

# Documentary Theatre as Dissidence: Textuality of World Politics in David Hare's History Play *Stuff Happens*

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## ABSTRACT

*In an age of manipulation through text and image, when television and the internet have seized representation and forwarded it as truth, political fiction struggles to remain a significant conveyor and commenter of information. Post-9/11 literature attempts to re-establish the supremacy of representation, and hints at the prevalence of a web of discourses hardly contingent with an actual, non-imposed truth. It is the case of David Hare's docudrama *Stuff Happens*, a mixture of actual statements made by Bush, Tony Blair, Condoleezza Rice, or Colin Powell – transposed as characters in the play – and a collection of imagined dialogues allegedly exchanged behind closed doors. Hare's play blurs the relation between factuality and representation. The aim of the present paper is to disclose this strategy by analysing the discursive practice at work within the literary text.*

**Keywords:** *political play, Bush administration, War on Terror, discursive practices, reality and fiction*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Political decisions are rarely made in the public eye. Generally, they are made available to people via media channels, which more or less distort them. In the traditional communication scheme, media should be in the middle, between sender and receiver. Along these lines, one could say that media act as a vehicle between politicians (sender) and the writers interested in political topics for their fiction (receiver). However, things are not that simple, as power structures intervene and affect this communication scheme. More often than not, media actually dictate to and impose on the political class, which consequently sends the message required by the medium. Ideally, media voice the public concern and their impositions upon political class would have to do with the concept of democracy or, at least, that is their claim. Thus, it appears that the media are in the middle, as they occupy a central position, being actually more

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than “the Fourth Estate”. Contemporary literature is *informed* by the media – and the verb can be read either in the sense of providing information or that of imposing shapes, principles, aesthetics, etc.

The relationship between politics and history and the individual – as both creator and silent victim – has been a concern of literature for ages. Political fiction has always been intrinsically related to the political context of its time – be it propagandistic or, on the contrary, subversive. Twenty-first century literature is no exception; if it were, perhaps we would witness profound renewal at the level of the modes of writing. In a post-communist environment, after the dismantling of USSR, the new political context that rises at the world’s level in the dawn of the twenty-first century is that of a concentrated offensive against a new enemy, one which the officials and the media endow with the attribute *evil*: the Muslim terrorism. Along these lines, literature unavoidably reacts, rapidly producing a new genre – perhaps one that has had the fastest development in the history of literature: post-9/11 fiction.

In what concerns the role of such literature as mass phenomenon which facilitates manipulation, the question is whether literature in general still has such an impact. Unarguably, literature has had this role since its inception and it probably preserves it until today but, in the light of the rapid development of many other possibilities of entertainment (films, games, and the internet, to name just the most important ones), the politically-engaged writer of today seems to have been touched by quixotism – if there is no one there to read what one has to say, how can one manipulate?

## **2. AIMS AND METHODOLOGY**

Quixotic, subversive, propagandistic or just engaged, it is a fact that a significant part of today’s literature deals with politics, and indirectly with contemporary history. The text proposed for this analysis is set against the spectre of the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center, in New York, on September 11, 2001 and its aftermath, with serious consequences for the world politics. In relation to this particular political/historical context, political thinking informs the contemporary aesthetics as a whole and affects/constructs identities at the micro and macro level, revealing the complex relationship between the individual and history. This is the reason why the major aims of this paper are to account for the way in which the marks of the political media can be traced at the level of fiction and to prove that their imprint is manifest through two

interrelated concepts: context and text (language). Focus is laid on puppeteers who hold inextricably the strings in their hands, thus contributing in the perception of national identities as informed and affected by power structures.

The critical theory which governs the present work is a combination of American New Historicism and its British counterpart, Cultural Materialism, theories which lay emphasis on the political, social, economic and cultural context in which the literary text is produced and disseminated, aiming, consequently, at finding a balance in the analysis of both literary and non-literary texts. The two theories follow the Foucauldian take on discourse: every text is constructed discourse; therefore, any truth that a given text forwards is also constructed and serves a specific purpose. The blending of factuality and fiction in the case study proposed in the present paper is intent, as the subsequent subchapter will strive to prove, on depicting the level of *fictionality* in the actual statements made by American and British statespersons on the occasion of the outburst of the War on Terror. The premise of the analysis is that the dramatic discourse is subversive and operates as dissidence within and against the discourse of power.

### 3. EAVESDROPPING IN THE OVAL OFFICE

An inquiry into the literature “after the fall” (Gray, 2011) reveals striking similarities with that in the aftermath of World War I in point of attempting at trauma resistance through escape from reality and abandonment to fiction. Nonetheless, their conveyance of “reality” is, in most cases, much more anchored in the surrounding reality than it was with the great experimentalists in the 1920s and 1930s. Perhaps this comes as a consequence of the media impact in this age of information: one simply cannot hide from the news, which is why one chooses to incorporate it into fiction and, consequently, to create alternate realities. It is precisely this partial fictionalization of events that a whole world has witnessed what renders a significant part of the twenty-first century fiction experimental, although the interplay of textual structures and architectures with various writing techniques ‘with a twist’ definitely contributes to deepening the degree of defamiliarization, even in cases in which, at a first glance, what textual evidence provides might seem utterly familiar. In the end, however, “due to the fact that a text can never be mistaken for the reality it refers to, literature (as written art) cannot imitate reality directly” (Praisler 2000:23). Playing the authority, the objective source of information, should never be

an aim of the literary text. Nonetheless, when literature meets journalism and, especially, when it deals with politics without hiding itself behind different dystopian worlds, the former seems to actually attempt at regaining a position long lost in the public sphere: that of a cultural apparatus able to form opinions.

Such is the case of the political play *Stuff Happens* (2004) by British playwright and Academy Awards nominee scriptwriter David Hare, a play which he defines not as political, but as “historical”, having in view the *history of the present*. Mention should be made at this point that this term has been preferred to contemporary history, as the latter is said to cover a much larger time span than the one in focus here. Both terms are elusive and subjected to change with the passing of the years. Nevertheless, as historian Jerry H. Bentley points out, “when historians address the past from global points of view and examine processes that cross the boundary lines of societies and cultural regions, the problems of periodization become even more acute” (1996: 749). For methodological purposes, it has been considered in the present paper that such a concept may roughly apply to the period starting with the first year of the third millennium, a year marked by an event that has completely reshaped the global policy: the attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. The British playwright seems to maintain a similar view, since his points of reference for contemporary history are, chronologically, the controversial election of George W. Bush as the forty-third president of the United States at the end of the year 2000, his entering into office on January 20, 2001, the attacks on the World Trade Center and the subsequent announcement and initiation of the War on Terror – the offensive against Afghanistan, set out on October 7, 2001, together with the British allies, joined later by other forces in the Northern Alliance, and the war in Iraq, starting on March 20, 2003.

Such a list of historical dates and events may seem out of place in a paper which deals with a fictional work, as long as it preserves its degree of fictionalization and does not slip towards mere historicism. Once the text has identified itself, both meta- and paratextually, as historical, it has inscribed itself in that category of texts marked by historicity, that is to say, among texts which overtly embrace “the cultural specificity, the social embedment” (Montrose 1989: 20) and, at the same time, construct and mediate a discourse that is contingent with a reality perceived outside their own textuality. It is precisely what Hare’s play provides: a historiographic metafiction transposed in the more straightforward, more to-the-point dramatic genre and, at the same time, in a past that is almost overlapping

and definitely affecting the present. As per Hutcheon's definition, Hare's play "parodically cite[s] the intertexts of the 'world' and art, and, in so doing, contest[s] the boundaries that many would unquestionably use to separate the two" (1988: 127). Specifically, what David Hare constructs with *Stuff Happens* is what may be described as a theatricalization of actual, verifiable historic events and, what is more, of actual, verifiable statements referring to these events. In the eyes of Carol Martin, professor of drama at New York University, author of *Get Real: Documentary Theatre Past and Present* (2009) and editor of the volume *Dramaturgy of the Real on the World Stage* (2012), this theatricalization, "created from a specific body of archived material: interviews, documents, hearings, records, video, film, photographs, etc" (Martin 2012: 6) produces an interrogation for the relation between factuality and representation, with an aim at reopening trials, at creating additional historical accounts and at reconstructing events (13). Even with understanding of the fact that 'the real' and 'the present' are continually revised and reinvented, she remarks that theatre and performance that engage the real participate in the "larger cultural obsession with capturing the real for consumption"(1).

David Hare's play seems to be obsessing with something radically different from simply capturing the real or interplaying between fiction and reality: it brings forth the geopolitical transformation of the entire world decided by a handful of people, according to the interests of their nation. This fact is obvious at the first glance – suffice it to take a look at the list of *dramatis personae*: Donald Rumsfeld, Colin Powell, Condoleezza Rice, Dick Cheney, Paul Wolfowitz, George Tenet, George Bush and Tony Blair are the characters that are actually given a name (or, rather, the real persons whose names are rendered as such). Almost all the others characters are introduced just as "an actor" or "a journalist", which points in the direction of their insignificance on the scale of history, politics and international relations, of their facelessness and lack of individuality on the world's stage. Hare's claim, in the preface of the play, that his play is a historical one, seems to suggest that he understands history not in postmodern sense, as fragmented bits of *petite histoires* put together, with the participation of the unknown, the unseen, the unnamed, but rather in the traditional, nineteenth century historicist direction. Thus, Hare's view on history seems to be that its course is determined by authoritative forces that make decisions to which the others, actors and journalists, are only witnesses, having the right to comment on them, but finding themselves in the impossibility to oppose them.

*Stuff Happens* moves away from the common traits of *verbatim theatre*, which presuppose the direct transposition of various real, recorded statements on stage, although the play displays a significant number of declarations made by the public figures listed above, on the occasion of the attacks on the World Trade Center and afterwards, which can be traced in newspapers and television archives. These statements are counterbalanced by a larger number of fictitious renderings of what the same public figures could have said or, in the author's words, of statements that are "not knowingly untrue" (2004, author's note). If one were to look for the meanings of Hare's declaration, one should, most probably, understand that, whilst signalling the fictionality of his play, he also seems to emphasise the possibility that such statements could have been truly spoken at some point. This is an artful authorial intrusion, which contributes in the interplay of reality and fiction, making the reader/spectator unable to tell one from another. In what follows, the present paper provides examples of the two techniques in the play: the direct transposition of an official statement and, by contrast, a number of fictional dialogues between the American officials with regard to the strategy they would further pursue during the War on Terror.

The title of the play is 'borrowed' from a press statement issued by Donald Rumsfeld, the US Secretary of Defense, when asked by the journalists why the American troops had pillaged Baghdad, attacking innocent people, after the conquest of the Iraqi city. An Iraqi character will voice, towards the end of the play, a concern about the racism of the statement: "then Donald Rumsfeld said 'Stuff Happens'. It seemed to me the most racist remark I had ever heard" (2004: 120). It is interesting to note that carelessness is regarded as racism, which may or may not be the case. Be it as it may, Rumsfeld's statement, translated almost verbatim in the second scene of the first act, was as follows:

RUMSFELD: I've seen those pictures. I could take pictures in any city in America. Think what's happened in our cities when we've had riots, and problems, and looting. *Stuff happens!* But in terms of what's going on in that country, it is a fundamental misunderstanding to see those images over and over and over again of some boy walking out with a vase and say, "Oh, my goodness, you didn't have a plan". That's nonsense. They know what they're doing, and they're doing a terrific job. And it's untidy, and freedom's untidy and free people are free to make mistakes and commit crimes and do bad things. They're also free to live their lives and do wonderful things, and that's what's going to happen here (Hare 2004: 3-4).

The statement is archived on the website of the US Department of Defense and may be accessed for free. Apart from a small alteration of the introductory sentence, the discourse in the fictional text is identical with the speech recorded in the official archive. The goal seems to be to emphasise the recklessness of the statements made by the American administration. Should it not have been made famous through fiction and performance, Rumsfeld's indifference towards the fate of the innocent people in Baghdad would have remained hidden in plain sight – available to the great public, indeed, but who is really in the habit of reading the briefings on the Department of Defense website?

The American official's statement lacks the adequacy and propriety of the diplomatic language, which should be order in such circumstances. On the contrary, what Rumsfeld utters is rather an annoyed, colloquial speech – if one is to consider the phrases he uses: *stuff happens* (which is a euphemism which replaces the taboo term in the original idiom), *nonsense*, *my goodness*, etc. Unwillingly, the Secretary of Defense has managed to render his discourse appropriate for performance through the (ab)use of a stylistic device, repetition (*freedom is untidy and free people are free to... and they are also free to...*) which, paradoxically, sounds almost constructed. This statement is placed at the beginning of the play so as to suggest that the entire development of the plot, which chronologically spans between January, 30, 2001 (ten days after Bush's inauguration) and April 11, 2003 (the date of Rumsfeld's actual statement), is under the sign of indifference towards the fate of other nations. As Dick Cheney (the character in the play, not the actual Vice President of the United States) remarks at some point, in a fictitious dialogue exchanged behind the closed doors of the Oval Office, they openly disregard what everybody else wants, including their British allies: "What I want is to follow this country's legitimate security concerns. And, for me, those come above everything [...] Now: if those interests happen to coincide with an Englishman's fantasy of how he's one day going to introduce some universal penalty system – three strikes and the UN says you can overthrow any regime you like – then that's fine. If not, not, and we won't miss him" (Hare 2004: 104). The Englishman he refers to is the British Prime Minister Tony Blair, who is belittled on the course of the same dialogue by George Bush, (again, the same distinction should be made between actual person and character), who states that "if he's not pro-American, he's nothing" (105).

Perhaps the most tragic instance of "stuff happens", that is to say, of American carelessness and pursuit of their ends at all costs, is the

representation of a discussion between Bush, Rice, Wolfowitz, Powell, O'Neill, Tenet, Cheney and Rumsfeld – the War Cabinet assembled at Camp David. Of course, the conversation in the play is completely fictional, but it is, at the same time, intended as explanatory for some decisions and actions of the American government in what was next to sweep over the Middle East until the capturing and killing of Osama bin Laden, on May 2, 2011: the War on Terror. In a nutshell, the discussion starts from the plans to attack Afghanistan, which is “a kind of demonstration model, so that other countries can look and say, ‘Oh, I see. That’s what happens’” (Hare 2004: 20). Yet, this message is considered not powerful enough: “Afghanistan’s a big country, but what are we going to bomb? [...] Have you looked at Afghanistan? Terracotta pots and straw roofs!” (21). This opens the way for deciding to attack Iraq, too, in order to establish democracy, as they claim.

Moving from fiction to reality, it has become obvious for everybody that Iraq was not involved in the attacks on the World Trade Center, but, during those years, the mechanisms of propaganda used to connect Al-Qaeda with the Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein. A good example in this respect is the publication of a leaked official memorandum in the newspaper *The Weekly Standard*, which is further **advertised** by Dick Cheney, who declares it “the best source of information”:

Osama Bin Laden and Saddam Hussein had an operational relationship from the early 1990s to 2003 that involved training in explosives and weapons of mass destruction, logistical support for terrorist attacks, al Qaeda training camps and safe haven in Iraq, and Iraqi financial support for al Qaeda--perhaps even for Mohamed Atta--according to a top secret U.S. government memorandum obtained by The Weekly Standard (Hayes, The Weekly Standard 2003).

Hare’s take on this aspect seems to be that the public opinion has been manipulated into believing this and opposes it with this *make-believe* strategy of putting fictional words in the mouths of real persons, which makes readers and spectators approach the play “as an accurate source of information” (Hammond and Stewards 2008: 3). In Hammond’s and Steward’s view, shared by David Hare, whom they cite, such drama type is similar to journalism and the dramatist has the moral obligation not to misrepresent: “no play, like no newspaper article, is without bias and inflection, but [...] people who work in the theatre tend simply to have much less to gain from lies and spin and much more interest in being honest” (4). Therefore, in journalistic spirit, Hare adds lines that have never



been spoken as such by the potentates of the world in view of showing the great public various hypotheses in what concerns the political, diplomatic and military decisions with an impact at the world's level. The risk induced by such an approach lies, however, in the people's tendency to take fiction for reality; in other words, one should not disregard the fictionality at work in the play and should not take Hare's 'exposure' as truth. As long as the reception of the play remains in the representational sphere, the reader/spectator is entitled, nevertheless, to question the political decisions made by the Americans and their allies in the aftermath of 9/11, much in the way in which the play itself does it.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

The mix of actual and fictional dialogues in *Stuff Happens* should not be regarded as misrepresentation, but sooner as an attempt at disclosing the misrepresented alliance between the United States on the one side, and the United Kingdom and the rest of the Northern Alliance, on the other. The dissidence of the enterprise should be sought in the way in which what is perceived as real, as true – the actual, verifiable statements of the politicians cited in the play – represent, in fact, just an angle, which may have been backed up by what has not been heard.

Hare describes his production as a "history play which happens to centre on very recent history" (2004, author's note), and, in doing so, he places his fictional work in a quest for historic objectivity, although the play may definitely look as overtly anti-American. The perspective adopted in the present paper is that one can no longer separate contemporary history and contemporary literature from information and communication and, consequently, that this history play becomes a communication vehicle as effective as the traditional means of imparting information.

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