



Stuff Happens

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"Stuff happens . . . And it's untidy, and freedom's untidy, and free people are free to make mistakes and commit crimes and do bad things."

Such was Donald Rumsfeld's response on April 11, 2003, following the infamous looting and pillaging of Baghdad. In David Hare's powerful new play chronicling the extraordinary process leading to the American invasion of Iraq, this statement provides entrée into the melee of diplomacy, political power, and terrorist vendetta still making headlines around the world. Using direct quotes meticulously culled from interviews and public appearances, combined with the playwright's nuanced reimagining of what went on behind closed doors, Hare has fashioned a historical narrative and human drama that presents the Iraqi conflict in all of its haphazard notoriety. *Stuff Happens* uses a uniquely evenhanded approach to a deeply contested invasion--seen from the perspective of international leaders and journalists, as well as Iraqi refugees--and raises a series of provocative questions regarding the most heartfelt and manipulative machinations of domestic and international politik.

Stuff Happens Details

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Leonie says

Despite being aware of the events that occurred following the 9/11 attacks, I had never taken a strong interest in the political events and the relationship between Britain and the US at the time. This play opened my eyes to the realities of Bush and Blair's motives, and presented the facts in a way that was utterly transparent. I thoroughly enjoyed the play, despite at times finding it a little dense. I would highly recommend it to anyone who is looking for an introduction to modern political theatre.

Phillip says

I thought this was an ok play. I mean, its approach was interesting and the quasi-documentary style challenged the way we think about current events and contemporary politics. But I just wasn't interested in the basic substance of the play. 9/11 and the build up to the Iraq invasion simply aren't interesting subjects for me.

This play does challenge us to think more deeply about what has become a political platitude--that politics is more show than substance. This play performs the disjunction between the public face of politics and the backroom deals, individual personalities/ambitions, and hidden agendas that so often are the real catalysts of policy. By dramatizing this disjunction the play asks us to rethink the performative nature of politics, both by drawing attention to the fact of shadowy political action and by drawing attention to our own knowledge of that shadowy action. In other words, the play asks us to reflect on politics, and then to reflect on our own act of reflection.

Bobby Sullivan says

This play made me so angry. Dubya and his chicken hawks, flouting international law to invade Iraq and topple a sovereign government under false pretences. Hundreds of thousands dead. Was Saddam a horrible despot? Yes. Was he worse than Bush? I honestly don't know.

Gretchen says

An incredible and unlikely page-turner. You actually see the play in your head as you read. The second I was done reading it, I started at the beginning and read it all again a second time--something i don't ever remember doing with any book or play before. I'd recommend it to anyone.

Calum Parfitt says

I really enjoyed this polemic, it takes an unsentimental look at the events leading up to the outbreak of the

Iraq war. Funny and sinister, the play is a scathing attack on the Bush administration, though some 'characters' get it a lot worse than others. Although the figures are in essence acting out a plot to which we already know the final picture, the play is still thought provoking and exciting.

Mette says

Glad I read it and good as an insight into what went on - I was a bit too young to have a political view on it at the time.

Some of the quotes and characters are pretty horrible, but yet it's still very readable and I would say I enjoyed it.

I'm unsure about whether I think the use of actors is a lazy device or not - hard to tell without seeing it live, but it certainly makes it more fast paced and means you have a clear sense of what's going on.

Hans Peter Madsen says

Hvorfor gik vi i krig i Irak? Det spørgsmål får vi danskere aldrig svar på, for i 2015 besluttede Venstre-regeringen at nedlægge Irakkommisionen. Hvad der var løgn og hvad der var sandt, til hvilken grad danske soldater benyttede tortur, i hvor høj grad vi myrdede civile, og hvorfor vi overhovedet gik med i krigen, bliver aldrig besvaret. Men når politikkerne ikke vil tage ansvar for deres beslutninger, så må forfatterne træde til.

Derfor stillede den britiske dramatiker David Hare allerede i 2004 spørgsmålet: Hvorfor gik Storbritannien med i Irakkriget? Og hvorfor gjorde USA? Skuespillet *Stuff Happens* har fået sin titel fra den amerikanske forsvarsminister Donald Rumsfelds svar, da han blev bedt om at kommentere det kaos, der i Bagdad umiddelbart fulgte den amerikanske invasion. Men *Stuff Happens* er også David Hares svar på, hvorfor der blev krig i Irak.

Skuespillet starter kort før 9/11, da George Bush' regering træder til. Allerede ved den første sikkerhedsbriefing kommer Irak på bordet og tanken om, at Irak har masseødelæggelsesvåben (hvilket de som bekendt ikke havde) bliver præsenteret. Det virker som om, der allerede er truffet en beslutning om, at Irak på et tidspunkt skal invaderes. Hvorfor er den beslutning truffet? Ja. Det er svært at sige.

Efter 9/11 bliver det nødvendigt for Bush at vise sin magt; at USA reagerer på angreb. Men hvordan? Irak kommer igen på bordet: det vil være nemt at invadere Irak og vælte Saddam Hussein, så hvorfor ikke gøre det? Bush ser ned på Clintons krig i Kosovo og forsøg på at løse Israel-Palæstina-konflikten. Begge er i Bush' øjne slæt fejl. Der er ingen grund til at involvere sig i noget, der er svært at løse. Irak er, for Bush at se, nem at løse.

Hares tragiske helt er den amerikanske udenrigsminister Colin Powell. Han kan ikke finde ud af, hvorfor hans ministerkolleger er så opsatte på at invadere Irak. Det giver ingen mening. Irak er ikke nogen særlig trussel mod USA og havde intet at gøre med 9/11. Men hvis Irak absolut skal invaderes, så må det være med et FN-mandat i ryggen. Der trækkes en konflikt op mellem Powell og resten af regeringen: Powell vil have en international kollision, de andre ministre kan ikke forstå, hvorfor verdens mægtigste land ikke bare kan

invadere hvem de vil, når de vil.

Samtidig følger vi den britiske premierminister Tony Blair. Han vil gerne være med til at invadere Irak. Ikke fordi Irak er nogen trussel, men fordi han håber til gengæld at få USA's støtte til en ny Mellemøstenpolitik, der én gang for alle skal løse Israel-Palæstina-konflikten. Blair er en godtroende idiot.

For når alt kommer til alt, er pointen, gør USA, hvad de vil. Og hvorfor gør de så det? Ja. Det er ikke til at sige. Som skuespillets fortæller siger allerede fra første replik:

"The Inevitable is what will seem to happen to you purely by chance.
The Real is what will strike you as really absurd."

Storpolitik er absurdteater. Så selvom Stuff Happens er en tragedie, minder den meget om den britiske komedie *In the Loop*. Den handler også om, hvordan de storpolitiske krafter beslutter sig for at gå i krig, og også her er pointen, at det ikke er til at sige. Det er ikke til at forstå. Der er ingen grund.

Stuff Happens består delvist af rigtige citater fra interviews, men størstedelen er fiktion; ingen ved, hvad der er blevet sagt i de private møder, hvor Irakkriken er blevet planlagt. Hares bud på, hvad der skete bag lukkede døre, forekommer mig at være meget britisk. Engang var Storbritannien verdens mest magtfulde land, men nu er de en ligegyldig lillebror til USA. Det giver mening, at de fiktionelle forklaringer på storpolitik fra et land, der er vant til at have magten, men ikke længere har den, er, at der ikke er nogen forklaring; hvis verden ikke følger en britisk logik, må det være fordi, der ikke er nogen logik. Eller som skuespillets epigraf med et Jonathan Swift-citat siger:

"It is useless to reason a man out of a thing he was never reasoned into."

Sisyfosarbejdet med at forsøge at finde logikken der, hvor den ikke er, er meget underholdende og meget frustrerende. At læse Stuff Happens er lidt som at genopleve optakten til Irakkriken (som jeg husker det - jeg var trods alt kun 8 i 2003) - ikke fordi Stuff Happens nødvendigvis viser virkeligheden, som den egentlig var (det tvivler jeg på), men fordi skuespillet meget godt kommunikerer følelsen af meningsløshed, som man i europæiske kredse følte, da amerikanerne, briterne og danskerne (+ mange flere) gik i krig uden anden offentlig grund end løgnen om masseødelæggelsesvåben, som allerede dengang tydeligvis var en løgn. Jeg ved ikke, om storpolitik i virkeligheden er absurd, og jeg ved derfor ikke, om David Hare har ret i sin portrættering af magtens inderkreds. Det har han nok ikke. Men for almindelige mennesker, der kun ser politikkernes løgne og deres ubegrundede nægtelse af svar på det egentlig ret simple spørgsmål om, hvorfor vi gik i krig, er følelsen af absurditet meget rammende. Og det er derfor, Stuff Happens er et godt skuespil. Ikke fordi det viser sandheden, men fordi det kommunikerer følelsen, vi magtesløse tilskuere får, når vi ikke kan få sandheden at vide.

<https://endnuenbogblog.blogspot.com/>

Harriet_Lang says

Incredibly interesting play. Makes you question what you already know about the events leading up to and during the war in Iraq. I'd be interested to see how it was done in the original production and how it was received by the original audiences.

BurntOrangeOwl says

No less infuriating today than ten years ago. Hubris has consequences. Pawns die when chess masters err. Loyalty is not such an endearing virtue in the long run. Powell, Blair.... We're still living in the age of deception.

Helen says

This is one of the set texts for the final module of my degree. It's an interesting play and I'm looking forward to learning more about it and deciphering it a bit more. It is difficult at times to read about something which bring back powerful emotions. Act One Scene Six in particular sticks out in that regard.

Michael Gardener says

while reading this (now in small increments, a scene at a time while on the toilet) i must keep in mind the good intentions of the play write to provide us with a dramatization of what he imagines may have taken place in those undocumented private meetings. suffice to say it was probably uglier then this play depicts.

Hannah Jarzombek says

Really, really, really interesting execution. Best read with annotations if unfamiliar with events and people in the scope of politics in the early 2000s. The set-up was really amazing though. Hare brings documentary to stage and gives fiction without sacrificing truth. Well executed and enjoyable read.

Ramsey says

An exercise in taking quotes and events (nonfiction) from the press and other sources, then writing a piece of fiction. Or is it? A historical play. That's what it is. Very recent history. Overall, good read.

Sam Haddow says

Robert Fisk, commenting on Colin Powell's appearance at the February 2003 UN Security Council Meeting, said that Powell seemed quite unsure of himself, halting and unconvincing, as he delivered his now infamous

fairytail justifying the US's subsequent invasion of Iraq. Conversely, Fisk noted, when he saw David Hare's *Stuff Happens* in New York, three years later, the Powell on stage was much more forceful, more charismatic, and a good deal more sure of himself.

I mention Powell, because Hare has maintained that – though much of this play (everything ‘behind closed doors’) is fabulation – in the interim between the premiere in London in 2004, and the revival in New York in 2006, he changed only one thing – the degree to which Colin Powell was or wasn’t complicit in the events that lead up to the invasion. Evidently, people who been involved, or had scrutinized the events closely, accused him of over lenience in his treatment of Powell, so he, in his own words, ‘changed him [Powell:] from a liberal hero to a tragic hero.’

Calling Colin Powell a liberal hero is a contention I don’t here wish to go into – the dramatic connotations of ‘tragic hero,’ however, are far more interesting. From Aeschylus to Miller we all seem to have our own interpretations of what is meant by tragic hero, and the last quoted – Miller’s ‘Chickens coming home to roost’ seems the most applicable. Hare’s depiction of Powell – most of which is in fact not taken from documentary sources – sees him as something of a serial worrier, an industrious and occasionally naïve apologist who nonetheless rattles his saber from time to time, when he believes he can get away with it. His dramatic purpose – chasing wild geese in a White House of silently leering cronies, each more in-the-know than he could ever hope to be – is rendered ultimately pointless with he utters a fateful ‘I don’t disagree’ to Bush’s eventual admission that he intends to wage war – second UN resolution or none.

Powell, then, is hardly Othello, but we can perhaps see him more in the light of the doomed salesman Willy Loman, grafting and whimpering in the outmoded grooves of his little existence. Where Loman was incapable of looking up and seeing the societal developments that would render him extinct, however, we get the feeling the Powell may well have known all along, and not looked up simply from cowardice. Tragic hero? It’s an interesting interpretation, though not altogether convincing.

In a way, approaching this play through anything other than a character by character basis seems impossible – as an audience member we bring to an interpretation of this text so many perspectives and so much bias based on what we do or don’t know, where we do or don’t stand, that the play-as-a-whole is more a (bomb?) site of innumerable derivations and contradictory assertions than it is a narrative. We would have had to have been sitting in some proverbial cave for years in order for it not to be, and Hare’s play is certainly not written to educate the uninitiated; though it does take pleasure in throwing in the odd snippet or two of little known ‘information’ to back up its avowedly left-leaning and unashamedly biased opinions.

That last was not an insult, or an attempt to debunk – I do not personally believe that any writing, however hard it may strive, is capable of obtaining complete objectivity, and I am more scared of writers or writings that falsely claim such a thing than I am of polemicists who wear their influences and opinions publically. Hare himself has said that he does not know what verbatim theatre is – a google or Wikipedia search for this term will reveal some or other definitions claiming a prevalence of documentary research, one might turn up Max Stafford-Clark’s oft repeated adage that it’s ‘like serving up your research raw – like a steak tartar.’ Hare’s confusion sprung from watching Stoppard’s ‘Coast of Utopia’ and taking personal objection to an extreme viewpoint held by an onstage character that he believed to be mirroring some obnoxious opinion of the writer’s own, before he found out that Stoppard had lifted the speech from the direct sayings of the historical character he was there representing. Hence – is ‘Coast of Utopia’ verbatim?

With ‘Stuff Happens’, there is so much on stage that simply cannot have been available to the writer – private conversations between the heads of state of six or seven countries, phone calls, classified information etc that common sense (should, at least) tells us that what we are watching is not a so-called objective

assessment of things-as-they-happened but rather a subjective perspective on events as they are/were presented.

Again, I have no problem with this, and am much more comfortable with an honest liar than I am with someone who writes history and calls it ‘fact.’ So much of history is unknowable, and so much of the representation of history is affected directly by issues of interpretation, *de facto* narrativising of unrelated events, spatial and temporal dislocation of items under analysis and so on that the old objectivity has been the subject of a fervent historicist debate for decades, now, with an increasing number of historians prophesying the death of history in both the upper-case (metanarratives, such as Capitalism or Marxism) and lower-case (history-as-toil, the work of historians). Hare’s writing is, regardless of what issue one may take with it – and there is a lot here to take issue with, whatever your political leanings – nevertheless a vitally honest reaction to such assertions; a dishonestly personal reaction to events that have become so important to so many of us that their original meaning is now impossible to grasp.

Ethically, of course, the collapse of such high-minded principles guiding the ‘objectivity’ of history is a problem – *Stuff Happens*’ trump card is that it plays in an arena where dishonesty and disloyalty have clouded the view for so long that they are impossible to extricate. The counter argument would of course run to the effect that this makes it all the more vital to discover *What Actually Happened*. To which the answer, reasonably enough, is that people will continue to try (and sometimes succeed) to discover this – they will work hard, they will establish the facts as they go along, and then they will present their findings. And then they will realize that their findings are in direct contradiction to other people who have done the exact same thing.

In the meantime, we have texts like *Stuff Happens* – which, whether liked or disliked, will retain, I believe, the power and ability to provoke debate whenever it is revived, read or discussed. And whilst this in itself is to a large part contingent upon the vivid nature of its subject matter, it’s still an important role – one of art’s best, and something a lot of people would do well to remember.

Jennie Pease says

I do remember the events surrounding the invasion of Iraq and Hare’s play is a damning indictment of the players, from the breathtaking arrogance of Bush, to Blair’s weakness and Colin Powell’s grave misgivings about the whole undertaking. Whilst this play is a dramatisation of real events, and private conversations are necessarily fiction, it is clear that Hare believes Bush was going to wage war on Iraq whatever the evidence (or lack of it) regarding WMD. Actually, the play says far more about Hare’s politics and take on events than it does about the events themselves.

This is not a very exciting play to read; it lacks dramatic tension on the page. It may be better to see it in performance.
