J. Chris Westgate

David Hare's *Stuff Happens* in Seattle: Taking a Sober Account

As *The Power of Yes*, the third play by David Hare to document recent history, opens at London's National Theatre, J. Chris Westgate examines in this article Hare's *Stuff Happens* in a regional production in the United States, at Seattle's A Contemporary Theater in 2007. He tracks the emphasis placed on controversy during the advertising and marketing of the play, which stands in direct contrast to the response to the play, which was received with self-satisfaction rather than increased insight in this highly liberal city. From this contrast, he discusses the way that this production of Hare's play – and the play itself – fails to produce controversy because it never holds those actually attending US productions as accountable for the Iraq War. Controversy, then, becomes a marketing device rather than a way of challenging the status quo. J. Chris Westgate is Assistant Professor in English and Comparative Literature at California State University, Fullerton. He has recently edited an anthology of essays entitled *Brecht, Broadway, and United States Theatre* and has published articles in *Modern Drama*, *Theatre Journal*, and *The Eugene O'Neill Review*.

DAVID HARE'S *Stuff Happens* has been heralded as a necessary source of controversy about the Iraq War during its regional production in the United States, simultaneously a worthwhile rebuke to George W. Bush's administration and a welcome occasion to revive public debate. Selected by Gordon Davidson as his final production as artistic director of the Mark Taper Forum in 2005, Hare's play was described as epitomizing the theatre's history of producing works that confront public understanding of contemporary issues.[1]

A National Public Radio story on Hare's play, entitled 'Controversial and Acclaimed Play *Stuff Happens* Debuts in Los Angeles', in fact suggested that the play cemented Davidson's legacy of staging controversy. When *Stuff Happens* moved to Seattle's A Contemporary Theater (ACT) – the production that I will consider in the following argument – the play was preceded with the same promise of controversy, best demonstrated by the *Seattle Times* reviewer Misha Berson's insistence on Hare's 'audacity' in dramatizing the administration's determination to invade Iraq under any circumstances.[2]

Reviews and advertising attending this production consistently described Hare's play as posing shrewd questions about the administration and/or supplying 'one heck of a civics lesson' about the war.[3] Hare probably welcomed this framing of *Stuff Happens* since his work, as dramatist and director, has rarely flinched from controversy. In fact, from plays such as *Christie in Love* and *Lay By* to *Via Dolorosa*,[4] he courted it. More notably, the concept of controversy was central to his definition of the history play as articulated to Alison Summers during a 1981 interview: 'Rewriting history is exhilarating. People have got a model and you show them an alternative to it. It generally stirs up great controversy.'[5]

But what does 'controversy', a term important to Hare's dramaturgy, mean? Beginning from Hare's public comments about his recent plays, we can derive a two-part definition that will supply the foundation for the reading of the Seattle production of *Stuff Happens* that follows. If the history play (or any play, for that matter) results in controversy, it is because it confronts audiences with the plausibility of an alternative epistemological paradigm – whether *what is*

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known or *how it is known* – that redefines general assumptions or attitudes. This challenge usually meets resistance, if not outright acrimony, because it threatens earlier understanding as well as the values and beliefs derived from that understanding.

Writing on another regional performance of *Stuff Happens* in pre-production, Christopher Rawson of the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* summarizes Hare talking about *Via Dolorosa*, his 1998 monologue regarding the Israeli–Palestinian conflict:

> 'I'm absolutely used to hearing, "I really didn't want to see this",' [Hare] says. . . . And yet when they tell him, it's to admit that they're glad they went after all.[6]

Implicit in this initial reticence, no doubt, is anxiety about being confronted with a new paradigm for the Middle Eastern conflict that may threaten or invalidate previous opinions. Noteworthy, too, is the second of the two-part definition of controversy: the confrontation is not intended to be polarizing, not meant to turn an argument into an impasse. Instead it should lead to conversation, to a willingness to debate or discuss the issue that is commonly but (in Hare's view) mistakenly understood by the public. He highlights this latter point in regards to *Stuff Happens*: 'This happens to be a slice of great Shakespearean history that is completely contemporary and helps people discuss what's happening in their country now.'[7] In Hare's dramaturgy, then, controversy begins with provocation but leads towards praxis.

The Dramaturgical Challenge

Though *Stuff Happens* represents a departure from the way Hare has dramatized history in previous plays,[8] its ambition remains consistent with his 1981 comments about the history play. That is, *Stuff Happens* unfolds by putting the public statements of the Bush administration following the attacks of 11 September 2001 and during the run-up to the War in Iraq (the epistemologically 'known') alongside imagined backroom scenes (the alternative paradigm of what's 'known') in order to challenge the accepted history.

Considered briefly without reference to the Seattle production, the play's structural and thematic investment in producing the above-mentioned controversy is easily illustrated by discussing two early scenes. Following the destruction of the World Trade Center, audiences hear a montage of public statements by President Bush during Scene Six, the first of which was an effort to define the attack: 'Freedom itself was attacked this morning by a faceless coward. And freedom will be defended.'[9] And then, tellingly, we hear the affronted entitlement that would ultimately define US foreign policy: 'We will make no distinction between the terrorists who committed these acts and those who harbour them.'[10]

Sombre and resolute, the tone of these remarks speaks to national tragedy, a starkly different tone from the buffoonery of the preceding scene. During Scene Five, Hare imagines the first National Security Council meeting of the Bush administration – which of course took place *before* 11 September 2001. Throughout the meeting George Tenet of the CIA tries to get administration officials to consider an aerial photograph of an Iraqi factory believed to be producing weapons of mass destruction (WMD). The running gag of the scene is Tenet's helplessness to get anyone even to acknowledge the information: 'If we can all study this photograph,' he says; then, 'Here's the photograph'; and then desperately, 'I hope everyone can see the photograph.'[11] Throughout the scene, Condoleezza Rice talks over him about the 'threat' to the Middle East being Iraq. Only after this premise is accepted does attention turn to the photograph.

Individually, these scenes highlight discordant perspectives in the Bush administration: the first determined and undaunted, the second feckless and foolhardy. Together, they redefine the truths about this administration that Hare contends need to be acknowledged and confronted in public discourse. Tenet's photograph, for instance, becomes a trope for the empirical evidence unacknowledged (because it ran counter to the administration's ambitions) and/or manipulated (because it served their ends) that contributed to

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the marketing of the war to senators, congressmen and women, and their constituents.

Likewise, Rice's insistence (with which both Rumsfeld and Cheney agree during the scene) on defining the threat *before* considering the evidence foregrounds the ideological myopia fuelling the administration's ambition towards Iraq long before the World Trade Center fell. After 9/11, this myopia only became more pronounced, as is suggested by another scene included in *Stuff Happens*, when Paul Wolfowitz and Rice insist that Hans Blix go to Iraq with the assumption that there are WMD and that his job is to 'produce' evidence for this conclusion. Contrasted with the public statements of the Bush administration, these sorts of scenes 'frame' audience understanding of the Bush administration (or, clearly, Tony Blair's administration when performed in London) in ways intended to undermine and then redefine assumptions of what was known about the run-up to the Iraq War.

This dramaturgical challenge to epistemology is integral to *Stuff Happens*, as suggested during the opening scene in the 2004 published edition.[12] The actor announces that 'the Inevitable' will become, presumably because of the play, merely what happens 'by chance'; and that the 'Real' will 'strike you as really absurd'.[13] Most importantly, 'Unless you exclaim – "There must be some mistake" – you must be mistaken'.[14]

The Contrast with *Rachel Corrie*

Considering this structural and thematic emphasis on challenging the 'known', it is easy to understand why Seattle reviewers celebrated *Stuff Happens* for its potential to induce controversy regarding the Iraq War. Implicitly, this means making audiences recognize their and others' 'mistakes' about the war, a recognition which may produce acrimony at first, but then turns that acrimony into conversation. But something curious occurred when Seattle's ACT staged *Stuff Happens* in 2007. Despite the loudly trumpeted insistence on *Stuff Happens*'s capacity to provoke public debate or discussion, little controversy of the first kind – provocation – emerged during or following the production, an absence particularly striking when Hare's play is contrasted with *My Name is Rachel Corrie*. Telling the story of a young woman who went to Israel to protest the ill treatment of Palestinians in her own words – her letters and her diary, edited and compiled by Alan Rickman and Katharine Viner – *My Name is Rachel Corrie* made its Pacific Northwest debut in 2006 at the Seattle Repertory Theater, not far from ACT, having been the subject of voluble protests in the Northwest. The Va'ad Ha Rabnim of Greater Seattle, a consortium of Orthodox Jewish Rabbis, criticized it for 'falsely cast[ing] Corrie's death "as a murder while demonizing Israel".'[15]

Likewise, the Pacific Northwest Anti-Defamation League took 'out an ad in the Rep's programme . . . defending Israel's Gaza policies as essential security measures'.[16] Leaflets were distributed during the run of *My Name is Rachel Corrie* as well as other Seattle Repertory productions during that season. Other groups, such as the Palestine Solidarity Committee, defended Corrie's 'noble commitment' to 'justice, peace, and nonviolent resistance', and thereby raised the possibility of turning provocation *through theatre* into public debate.[17] Contrasted with *My Name is Rachel Corrie, Stuff Happens* produced hardly a murmur in Seattle.

Why Hare's play failed to provoke any public controversy is plain enough from the circumstances of this production. Performed four years after the 2003 invasion, *Stuff Happens* inherited a political climate in which much of the administration's rhetoric about Iraq had already been discredited. No WMD found despite the administration's *a priori* adamancy; no easy victory over Hussein's Baath Party or being welcomed as liberators by the Iraqi public despite assurances to that effect. So Wolfowitz's 'We're talking about going in and establishing democracy. . . . [Iraq] will break very easily' was met by the harsh laughter of public condemnation during the ACT production.[18] Most of the revelations about the mendacity or incapability of the Bush administration, then, have become part of public consciousness, thanks to journalistic projects such as Bob Woodward's

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Bush at War (2003), Thomas E. Ricks's *Fiasco: the American Military Adventure in Iraq* (2006), and Michael R. Gordon's *Cobra II: the Inside Story of the Invasion and Occupation of Iraq* (2007).

Not surprisingly, US national opinion had turned against the war in the interim between the 2004 production of *Stuff Happens* in London and the 2007 in Seattle – a city that was at the forefront of this disapproval from the beginning. As far back as 2005, Seattle saw sporadic protesting against the war when much of the nation was still overcome with the surge of patriotism after the 9/11 attacks that gave licence to the administration's plans for Iraq. During the intervening years, protests in Seattle – and elsewhere in the US – have grown more organized and more voluble, including groups that gathered at Fort Lewis, fifty miles south of Seattle, to protest the deployment of the army's First Stryker brigade in 2006; and the World Can't Wait staging a 'die-off' by having protesters abruptly collapse 'dead' on the sidewalks of Seattle's Westlake Center in 2007. Against this backdrop, we recognize the significance of Hare's remarks about *Stuff Happens* performed in the US: 'I think we've passed the stage where you congratulate the artistic director for his bravery in doing it.'[19]

Controversy as Commodity

Left unanswered, however, are the more pressing questions that I want to consider in the following pages. Why was there such enthusiasm for defining Seattle's *Stuff Happens* as a source of controversy? What does it suggest to 'market' Hare's play as controversial far past its capacity to incite that reaction? Implicit in questions such as these is the two-part definition of controversy stipulated at the beginning of this paper. I don't mean to suggest that provocation of public disapproval (manifested as protests or otherwise) is a necessary requirement for praxis: discussion, no doubt, can turn to activism without acrimony. Nor do I mean to suggest that provocation is sufficient for praxis: the debate surrounding *My Name is Rachel Corrie* will not, unto itself, result in efforts to resolve the Israeli–Palestinian crisis. What I do contend is that failure to produce the first part of controversy during the Seattle production of *Stuff Happens* is symptomatic of failure in the second: that is, neither David Hare's play nor ACT's production provoked much discomfort or dissension in Seattle audiences because neither intended any meaningful praxis. Instead, play and production implicitly reinforce complacency by first turning controversy into entertainment – and therefore confirming ideological or political beliefs instead of challenging them – and second by transforming controversy into commodity.

In many ways, my consideration of *Stuff Happens* in Seattle is guided by Wendy S. Hesford's 'Staging Terror', which considered how artistic representation as in *Inconvenient Evidence* and *Guantanamo: Honor Bound to Defend Freedom* can position audiences in relation to the ethical-legal crisis of terrorism.[20] I'm sensitive to the jeopardy of implicitly endorsing the Bush administration's conflation of the 'War on Terror' and the Iraq War. But I want to consider the question of Hesford's essay – how can theatre frame audiences in response to ethical-legal crisis – in regards to *Stuff Happens*, because doing so will reveal play and production as a cautionary tale not merely about the Iraq War but further about political theatre's efforts to respond to that war.

Beginning from the attending press for *Stuff Happens* at ACT, Hesford's question may be initially answered as something like a public reckoning about the Iraq War, both the dark history that precipitated the invasion and the muddled future with which we are left. In a press release available on ACT's website, the play was described or celebrated as delivering truths the Bush administration had long since denied: 'In this compelling political drama, award-winning playwright David Hare takes you behind closed doors to the high-stakes wheeling and dealing that led to the invasion.'

Noteworthy here are Stephen Bottoms's remarks about Hare's (ab)use of unacknowledged sources during the scenes in which Hare admits, in the Author's Note, to having

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used his imagination and thus may perpetuate the very problem at the heart of the administration's rhetoric that led to the war.[21] In the press release, however, Bottoms's concern is erased and replaced with the promise of verisimilitude, a welcome rejoinder to the administration's obfuscation.

This contrast is further emphasized during an opinion piece published in the *Seattle Times* just before the play's opening by Alex Alben, a member of the Board of Directors at ACT, in which he observes, 'I'm encouraged to see *Stuff Happens* hold a clear mirror up to the making of our foreign policy nightmare in Iraq.'[22]

Implicit in ACT's press release is that this mirror reflects upon those directly and indirectly involved in the disastrous war:

> Shakespearean in scope, this blistering ensemble show pulls no punches. And in Hare's telling, none of us is off the hook.

Here we find the promise of provocation that serves controversy, a point stressed by the use of the first-person plural: all of the audience, or all of 'us', will have to face our image in the mirror and acknowledge accountability. Thus emerged a horizon of expectations about *Stuff Happens* that implicitly located the play in the anti-war sentiment within the Seattle community.

The Complicity of the Governed

This prominence of political reckoning was amplified once audiences arrived at ACT.[23] In the programme, they found a glossy inset of well-known quotations or quotations from well-known public figures superimposed over a washed-out picture of the White House. Among the quotes were Madeleine Albright's admonitory remarks about not criticizing or condemning all Muslims for the sins of Osama bin Laden or al Qaeda; Winston Churchill's warning on the 'unforeseeable and uncontrollable events' of war; and, of particular note, Abraham Lincoln's 'Nearly all men can stand adversity but if you want to test a man's character, give him power.'[24] The visual rhetoric of the inset was unmistakable: the voices of statesmen and women, scholars, and artists became a rebuke of the White House's policy about the Iraq War.

That this rebuke was not limited to President Bush's administration, but extended towards all, was implied by the inclusion of George Bernard Shaw's 'Democracy is a device that ensures that we shall be governed by no better than we deserve'.[25] This point not only echoed the promise in the press release of *Stuff Happens* holding all of us accountable, but implicitly reaffirmed the importance of provocation as part of controversy. Most importantly, the reprimand of administration officials and average Americans alike was subsumed within the production of *Stuff Happens*, which metaphorically became the vehicle for public outrage about the war as well as personal acknowledgement of responsibility – a point underscored by the first and last of these quotations, coming from Hare's remarks on theatre's sociopolitical function. The second may be the most noteworthy since it stressed: 'The main value of the theatre is that it's a place where society can go to take sober account of itself, and see itself truly.'[26]

Beyond these trappings of controversy, it's ambiguous how much opportunity there was for Seattle's 'society' to 'take sober account of itself' because of the way that *Stuff Happens* frames US reception in terms of political affiliation. The Artistic Director of ACT maintains, again in the programme, that the 'concerned public, left-leaning or right-leaning' had real need of Hare's dramaturgical confrontation.[27] But *Stuff Happens* divides and addresses audiences in regards to accountability *along precisely such political lines* in two complementary ways. The first involves using metonymic representation as definition. During the fourth of the five monologues interspersed through *Stuff Happens*, an angry British person (a woman at ACT) describes being in Saks Fifth Avenue when the bombing of Baghdad began.

> 'Isn't it wonderful?' says a saleswoman to the British woman. 'At last we're finally hitting back.'[28]

When the British woman explains the non-sequitur implicit in attacking Iraq because of

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From the ACT production of *Stuff Happens*. Above: Colin Powell (Charles Dumas, standing, back to camera) explains matters to a seated George W. Bush (R. Hamilton Wright). Below: Bush with Dick Cheney (Michael Winters). Photos: Chris Bennion.



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9/11, her argument is met with patronizing indifference: 'You're not American. You don't understand.'[29]

Staged in London, this scene may have helped to define the problem as an American crisis. Staged in the US, however, this scene shows those who were (and still are) seduced by the rhetoric of the Bush administration, in this case those who would be considered die-hard conservatives and not liberal audiences who have demonstrated growing frustration with the administration and the war, as have many living in Seattle. If this dividing of audiences along political lines wasn't clear enough, *Stuff Happens* then cites statistics, which were updated by Hare during revisions made when the play was scheduled for production at the Mark Taper Forum. These statistics make the political divisions underlying the play's political reckoning glaringly obvious:

> To this day, 47 per cent of the American electorate still believe that Saddam Hussein was directly involved in the planning of the 9/11 attacks. 44 per cent believe the hijackers were Iraqi.[30]

For 'right-leaning' audiences or those enthralled by the rhetoric of patriotism that followed the 9/11 attacks, *Stuff Happens* can potentially do just what Hare defined as the method and ambition of his history play more than two decades earlier and which he has reaffirmed in remarks on *Stuff Happens*. Through the deflating and penetrating humour of contrasting public and private statements of the administration, such audiences are made to recognize – at least within the argument of the play – that the history that they believed true about Iraq (WMD, links to terrorism, etc.) were somewhere between mistaken and absurd.

George W. Bush as the Joke of the Family

But for 'left-leaning' audiences – who constituted 53–56 per cent of Americans during 2005, according to Hare's updated math, and was probably much higher in Seattle in 2007 – the play merely invites laughter. And laugh they did: early, often, and enthusiastically, though the laughter had more of the quality of ridicule than revelation, more *Saturday Night Live* than George Bernard Shaw.

The best illustration comes during a war cabinet meeting at Camp David following the 9/11 attacks. Initially, this scene focused on the strategic and political debate about invading Afghanistan or Iraq, but the meeting breaks for dinner when the wives of Bush and Rumsfeld arrive. After dinner, George W. and Laura Bush assemble a jigsaw puzzle of the Bush family standing in front of the White House with the President noting with some enthusiasm, 'That looks like you, Laura. That looks like a bit of you, sweetheart.'[31]

Though ACT's audience was chuckling amusedly, Laura's reassuring but condescending reply underscored the joke: 'I'll work on the columns, you work on the people.'[32] Contrasted with the gravity of international affairs and war, this punchline worked on numerous levels, but nearly all suggested the intellectual limits of President Bush, who sounded childlike and naive during a moment that would determine the fate of hundreds of thousands of US and Iraqi people in years to come.

This lampooning effect was compounded by the casting for ACT's production, which included R. Hamilton Wright as President Bush. A mainstay in Seattle theatre, Wright was strong in the role, garnering praise from many reviews[33] and finding just the right inflection of Bush's staccato speaking rhythm and Texas accent without resorting to caricature. But Wright was notably the shortest male actor in the cast and therefore looked comically, even grotesquely, diminutive when sharing the stage with Frank Corrado (Rumsfeld) or Charles Dumas (Colin Powell), both of whom are notably taller men.

Casting someone of Wright's stature as President Bush represented a departure from the 2005 Mark Taper Forum production which included Keith Carradine in the role. Notably, Carradine played Bush a year after playing Wild Bill Hickok on the HBO series *Deadwood*, a role that most likely ghosted his performance in *Stuff Happens*.[34] The effect of putting Wright in the role, even if unintended, was to make President Bush less formidable and more childlike, someone easily

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bullied by the forceful wills of Cheney and Rumsfeld.

This effect was even more pronounced during the scenes with Mark Chamberlain (Tony Blair), who towered over Wright and made Bush appear the Napoleon-like figure of numerous farces: playing at foreign affairs without the knowledge or ability of Blair.[35] Visually, casting Wright as Bush reaffirmed the punchline from the scene at Camp David – his diminutive status suggesting his intellectual limits – and was consistent with Hare's dramaturgy. In fact, much about the play and production seemed intent on confirming the derogatory exposition attending President Bush's entrance into *Stuff Happens*: 'The elder son of a Kennebunkport dynasty, George W. Bush is considered the joke of the family.'[36] Welcomed by Seattle's audiences with hearty laughter, this caricaturing nonetheless suggests problems about framing audiences in relation to the Iraq War.

Unlike conservative audiences who have to reconcile the history they believed they knew with the redefined history dramatized in *Stuff Happens*, Seattle's principally liberal audience had little opportunity or impetus to 'take sober account' of themselves during ACT's production because of two correlated problems. The first arose from the previously discussed lampooning of administration officials by the production and the play, a strategy that does nothing to challenge how liberal audiences know the Iraq War. If anything, it just confirmed the most derogatory attitudes among liberals about the administration.

Again: when the administration considers which country to invade, during the scene with George Tenet trying desperately to get anyone to take notice of his aerial photograph, Tenet becomes a bumbling fool who not only gave us the memorably erroneous conclusion about WMD in Iraq (his 'slam dunk' remark) but also failed to anticipate the terrorism of al Qaeda. And during the same scene and elsewhere in *Stuff Happens* Condoleezza Rice becomes a Machiavellian manipulator of information who inveigles and obfuscates at every turn, confirming what many suspected after her infamous parsing of the distinction between 'report'



George W. Bush with Condoleezza Rice (Tracy Michelle Hughes) and Colin Powell. Photo: Chris Bennion.

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and 'memo' before Congress.[37] But most notably, George W. Bush appears as what Lenin called a 'convenient idiot'.

Attendant with such *ad hominem* attacks is the second shortcoming of *Stuff Happens* as history play: the lack of any character to represent liberal audiences or a liberal point of view. The one possibility is the saleswoman who works and presumably lives in New York City instead of a conservative region like the South. But this woman is more caricature than character, never onstage, and hardly described long enough for audiences to recognize anything of themselves in her. This failure to represent and thereby interrogate the perspective of liberal US audiences is surprising in a play that goes out of its way to include many different perspectives.

The Danger of Liberal Complacency

Considered in terms of Hesford's question about framing reception, this failure proves especially troubling. Despite promises by ACT that *Stuff Happens* lets no one off the hook, Hare's play encourages liberal audiences to defer accountability for the war in Iraq onto the Bush administration and, more notably, *not* to consider whatever responsibility, however indirect, they may share for not resisting the administration's ambitions loudly enough in 2003.

This was, in fact, precisely what local reviews suggested that audiences take away from the production. Joe Adcock of the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* compares the administration to a 'lynch mob' and 'a gang capable of unleashing catastrophic violence'.[38] Berson of the *Seattle Times* didn't bother with analogy: '*Stuff Happens* lays responsibility for the war directly on Bush's squared shoulders,' she told readers.[39]

Attending Hare's play in Seattle became a kind of scapegoating during which all the sins regarding the Iraq War – including sins of omission – are heaped upon the Bush administration and thereby extirpated. Hare's dramaturgy invites this sort of conclusion with its closing stagecraft. Toward the play's end, administration officials momentarily take centre stage, confess their mistakes, and then vanish. Wolfowitz repeats his public contention that the war would be 'self-financing' only to have an actor (standing in for the playwright presumably) offer the following correction: 'The true figure is now likely to be nearer a trillion.' Then Wolfowitz walks offstage.[40]

Next, Rumsfeld says he doesn't remember if he anticipated a 'robust insurgency' among the possibilities following the invasion, and then he, too, leaves the stage. And this process continues through Cheney, Powell, Rice, Bush, and finally Blair – all of them having taken collective responsibility for the war upon themselves and been, metaphorically, driven out of 'society'. Suggesting that liberal audiences blame the administration obviously works against producing meaningful controversy that works towards some sort of praxis. Never provoked towards anything but laughter, liberal audiences perhaps leave *Stuff Happens* rather complacent, even satisfied with themselves.

The Iraqi Exile's Indictment

The exception to this almost congratulatory situating of liberal audiences comes in the monologue following the evanescence of administration officials. The last of five monologues interspersed within the play, this one centres on an Iraqi exile who speaks in tones of dismay and derision about what followed the invasion:

> Donald Rumsfeld said, 'Stuff happens.' It seemed to me the most racist remark I had ever heard.[41]

After a pause, as if collecting himself, John Farrage (at ACT) provides further summary:

> A vacuum was created. Was it created deliberately? I cannot comprehend. They came to save us, but they had no plans.[42]

Regardless of the intentionality, the effect was the same: 'Our dead are not counted.'[43] The beginning of the monologue continues the indictment of the administration for its hubris; but, towards the end, the topic of this

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indictment shifts noticeably when the exile talks about how Iraq became such a tragedy:

> Basically it's the story of a nation that has failed in only one thing. . . . It failed to take charge of itself. And that meant that the worst person in the country took charge.[44]

Even though 'nation' refers to Iraq, the non-specific reference unhinges the remarks so that they extend toward other nations, especially the United States. The indictment was obvious: since US citizens, liberal or conservative, did not take control of their nation's activity or destiny through voting or activism or journalism during the run-up to the invasion, the 'worst person' in the country took charge. In effect, the tragedy of the Iraq War emerges, in part, from national complacency.

More notable, perhaps, is the subsequent warning: 'Until this nation takes charge of itself, it will continue to suffer.' And then, invoking the second-person so that theatre-goers are addressed individually, Hare has the Iraqi exile deliver more non-specific lines that invite us to 'take sober account'. That left ACT's audience moved and impressed, judging from the applause: 'If you don't do it yourself, this is what you get.'[45]

Unfortunately, the ACT audience were neither troubled nor chastened by this indictment. This monologue did not, for example, provoke the immediate response that followed the fourth monologue – by a Palestinian academic who describes Palestinians as the Jews of the Jews – when performed at the Mark Taper Forum: loud booing that briefly derailed the performance.[46] Nor did this final monologue provoke the deferred discomfort that emerged at ACT during a post-production discussion, which again centred on the fourth monologue's depiction of Israel–Palestinian relations.[47]

Why was there no outward reaction from audiences to being included in the indictment of complacency? Probably because *Stuff Happens* mediates this indictment with the previously discussed division of its audiences in the United States along political lines. The last words before the monologue begins are the statistics that formally define this division: 53 per cent of the US public believes that the administration exaggerated links between Iraq and al Qaeda and 47 per cent thinks that belief in such links is still justified.

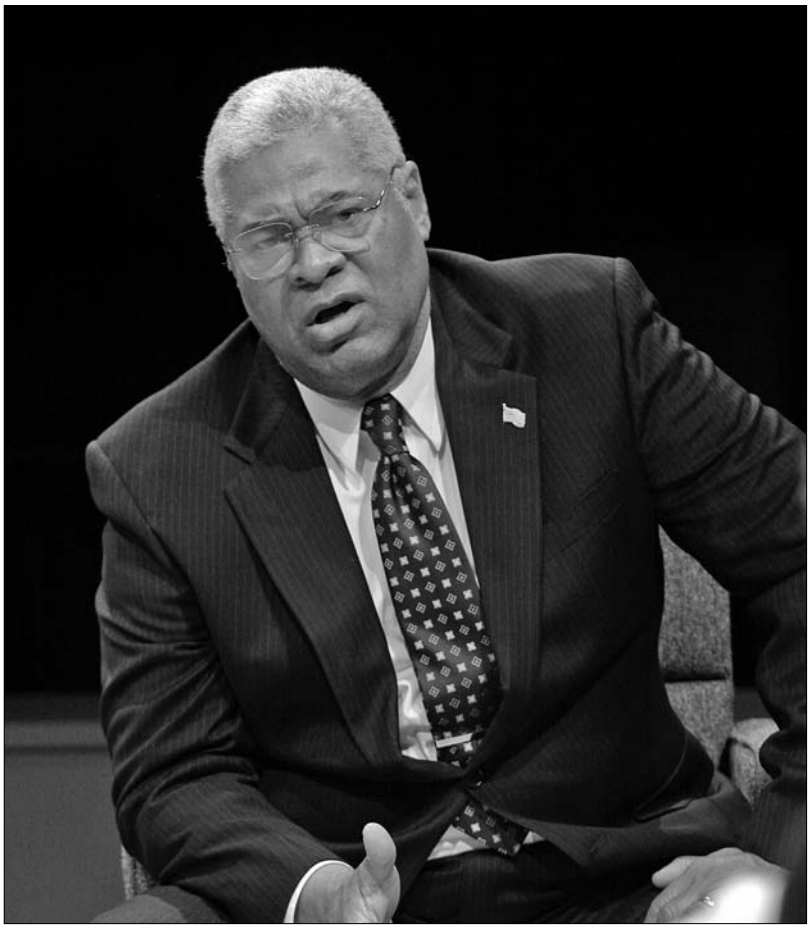
This unfortunate contrast of documentary material and dramatic monologue constrains the accountability demanded during the monologue: those who have failed to take control of the nation's destiny, the play suggests, are those who continue to be enthralled by the administration's rhetoric – not, notably, the liberal audiences reproving the administration with their laughter. In effect, this monologue becomes another form of scapegoating, in this case, of the 'right-leaning' members of society who continue to support the President. This framing undermines the suggestion that audiences – the 'you' of the monologue's language – must resolve the problem. And, it leaves liberal audiences with the moral high ground since they are not now, if they ever were, duped by the rhetoric.

The Absence of a Forum for Debate

Seattle's ACT production, then, exposed several shortcomings in *Stuff Happens* in regards to Hare's ambitions for the history play. When *Stuff Happens* debuted in London in 2004, much closer to the history at issue, it provoked enough public controversy for the *Guardian* to run an article entitled 'For or Against?' in which British notables loudly voiced opinions on the veracity of the play's criticism and the legitimacy of the Iraq War.[48] This was, no doubt, precisely what Hare hoped would emerge from the play: debate about how and why the war occurred. Nearly a year later and a world away at the Mark Taper Forum in LA, *Stuff Happens* provoked US audiences in its treatment of the Israeli–Palestinian crisis but not, significantly, the Iraq War.

After its Broadway run and after moving into regional production in Seattle, *Stuff Happens* hardly ruffled a feather, much less produced controversy, about the most polarizing issue in US politics of the day. The different reactions in the US and the UK

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Right: Charles Dumas as Colin Powell.

Opposite page, top: George W. Bush (R. Hamilton Wright) with Dick Cheney (Michael Winters).

Opposite page, bottom: Cheney with Donald Rumsfeld (Frank Corrado).

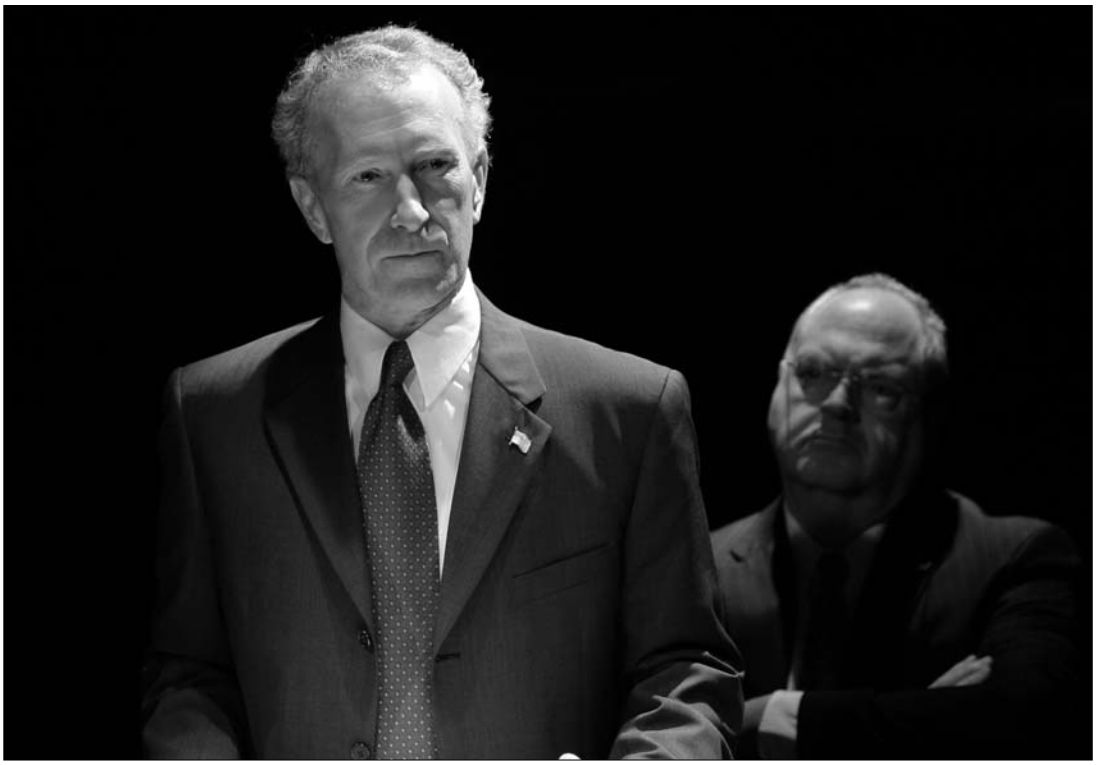
Photos: Chris Bennion.

certainly owe something to the different traditions of theatre in regards to social criticism, since the US generally values theatre as entertainment rather than a forum for public debate. Nevertheless, the ACT production demonstrated the short shelf-life of *Stuff Happens* in regards to its ability for provoking controversy because of the way Hare envisions and defines audiences beyond London (this even though he made revisions to the text for the US).

The play's failure to 'stir up great controversy' may additionally speak to problems of the documentary theatre form. A considerable number of of plays in this form have been written and produced during the last decade, many about the Iraq War or the War on Terror. As Hesford argues about *Guantanamo: Honor Bound to Defend Freedom*, many of these plays have struggled, first, to shake audiences 'out of complacency', and second, to link the criticism put forth with praxis.[49] *Stuff Happens* suggests further evidence of an exhaustion of the form, though to debate that is beyond the scope of my argument.

Instead, this remaining section considers how the ACT production compounded the shortcomings of *Stuff Happens* by turning the laudable, if mostly latent, criticisms of the play into entertainment as well as the dangers for political theatre suggested therein. The problem began with ACT's minimizing the number of post-production events that could have linked Hare's play with public debate, if not political praxis. Limited to just three nights, the minimum number attending any play at ACT, these discussions were open forums for everything from acting to activism. They were not, notably, connected with any of the protest groups working in Seattle like ANSWER (Act Now to Stop War and End Racism) or The World Can't Wait, or

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centred around any of the highly public protests playing out in Seattle. Neither were they connected with the case of Lt Ehren Watada, the Fort Lewis Army officer who refused to be deployed with his unit to Iraq because of what he insists is the illegality of the Iraq War, a case that has produced much controversy in Seattle and across the United States.[50]

In not scheduling such events for *Stuff Happens*, ACT made a break from previous years when it cast itself as a cultural and social nexus for public debate on controversial issues. During the 2006 season, for instance, ACT's production of Caryl Churchill's *A Number* was supported by a panel discussion entitled 'To Clone or Not to Clone: Is That the Question?' led by the Women's Bioethics Project. There, this discussion had the potential to transform questions raised or attitudes challenged by Churchill's play about the ethics of cloning and the sanctity of human life into the public debate necessary for society to 'take sober account of itself'.

Couching the production in the context of a public debate and thus making theatre the opportunity or impetus for praxis likewise characterized ACT's world premiere of *Mitzi's Abortion* by Elizabeth Hoffman during the same season. There, the production was complemented by a discussion led by the Northwest Women's Law Center that took on the politically charged topic of women's reproductive rights.

The Play in Blogosphere – and over Beer

Given this history of turning a controversial play into a forum on the controversy, the failure to supply attending events for *Stuff Happens* is disappointing. Notably, denied the opportunity that would have been provided by these events, audiences were left uncertain about the ultimate message of *Stuff Happens*. In a blog posted on *Seattlest*, Jeremy Barker highlights the play's efforts to answer what will become the fundamental question on this period in his estimation: why did we invade Iraq? Finding Hare's play enjoyable, Barker nevertheless underscores his disappointment: 'By the time the lights came on . . . and the actors took their well deserved bow, we were left wondering, what really we were taking away.'[51] 'Was it Rice that persuaded Bush? Was it his own decision?' asks Barker, 'Did you actually believe in WMD?'[52] Never answering these questions, *Stuff Happens* leaves Barker with the opinion, 'You leave the theatre no more informed than when you went in.'[53]

It should be stressed, of course, that asking the questions posed by Barker is one way that the play can provoke discussion. But since ACT provided no forum for considering such questions, it left those such as Barker to guess at instead of debate answers. Another example comes from Janna Cawrse who published a blog about attending ACT's *Stuff Happens* on the website of the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*. Like Barker, Cawrse seemed to be searching for a forum in which she could discuss the questions emerging from the play, even linking her blog to the aforementioned *Guardian* article, 'For or Against?' Some of these questions posed by Cawrse were rather tongue-in-cheek: 'Like, is Cheney really such a frat boy'? and 'What if the real President Bush could deliver his lines as unhaltingly as R. Hamilton Wright?'[54] But perhaps these are the best questions that follow from *Stuff Happens* when it is produced without any forum for addressing those questions.

Worse still is the possibility that Seattle's *Stuff Happens* would be framed by the remaining 'special events' attending every ACT production: 'beer tasting' sponsored by a local beer club; 'wine tasting' accompanied by 'hors d'oeuvres', and 'drinks-and-a-show' which promises cocktails at happy hour prices. Included in the advertising of *Stuff Happens*, these events outnumber the post-production discussions that did happen and, on the one hand, locate Hare's play in escapism – getting away from the office for a few drinks and a play that just happens to be about the Iraq War – rather than engagement with controversy.

On the other hand *Stuff Happens* – controversy and all – may implicitly become part of the promised gustatory satisfaction attendant with consumption in addition to being

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framed by these events. Either way, this marketing of Hare's play suggests a particularly literal meaning of the phrase 'culinary theatre', or theatre which is intended for bourgeois consumption – which is what *Stuff Happens* became in Seattle when played before liberal audiences and without a forum to discuss concerns.

However much the play was advertised as impetus for controversy, the production never moved the audience in attendance in Seattle towards redefining their position about the war and therefore the controversy surrounding *Stuff Happens* becomes something to be consumed.

Hare's play, then, was not just sold *with* or *through* consumption (of beer, wine, and hors d'oeuvres) but *as* consumption, as a chance for consumption of controversy for audiences hungry for an opportunity to show their displeasure with the administration – as Cawrse does when she emphasizes how 'maddening' this administration has been – or to have a sort of reckoning with or in history – as Barker suggests with his emphasis on the questions of why the invasion occurred. Though the problem certainly begins with Hare's play's failure to confront liberal audiences in the US, a larger problem emerges from the failure to link *this* production to public debate, suggesting that the stress on controversy in the attending press for *Stuff Happens* may have been nothing more than marketing.

Stuff Happens and the Culture Industry

Instead of producing controversy that might redefine the history of the Iraq War, *Stuff Happens* in Seattle redefined controversy as part of the 'culture industry'. Originally as described by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947), the 'culture industry' defines the concomitant economic and ideological pressures shaping products 'for consumption by masses' and determining 'the nature of that consumption'.[55] Drawing both high and low art into itself, the culture industry turns all into commodity, thereby stripping a controversial play, or controversy itself, of political ambition.

Using the culture industry as a lens to examine ACT's *Stuff Happens* demonstrates what went wrong with this production and the dangers inherent therein. When advertising Hare's play, ACT overtly stressed the its controversial quality and implicitly situated the play within the anti-war sentiment of the Seattle community. But towards what end? Without any links to anti-war protests, the groups sponsoring those protests, or at the very least forums organized around those protests, the emphasis on controversy seems more like a way of appealing to the predisposition of Seattle audiences, who have been at the forefront of anti-war sentiment in the US, in order to fill theatre seats rather than becoming a nexus for public debate.

This marketing of controversy was probably a product of the increasing economic pressures on US regional theatre that follow from cuts to the National Endowment of Arts and federal funding policies.[56] Doubly felt in Seattle, where ACT was still recovering from a 'disastrous' 2002 season,[57] this meant that the production never intended to provoke public controversy, only the façade thereof. Confronted with pressures of the culture industry, then, ACT took to selling rather than supplying controversy.

Redefining controversy as commodity has perilous consequences for theatre intending to make audiences 'take sober account' of themselves about anything, but especially the Iraq War, that many US citizens have simply tuned out. Because *Stuff Happens* scapegoats administration officials for the Iraq War crisis and because ACT minimized events that may have encouraged praxis, the Seattle production was more purgative than provocative. It left audiences with little to consider, confront, or resolve. Instead, they were told to feel that they were part of the growing frustration with the war without translating that frustration into action, to consume the controversy that was emphasized in marketing Hare's play.

The real peril, then, was not merely that the ACT production of *Stuff Happens* failed to provide opportunity for praxis but further that it may actually have undermined the possibility of praxis. Consumption, after all,

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involves not just the mindless devouring of culinary delights but additionally an exhaustion of resources: to consume something, like the controversy about the Iraq War, is to finish that thing.

Laudable Ambition, Listless Results

Seattle audiences were reassured by the marketing of Hare's play that they were taking part in a real-world controversy without any link to real-world activism. Instead, the play stood in for activism or just meaningful discussion about why we invaded Iraq. Told implicitly that all they had to do was laugh at the administration figures brought onto the stage, audiences perhaps left the theatre convinced that they had done their part in confronting the history and future of the war in Iraq simply by attending a night of theatre.

Returning to Hesford's questions about how theatre frames audiences in relationship to international crisis, we reach two troubling conclusions about *Stuff Happens* at ACT. Members of the audience were left uncertain how to pursue questions they either brought to the theatre or that were invoked by *Stuff Happens*; others may have walked away satisfied with themselves and the world. Whichever was more the common response, it points to the following: in the case of *Stuff Happens,* theatre became the *end* rather than the *beginning* of controversy.

Moving towards the conclusion of this argument, I want briefly to contrast David Hare's *Stuff Happens* in Seattle with George Bernard Shaw's *Heartbreak House* (1919) in London almost a century earlier. Written during the First World War but not produced until after the armistice, *Heartbreak House* was Shaw's withering reply to an England stumbling headlong into a calamitous war at the beginning of the last century. Like Hare's play, Shaw's condemns the leaders of the nation specifically through metaphors of sailing, navigation, and the ship of state: 'The captain is in his bunk, drinking bottled ditch water,' cries Captain Shotover. 'She will strike and sink and split'.[58]

Noteworthy, though, was Shaw's decision to leave those leaders offstage and to focus his true venom upon what we he calls in the Preface to *Heartbreak House* the 'leisure class' of England – those most capable of reining in ship's captains drunken on hubris, and who were, instead, too busy with indulgences in fantasy and flirtation. Though Shaw includes everyone from bohemians to businessmen among this class, the most important character for purposes of my argument may be the socialist Mazzini Dunn. During the final act of *Heartbreak House*, after being asked pointedly why he never did anything to alter England's course, Dunn offers the following:

> Every year I expected a revolution, or some fright smashup: it seemed impossible that we could blunder and muddle any longer.[59]

Because no revolution emerged from his activism or from the nation's blundering, Dunn concludes that his efforts had been unnecessary and implicitly endorses the status quo: 'Nothing ever happens,' he says with a shrug.[60] Within moments, however, the distant hum of German zeppelins can be heard; and, while characters scramble about, tempting their own destruction by turning on house lights and taking refuge in pits full of dynamite, the humming grows louder and louder until it drowns out the folly of Mazzini's words and others' lives with the promise of annihilation.

The argument of *Heartbreak House* is that the catastrophe of war comes not *while* the leisure class indulges in escapism but *because* of this indulgence, an argument which has become as much cautionary tale as artefact of Shaw's contempt. This argument, in fact, proves just as relevant today about another war, as Jon Jory knew when he directed a revival of *Heartbreak House* at Seattle's Intiman Theater in 2006.[61] The middle class of the US may have fewer privileges than the leisure class of England, but many have busied themselves with indulgences and escapism while neoconservatives have run the country aground in Iraq. Instead of stressing this complicity, like *Heartbreak House*, *Stuff Happens* at ACT may have subsidized this indulgence thanks to the marketing of Hare's play as controversial past its capacity to produce real controversy, or at

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least without the commitment to attending events that would provoke and promote debate regarding the war.

Watching *Stuff Happens* and laughing at the Bush administration only provides the illusion, pleasant and satisfying at it may be, of confronting the fiasco of the Iraq War. Worse still, consuming the controversy of *Stuff Happens* locates theatregoing, at least in Seattle, within Dunn's litany of activities undertaken with laudable ambition that end with listless results.

The production of Hare's play in Seattle, in other words, suggests as many questions about the capacity of theatre to confront audiences with real-world crises as it does about the crisis in Iraq. Are theatregoers today, like Shaw's characters, dancing a waltz while zeppelins approach? Has theatre become so imbricated within the culture industry that it turns controversy into commodity without noticing? Until these questions have been addressed in theatre or performance studies, it seems doubtful that theatre will fulfil the mandate that Hare invokes: providing the venue for society 'to take sober account of itself'. Likewise with the truth recognized by Shaw in the quote included within the playbill of *Stuff Happens* but which was, in truth, never more than trapping for the ACT production: 'Democracy is a device that ensures that we shall be governed by no better than we deserve.'[62]

Notes and References

1. Included in past seasons at the Mark Taper Forum were Daniel Berrigan's *Trial of Catonsville Nine*, Mark Medoff's *Children of a Lesser God*, Anna Deavere Smith's *Twilight Los Angeles, 1992,* and Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*. The NPR programme quotes Davidson as saying the following: 'We had the Democratic Convention of '68 coming up. We had women's lib, we had civil rights, we had the Vietnam War, and it was an extraordinary time. And to have a place where I could give voice to my feelings and other artists' feelings and connect to an audience of people sitting there every night from different walks of life, and that dialogue goes on.'

2. This was certainly not the only such example of this emphasis on controversy. Whether implicitly or explicitly, Seattle newspapers describing Hare's play continually foregrounded this controversy. See Joe Adcock's 'Iraq War Stink Hits the Fan in *Stuff Happens*', in *SeattlePI.com*; Egil Krogh's 'Bush's Iraq War, Seen through a British Lens in ACT's Compelling *Stuff Happens*', in *Crosscut.com*; as well as Alex Alben's editorial, 'When *Stuff Happens*, Artists Fill in the Blanks', in *The Seattle Times.com*.

3. Misha Berson, 'ACT Rendition of *Stuff Happens* Takes Us into War Step by Step', *Seattle Times.com* <http://seattletimes.nwsource.com/html/entertainment /2003771881_stuff03.html>, 10 July 2007, par. 15.

4. Hare directed Howard Brenton's *Christie in Love* (1968); he was one of multiple authors for *Lay By* (1971), a project of the Portable Theatre; and he wrote and acted in *Via Dolorosa* (1998). See Richard Boon, *About Hare: the Playwright and the Work* (London: Faber, 2003), for a further discussion of these early works in Hare's career as dramatist and director.

5. Hare, quoted in Boon, p. 98.

6. Christopher Rawson, 'Stage Preview: Playwright David Hare Fills in the Details of the Iraq War Buildup in *Stuff Happens*', *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette.com* <www.post-gazette.com/pg/07130/784603-325.stm>, 10 May 2007, par. 2.

7. Misha Berson, 'A Seat in the War Room in ACT's *Stuff Happens*', *Seattle Times.com*, 28 June 2007 <http://seattletimes.nwsource.com/html/entertainment/2003765032_stuff28.html>, 10 July 2007, par. 11.

8. Hare had previously addressed history through individual stories that spoke to, without trying to draw in, the vast stretch of historical characters or literal places that we find in Shakespearean history plays. See Boon for further discussion.

9. David Hare, *Stuff Happens* (London; New York: Faber, 2004), p. 17.

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid., p. 13.

12. It's worth noting that this prologue is part of the written text published by Faber and Faber, but it was excluded from the revised text (by Hare) for US production and therefore was not spoken during the Seattle production. In this paper, I've referred to the 2004 Faber and Faber published text except for those places that involved revisions with the 2007 manuscript, such as the deleted prologue.

13. Hare, p. 3.

14. Ibid.

15. Misha Berson, 'Controversy follows *Corrie* to Seattle Stage'. *Seattle Times.com* <http://seattletimes.nwsource.com/html/artsentertainment/2003626824_corrie20.html>, 20 March 2007, par. 8.

16. Ibid., par. 10.

17. Ibid., par. 12.

18. Hare, p. 21.

19. Hare, quoted in Rawson, par. 6.

20. Wendy S. Hesford, 'Staging Terror', *The Drama Review,* L, No. 3 (2006), p. 29–41.

21. Bottoms certainly has a valid point in highlighting this failure to identify and openly discuss evidence in Hare's play and its correspondence with the administration's dubious evidence about WMD in Iraq. That the local newspapers in Seattle stressed the truthfulness of Hare's play is further evidence of the danger suggested by Bottoms. See 'Putting the Document into Documentary: an Unwelcome Corrective?', *The Drama Review,* L, No. 3 (2006), p. 56–68.

22. Alben, par. 10.

23. This falls under what Marvin Carlson describes as the 'performative matrix', or the attending information (from posters, the lobby, advertising, etc.) that influences how audiences receive the production. See *Places of Performance* for further discussion.

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24. Playbill, p. A4–A5.
25. Ibid., p. A5.
26. The quote comes from a 1993 interview with Hare by Georg Gaston first published in *Theatre Journal*, excerpted on A5 of the playbill.
27. Playbill, p. A5.
28. Hare, p. 92–3.
29. Ibid., p. 93.
30. These numbers come from the 2007 manuscript. In the 2004 edition, the following statistics were cited: 'Eighteen months after the invasion of Iraq, seventy per cent of the American electorate still believe that Saddam Hussein was directly involved in the planning of the 9/11 attacks' (p. 119).
31. Hare., p. 25.
32. Ibid.
33. Nearly all the reviews included praise for Wright. See Note 2.
34. I'm borrowing the language of Marvin Carlson from *The Haunted Stage*, in particular his theory that actors and acting roles are like palimpsests in which previous actors playing the roles and previous roles played by the actor inform how audiences perceive any performance.
35. In London, this sort of casting would have served the play's critique of Tony Blair, of course, though it was apparently not an aspect of the National Theatre's production.
36. Hare, p. 9.
37. See <http://www.cnn.com/2004/ALLPOLITICS/04/08/rice.transcript/> for Rice's testimony to Congress.
38. Adcock, par. 1.
39. Berson, 'Step by Step', par. 12.
40. This quotation comes from the 2007 manuscript, p. 98.
41. Hare, p. 120.
42. Ibid.
43. Ibid.
44. Ibid.
45. Ibid.
46. The booing was so vehement that the actress playing Condoleezza Rice was surprised enough to lose track of her lines. See Don Shirley's 'Boos Based on Mideast Borders', *Los Angeles Times*, 26 June 2005.
47. This was based on email and telephone correspondence with members of ACT staff.
48. 'For or Against?', *The Guardian.com*, 3 September 2004 <http://arts.guardian.co.uk/ politicaltheatre/story/0,,1296666,00.html>, 10 July 2007.
49. Hesford, p. 38.
50. In 2006, Lt Ehren Watada of Fort Lewis refused to be deployed to Iraq along with the rest of his unit, because he viewed the war as being unjust and illegal. He faced a court martial for his decision, though he quickly became something of a celebrity among the anti-war groups in the Pacific Northwest and across the nation in the months before Hare's play was performed in Seattle. For more details, see 'War-Protesting Fort Lewis Officer Doesn't Deploy with Unit' in the *Seattle Times*.
51. Jeremy M. Barker, '*Stuff Happens* @ ACT', *Seattle st.com* <http://seattlest.com/2007/06/29/watching_david.php> (29 June 2007), par. 9.
52. Ibid.
53. Ibid.
54. Janna Cawrse, 'Review: ACT Theatre's *Stuff Happens*', <http://blog.seattlepi.nwsource.com/happilyeven after/archives/118422.asp>, 21 July 2007, par. 5.
55. T. W. Adorno, 'Culture Industry Reconsidered,' *The Audience Studies Reader*, ed. Will Brooker and Deborah Jermyn (London; New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 55.
56. See Anne Marie Welsh, 'Stymied by Policies and Economics, Theater Artists Are Now Rarely Daring', S*an Diego Union-Tribune*, 3 July 2005.
57. Putting on a play like Hare's, with so many characters, obviously has financial demands (and risks) but the theatre was probably banking on the anti-war sentiments of Seattle to assuage the difficult past seasons. See Berson, 'Iraq War Run-Up Drama to Open 2007 ACT Season', *Seattle Times.com*, for more details.
58. George Bernard Shaw, *Heartbreak House*, in *Bernard Shaw's Plays* (New York: Norton), p. 146.
59. Ibid.
60. Ibid.
61. Though the production of *Heartbreak House* at Intiman was performed without any overt topical references in the production, Jory made the connection in the programme for audiences that might not recognize the parallel situation.
62. Playbill, p. A5.

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