

“Chinese Whispers”

John Bull

This is a note with aspirations to being a query. Initially, it arises from a reading of James Moran’s article, “Reflections on the first onstage protest at the Royal National Theatre: What is the problem with Richard Bean’s recent work?” (*Studies in Theatre and Performance*, volume 32, number 1: pp.15-28). It was a reading undertaken some months after I had finished writing a review of Thomas Postlewait’s invaluable *Cambridge Introduction to Theatre Historiography*, a book that made me acutely aware of the way in which ‘evidence’ is made use of in academic scholarship: my connection between the two publications being that, in 2010, I had had published an article on one of Bean’s plays that Moran writes about, *England People Very Nice* (Royal National Theatre, 2009).

In his article, and echoing its title, Moran talks about how the play “triggered a media storm by becoming the first play in the 32 year history of the Royal National Theatre to create an onstage protest. He goes on to cite and to quote from an article by Kate Muir in *The Times* of 7 March 2009. According to this account, a near “riot” occurred when “rowdy English intellectuals of Bengali and Irish decent stormed a discussion with the playwright Richard Bean. They jumped onstage, called Bean a racist and demoniser, waved placards and demanded a debate, until politely asked to leave” (Moran: 18 & Muir: para 2). Later, he again cites Muir: “The first ever protest on the Royal National Theatre’s stage was led by a second generation Bangladeshi, Hussein Ismail, as well as an English-born Irishman, Keith Kinsella” (Moran: 24 & Muir: par10).

In his *Cambridge Introduction*, Postlewait considers, amongst other things, “the case of Alfred Jarry’s *Ubu Roi*” (Postlewait: 60-86), demonstrating the danger of a reliance on a supposedly first-hand experience of a theatrical event, especially when the recall may actually have been penned many years after the performance in question, and then becomes the major source for subsequent narratives. Something rather similar appears to have happened, not years but certainly days after, with Muir, and there is already evidence that, if uncorrected, it too may become the source of the legend from which future narratives are constructed. Already, a casual internet search undertaken by me immediately yielded another example of this ‘borrowing’: in this instance by Bronwen Walter, a sociologist and Professor of Irish Diaspora Studies at Anglia Ruskin University (Walter: 64-65).

However, if we look at the actual article in *The Times*, we discover that at no point does Muir state that a “near riot” broke out. This claim is down to the sub-editor who provided the heading, “A riotous romp? Well, England People Very Nice at the National Theatre almost started a riot”. I think that we can safely assume that the person responsible for that headline was not present on the night in question, and the link with the content of the article is tenuous at best: “Billed as a black comic romp”, Muir had mistakenly written. Her editor may at least have felt sanctioned by the National’s publicity blurb for the play, where it was described not as a romp but as “a **riotous** journey through four waves of immigration from the 17th century to the present”. [my stress].

Anyway, as Muir makes clear, she too attended a later performance, and there is an unconscious, or possibly deliberate (given that she had not witnessed the protest) ambiguity about the number of protesters she describes as having been present. Her “last week rowdy English intellectuals of Bengali and Irish descent stormed a

discussion with the playwright” does not deny the possibility of there being only two protesters (which there were), but its lack of specificity allows Moran (who was also not present) to enlarge the narrative in a manner that gets us a little nearer a possible riot: “The first ever protest . . . was **led by**” [my emphasis] the two named men. In reality, it was not led by them: the organised protest consisted of them.

I am able to say this because, as it happens, I was present at both the performance and the protest. Indeed, I took careful notes of what happened and what was said, because I was booked to deliver a paper on *England People Very Nice* at the Contemporary Drama in English Conference, “Staging Interculturality”, in Vienna later that year. My account of that evening in the paper and in its subsequently published form, opened thus:

“The date is Friday, February 27, 2009. The time 6.00 pm. The place, the Olivier auditorium of the National Theatre on London’s South Bank. An audience is gathered to listen to Christopher Campbell, the National’s Deputy Literary Manager, discussing a new play, *England People Very Nice*, with its author, Richard Bean. I have been to many such events: normally there are forty to fifty people present, tops. Today the entire stalls area of the theatre is packed. As the playwright takes the stage, an angry man strides down the aisle shouting repeatedly, “Richard Bean is a racist.” He is, it transpires, Hussain Ismail, founder of the Tower Hamlets-based Bangladeshi theatre company, Soulfire. Eventually, Ismail clambers on to the stage and proceeds to harangue Bean, the first time a platform invasion has ever happened at the National. After a delightfully liberal delay, with various members of the audience shouting, “Get out!” and, “Get security and throw him out,” the protester agrees to be led away

by security guards. He was one of two protesters.¹ Campbell's first question to Bean is "Richard, tell me, how do you feel about the reception of the play?" Bean: "I thought this was about *War Horse* and the treatment of the Germans." (Bull: 70-71)

Far from a near riot situation developing, angry though Ismail clearly was, the only demand being made was for the playwright to engage him in debate: it was a demand that, perhaps unsurprisingly, was rejected. The stage was 'invaded' by a single person, and there was no suggestion from him of anything that might become vaguely physical: nor was there anything of the kind of violent audience response that had supposedly featured in earlier famous theatre 'riots'. On entering the theatre "the first sight that greeted the audience on the otherwise empty stage, were two chairs, and a hand-written placard, 'PROUD OF MULTICULTURAL EAST LONDON', evidently placed there by the second protester". (Bull: 71) It was a protest conducted in words, both spoken and written. There was no near riot: pass it on.

However, there were later developments, once the platform interview got underway, that have some relevance to the tension that interests Moran in his article. Bean described himself: "Politically I am a liberal hawk... a wet liberal too... What I am absolutely prepared to do is to defend liberalism", and talked about the play that would become *The Big Fella* as his next project.

But there was another context for this debate, other than the controversy about his own play. On February 6 2009, predating the first night of *England People*, Caryl Churchill's *Seven Jewish Children* had opened at the Royal Court Theatre: on March 12 David Hare gave the first performance of *Wall* at the same theatre. Both of them offer a political analysis that is supportive of the Palestinian cause. Bean was clearly

¹ After Ismail had left, a white teacher, Keith Kinsella, briefly sat on the platform before also being escorted off.

aware of these theatrical events. “In his platform interview, Richard Bean twice referred disparagingly to what he called ‘the Hampstead Hamas’, to the kind of enthusiastic response from a section of the audience that made clear that it understood very well his angry nod towards the Royal Court Theatre. Bean’s support for Israel over Palestine is unambiguous, and it is very hard for him or for an audience to separate it from his treatment of the implications of Muslim immigration into Bethnal Green and into Britain in the play that followed the interview.” (Bull: 85-86)

So, a riot no, but a contentious event, certainly. My intention in writing is simply to chronicle what actually happened, in as much as the annotated recall of a single member of that audience can be relied on to establish the veracity of a narrative. My conclusion to this note that may, or may not, have become a query is two-fold. First, the irresistible urge to quote the wise words of Postlewait at the very end of his book:

“Our sources provide the credible witnesses in the events we attempt to construct, but each of us who works as a historian is also a witness to history. In our scholarship – our historical narratives – we perform our own acts of witnessing. Our credibility, like that of the documents we consult, is always in the witness box. We are under oath to tell the truth, yet we must also remain open to questions, doubts and challenges”. (Postelwait: 269).

And secondly a confession: on re-reading my own article before I wrote this short piece, I realised to my horror, that I too had unwittingly laid the grounds for another set of fictional narratives. I talk, in passing, of being behind Michael Grade in the queue to get in to see Howard Brenton and Tariq Ali’s *Iranian Nights* (Royal Court

Theatre, 1989), a play written as a rejoinder to the *fatwah* declared on Salman Rushdie after the publication of his *Satanic Verses*. I then praised Grade for taking the decision to broadcast a televised version of Rushdie's work. What I should have said, of course, is that it was *Iranian Nights* that was screened. That, however, is a part of another narrative.

References

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