</sup> If Hare is Agamben's exceptional sovereign then the other pole of exceptionalism, the *homo sacer*, is the audience. Hare's audiences are not equipped with an author's note, nor is the play's interplay of fact and fiction revealed, and therefore the audience must take Hare's truth claims at face value. Arguably, without Hare revealing how his work is mediated, his audience may interpret the entire play as truthful.

Some scholars have argued that the three levels of reality in Hare's work, coupled with his seemingly disingenuous claims over the veracity of his research, point to an artist who is asking his audience to think more critically about how truth and knowledge are disseminated. Colleran, for instance, declares that 'the engine' of *Stuff Happens* 'is its collage of the imagined and the seen; the tension between these invites the viewer to think critically about surface and depth'.<sup>104</sup> Soncini suggests that the blurring of these boundaries in Hare's play, 'allows for a more

complex, nuanced configuration of representational modes to emerge'.<sup>105</sup>

What Hare presents is not merely truth and fiction living in a 'hybrid cohabitation' but reveals how these two domains can be reversed.<sup>106</sup> The verbatim authenticates the fiction but, on the other hand, Hare's fictional imaginings are 'granted a higher degree of truthfulness than . . . the public evidence quoted in the play [which] is certainly authentic but it is designed to obscure, rather than disclose the truth about Iraq'.<sup>107</sup>

The verbatim dialogue comprises banal statements designed to conceal and manipulate, while Hare's imagined dialogue is recast as 'counterfeit' dramatic dialogue'.<sup>108</sup>

However, for audiences to engage critically in this manner, they must be aware that they are being manipulated by Hare, which, based on the reactions of the informed reviewers who attended his play, they are not. Instead of being more critically attuned to the multiple sources of contradictory information regarding the Iraq war, the play reinforces the information provided by its author as the definitive version of events. Hare does not create an engaged public sphere at the National Theatre but instead, as theatre historian David Wiles argues, creates the 'instant and illusory thrill of an engaged citizenship, while not actually identifying the fundamental issues upon which a social consensus must rest prior to effective political action'.<sup>109</sup>

### The Issue of Self-Reflexivity

*Stuff Happens*, like the politicians it skewers, is ultimately attempting to overlay its own singular narrative on to a complicated, politicized series of events. The failure to foreground the level to which Hare is mediating and inventing events seems unethical and disingenuous. This form of reflexive verbatim, which asks its audience to think critically about the dissemination of truth through its mixture of fact and fiction, does exist and has been achieved successfully, as Stuart Young discusses in his article 'Playing with Documentary', which highlights Pol Heyvaert and Dimitri Verhulst's *Aalst* (2005)

and Dennis Kelly's *Taking Care of Baby* (2007) as key examples of work that emphasizes 'the process of writing or reporting, thereby drawing attention to the methods of construction in documentary theatre and to the problematic issues inherent in those methods'.<sup>110</sup>

As Stuart Young points out, both plays are self-referential and constantly point to their own mediation to make the audience question their authenticity. No similar devices occur in *Stuff Happens*. Without this level of self-reflexivity, reviewers assumed *Stuff Happens* presented the 'truth'. John Nathan (*Jewish Chronicle*) claimed 'Hare does not distort the facts in order to make a point – rather he sticks to them', while Innes argued that the play is 'dealing in a hard-nosed, factual way with very recent history and the events of the day, establishing new standards of authenticity'.<sup>111</sup> In fact, Gipson-King indicates that 'over two-thirds [of reviewers] considered the play, balanced, accurate, and convincing'.<sup>112</sup>

Hare can write whatever he likes; as an artist, he should be allowed an uninhibited response to contemporary life. He himself describes the role of the artist as responsive: 'You find the driftwood on the beach, but you carve the wood and paint it to make it art'.<sup>113</sup> However, when he positions his work as being representative of actual events and to be a version of the truth, he starts to enter the anomalous void of the state of exception. The devices used to promote his work as truthful, operating somewhere between documentary theatre-maker, journalist, historian, and artist.

He uses his work and its truth claims to implement a problematic narrative that furthers his own interests. Without foregrounding his 'own processes of representation in order to acknowledge the problem and encourage audiences to adopt an actively critical perspective on the events depicted',<sup>114</sup> Hare grants himself special power and dissemination of the truth, making him guilty of the same crimes as those he wishes to critique, while his audience are cast as *homo sacer* whose right to discern fact from fiction has been suspended.

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