

Introduction

This project was born from another. In late 2004 I began work on a documentary film investigating peacemaking, for which I interviewed peacemakers across the globe. In the course of preparing, researching and shooting the film I met many extraordinary people working in extreme circumstances in dangerous locations. I also came to know as friends the equally extraordinary people who, while not themselves in situations of immediate risk, dedicate their lives to supporting those who are.

Principal among the latter were the people at Peace Direct and the Oxford Research Group, both organizations founded by Dr Scilla Elworthy, and both in different ways devoted to finding solutions to conflict. In the summer of 2005, Scilla asked me to become involved in research she was doing into the assault on Fallujah and the suspected war crimes carried out during it. Subsequently, through her agency, I met and spoke to many people whose testimony was so powerful and shocking that Scilla and I began to talk about the possibility of the material becoming a play. Scilla's own research at that time into the situation in Fallujah constitutes the core of her authoritative contextual article in this book.

The first meeting I attended while doing research for the play, organized by the Oxford Research Group, comprised several powerful and highly experienced individuals central to the coalition command and the US/UK presence in the region. They cannot be named, and I am unable to supply any more circumstances of the conversations that

took place, except to say that all present impressed me hugely by their sincere commitment to improving the situation within Iraq. My first preconception was shattered; here were senior military men who really cared about the implications of their actions. My second surprise, as an atheist, was to hear religious leaders speaking pragmatically, sanely, and with a thorough grasp of *realpolitik*. Despite being Christians involved in an Islamic country, they followed no prescriptive ecclesiastical line, and displayed extensive knowledge of the culture and traditions of the people with whom they were dealing.

Much of the material garnered from this initial meeting came to be included in the play more or less as it was expressed.¹ The meeting itself led to conversations with other rational and clear-sighted individuals in exile from Fallujah, who also agreed to speak to me on condition of anonymity. I am not a journalist, and had not known quite what a terrible thing it is to speak with people who have to guard their identities because of the impact their statements might have on the lives of others. The responsibility is sobering.

The next step was to talk to those people who were able to go on record with their experiences. Through contacts I had made I was able to speak to Jo Wilding, about whom I had heard already. She had featured in a documentary made by Julia Guest, entitled *A Letter to the Prime Minister*, which had been doing the rounds of independent cinemas in London; I'd managed to borrow a copy on DVD.

Jo is an extraordinary figure. Convinced of the inequity and iniquity of the Blairite stance on Iraq, she had deliberately broken sanctions in order to be brought to

¹ It can be found in Scene 5.



court and thereby draw attention to the government's damaging anti-Iraq policies. Subsequently she went to Iraq, and to Fallujah. Her accounts of her time there are vivid, passionate and precise in their record of abuse and violation, of a war machine utterly contemptuous of the civilian population – whom they were supposedly there to protect and to liberate. Her writings initially stem from her time in the city in April 2004, though she went there again later with – of all things – a circus. With their rare combination of lucid detail and fierce conviction her journals constitute a rallying cry in the face of corruption on a massive scale. Some of them – the ones most pertinent to the play – are reprinted in this volume, and constitute a personal chronicle of Fallujah to accompany Scilla's objective contextualization.

In a slightly more official capacity, the Canadian journalist Dahr Jamail had been reporting from Iraq for some time. His experiences in Fallujah have provided essential evidence of human rights abuses and derogation of duty on the part of the US military, as well as providing a substantial and often disturbing archive of photographic evidence, all of which can be found at www.dahrjamailiraq.com. Some of his reports, too, are reprinted here. Dahr's accounts include interviews he himself carried out with Fallujan citizens, which in turn became valuable for the play.

One aspect of the suppression of dissent in Fallujah was the blanket ban imposed by the US military on reporting from the city. Consequently, if it hadn't been for the heroism of people like Dahr and Jo, very few first-hand accounts would have reached Western media outlets. Nevertheless, through interviewing and recording the



testimony of those who have been there – soldiers, doctors, aid workers, civilian exiles – it is possible to build an eyewitness picture of the disturbing situation within the city. By cross-referencing accounts and juxtaposing them with photographic, video and surveillance evidence it is possible to see just what life has been like in the city, and just how appallingly the occupying forces have behaved over the past three years. The essay in this volume on Fallujah and the Geneva Conventions makes clear just how bad the situation is: the Americans have violated seventy separate articles of the conventions, repeatedly and with impunity.

The general state of affairs in Iraq has been catalogued in more poetic fashion by the American writer Eliot Weinberger in a now-iconic piece, *What I Heard About Iraq* (for the *London Review of Books*, January 2005). The piece is, in Borgesian fashion, halfway between an essay and a poem, and uses the disinformation and lies of the Bush administration in counterpoint with the reality of life on the ground in Iraq to create a heartbreaking sequence of snapshots of a tragedy. The full text is readily available in print and on the web, and its simplicity and power were a significant inspiration for the play; indeed, its full text has been performed itself as a protest piece in cities around the world. Its inclusion in this book gives a unique perspective on the wider situation in the country; a wide-angle response to add to Jo's close-ups.

In the course of making *Perpetual Peace*, my film about peacemaking, I had met and interviewed George Monbiot. His piece on chemical weapons usage in Fallujah was one of the first to make public this particularly disgraceful episode in the history of the US Armed Forces, and I am grateful to him for allowing it to be included in this volume.



There are two principal atrocities in Fallujah. The first is the criminal behaviour of American troops. The second is the failure of the West to condemn that behaviour. The prevention of news broadcasts from the city undoubtedly played a major part in this lack of condemnation, and additional reasons can be found in the reluctance of European governments, especially that of the UK, to criticize the Bush administration's actions for fear of covert reprisal.

It is too late fully to remedy the situation in Fallujah: the damage has been done, and it is extremely doubtful whether the inhabitants will ever have meaningful redress. There remains only the opportunity to publicize the disgrace, and to condemn it noisily. As the muted outcry over the massacre of twenty-four civilians by US forces in Haditha in November 2005 (which went unreported until May 2006) has shown, governments cannot ignore such a reaction entirely. To quote Brigadier General Mark Kimmitt in an alternative context, the responses to situations such as this need to be 'methodical, precise and overwhelming'. Methodical preparation, precise expression and overwhelming commitment to peaceful and intelligent opposition can begin to make an effect, but it needs to be sustained, coherent and visible.

As a culture it seems that we have lost our sense of collective perseverance; one march will not change things, even if a million people take part, but ten years of marches will. It is a sign of how successful structures of power have been in instilling ideologies of immediate gratification and political apathy that so many prominent intellectuals have admitted defeat so readily. One cannot learn a language in a day, and one cannot change government policy over-



night; it is madness to assume either, and yet we continue to be disillusioned when the latter does not occur.

This book contains five responses to the siege of Fallujah: Scilla's essay discussing the context for the attack and its repercussions; eyewitness testimony; George's piece about illegal weapons usage; an article by me detailing the rape of the Geneva Conventions by the US military; and a play composed of testimony from those involved. The book, I suppose, could be subtitled *Voices from Fallujah*; the result is a glimpse, a brief aperture into the lives of Fallujan citizens and the horrific situation they have had to endure. It is, in a way, a textual equivalent of a photojournalism exhibition.

All the responses here are, essentially, acts of witnessing. Whether informed responses to the wider situation, direct testimony from those in the thick of it, or a mode of communication that allows groups of spectators to listen to otherwise unheard voices, everything in this book originates from a powerful desire to bear witness. For me, a collective act of witnessing is what the theatre necessarily involves, one that is inescapably ethical, as it requires us to take responsibility for our response to what we experience. We do the same when we engage as readers, and it is in this witnessing that art can be a vehicle for resistance to oppression.

Jonathan Holmes, 2007