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REVIEW

From Page to Stage: What Emerges 'In Between' Politics and Art in George Packer's *Betrayed*.

George Packer, 'Betrayed: the Iraqis who trusted America the most', *New Yorker*, 26 March 2007.

George Packer, *Betrayed: A Play*, New York: Faber & Faber, 2008.

George Packer, *Betrayed*, directed by Robin Stanton, Berkeley: The Aurora Theatre Company, 23 January – 8 March, 2009. The West Coast Premiere (following on from the world premiere staged at New York City's Culture Project during 2008).

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*The gulf that separates politics and art can haunt us. Bounded by the strict parameters of pragmatism and rationalism, political endeavours can and often do disclose the textures of life that belie the thrust of history and the grand narratives of the day. But having done so, rarely do they embed us in and emancipate us from the very real and often absurd human emotions, desires and urgencies that propel political actions. Something more is needed: something at once personal, emotional and rational that communicates what is often lost in translation. The purpose of this essay is to chart the gulf that typically separates politics and art. To do this, it will analyse the process and impetus that pressed George Packer, an American political analyst, to transcend and translate his New Yorker article, 'Betrayed: the Iraqis who trusted America the most,' into *Betrayed*, a political play. Tormented by the findings and inadequacies of his own political analysis, Packer quickly found himself 'haunted' by the 'inadvertent bluntness' and 'accidental poetry' that is often at the heart of politics but which politics cannot always adequately express. As an article and play inspired by the lives of Iraqi translators employed by U.S. forces in the current war in Iraq, it raises some of the most pressing legal, political and moral concerns in U.S. foreign policy and*

international relations more broadly. In so doing, Packer also captured the inadequacy intrinsic to legal, political and moral discourses.

The words that had filled my recorder continued to haunt me. They had the inadvertent bluntness and accidental poetry of a second language, and the intensity of life caught in a reflective pause during an extreme time.

- George Packer.

The consequences of our political actions can come to haunt us. Just ask George Packer: political analyst, novelist, dramatist. Haunted both by what politics did, in Iraq, and by what politics could not do, for the Iraqis who had sacrificed the most, Packer quickly found himself pressed by the need to see and approach political reality differently. The product is his new play, *Betrayed*—a serious political drama which sees in politics ‘the inadvertent bluntness and accidental poetry of a second language’ (Packer, 2008: ix).

The inspiration and premise of Packer’s play emerged, quite literally, from the interviews he had conducted while researching his *New Yorker* article, ‘Betrayed: the Iraqis who trusted America the most’ (Packer, 2007). Moved by the predicament of Iraqis who risked their lives for the prospect of a brighter future, the article exposes the double lives and the double-edged sword that confronts the thousands of Iraqis employed by the U.S. throughout Iraq. Specifically, it is the lives of Iraqi translators employed by the U.S., as go-betweens and as informants, that capture Packer’s focus. On the ground, scattered throughout Iraq, these mostly young Iraqi men and women are often the Coalition’s only mouthpiece in a foreign and diverse land. They are both their eyes and their ears. At the forefront of any Coalition effort, these are the Iraqis who have most fully entrusted their lives to America, and others, spurred on by the promise of peace and freedom (‘The Road Home’, 2007).

But those with the most to gain, as it turns out, are also those with the most to lose. By stepping forward to aid the Coalition’s mission in Iraq, these young Iraqi men and women often became terrorized from ‘within’ and deemed as terrorists from ‘without’ (Blumenauer, 2007). Persecuted by Iraqi insurgents who suspected them of being American *aameels* (agents), these women and men became the targets of intimidation, ostracism, torture, and murder. Sunni or Shia, it did not matter. In a country beset with suspicion, antipathy and violence, Iraqi translators employed by the U.S. stand out as obvious and easy targets. In the face of these explicit dangers, timely U.S. protection has rarely been forthcoming. Pleas of assistance to their American superiors, for the most part, fell on deaf ears. Of course, there were always Americans who listened and cared. But many failed to ever see these Iraqis as anything beyond potential threats, even as terrorists. As Kirk Johnson, then a 24 year-old information officer with

the United States Agency for International Development, learned: in the Green Zone, Iraqis were always third-class citizens, behind Americans and all other foreigners (Packer, 2007). Whether as translators or as *aameels*, these young Iraqis were literally people caught 'in between.'

This is, in short, the crux of Packer's article: the life of the outsider, the non-belonger who lives exiled from their homeland. Today, Iraq is a land of non-belongers. Taja, the elderly Iraqi woman who worked at the Palestine Hotel in central Baghdad, where Packer conducted his interviews, is only one of the article's many. Hers is a bittersweet story that is not unique but nonetheless evocative. In her old age—having survived Saddam's dictatorship, having seen the Americans come and then leave—she sings for Packer and his Iraqi companions the music of the old days, when music could still be heard:

Goodnight, sweetheart,

Well it's time to go.

I hate to leave you, but I really must say,

Goodnight, sweetheart, goodnight. (Packer, 2007)

Pulling away from Iraq, as Packer describes, in 'the fitful, irritable manner of someone trying to wake up from an unpleasant sleep,' the U.S. and its allies have for the most failed to recognise the lives of Iraqis who no longer see, perhaps never saw themselves as Iraqis (Packer, 2007). What are the outsiders, the non-belongers to do when caught 'in between' and then left behind? Who bears the responsibility in this difficult and uncertain situation? Are there contingency plans in place for these Iraqis, as the Coalition pulls out and backs away from Iraq?

In the almost two years since the publication of Packer's article, we know that the U.S. and other Coalition nations have finally begun the process of redressing this problem. Within the U.S., the newly-enacted legislation, known as the Kennedy Special Immigrant Visa Program, strives to increase the visa quota—predominately aimed at Iraqi and Afghani translators—from 500 to 5000 cases per year (Foley and Scialabba, 2008). The Australian Labor government—perhaps in a token gesture—has also begun to match action with rhetoric, granting permanent humanitarian visas for up to 600 Iraqis and their families to resettle in Australia, if they desire.

But, for the longest time—perhaps during the most dangerous time—the U.S. and its allies were not always so willing. When first confronted with this need, the U.S. response was characterised by inaction cloaked, as always, in benevolence. 'It's easier for the U.S. government to leave them to their fate while telling itself that "the good Iraqis" are needed to build the new Iraq,' Packer notes, with reference

to the evacuation of the Vietnamese following the conclusion of the Vietnam War (Packer, 2007). Be that as it may, such a 'solution' did not solve and perhaps did not even acknowledge the problem that beset the many Iraqis who sided with the Coalition. Unwanted by their own, seeing themselves distinct to their own, these Iraqis were in turn denied the legal rights that would enable them to access humanitarian assistance from their liberators. Politically, legally and morally, then, these were individuals betrayed by a war whose outcomes failed to match many or any of its original aims. Towards the end of his article, Packer concludes that 'part of our legacy [in Iraq] will be [the] thousands of Iraqis who, because they joined the American effort, can no longer live in their own country' (Packer, 2007. Also see Ignatius, 2007; Power, 2007). Policy shifts aside, this is a projection that looks likely to mark the Iraqi social landscape for the next few years, at the very least.

Not surprisingly, then, 'the struggles of the Iraqis,' wrote Dexter Filkins (2008) of the *New York Times*, 'stayed with Mr. Packer after the journalism was done.' For Packer, the politics of Iraq were strewn with a lifetime's illusions and disillusionments, with a people lost on a sea of hope and hopelessness. Sure this was politics, and it was being dealt with politically. But it touched on and asked so much more. The individual stories that Packer's informants regaled him with evoked the larger political decisions, actions and consequences which were and are still taking place throughout Iraq and the rest of the world. From his political analyses, even in the words of his subjects, the ghostly whisper of denied senses called on Packer to do more. As he says:

I wanted to do something with the material I had that I didn't think journalism could do, which was to go deeper into the experience of the Iraqis ... [t]o explore them as human beings in this incredibly complicated and heartbreaking situation. Loyalty between friends, hope and betrayal – these are universal themes. (Packer, 2007)

The complexity of human relations—the relationships between the Americans and the Iraqis, between the Iraqis themselves—quickly became a focal point of the War. And through his political investigations, it quickly became the focal point of Packer's attention.

What interested and troubled Packer the most about the situation in Iraq was 'the ability or inability of individuals to transcend their "official" roles and maintain a human pulse' (Packer, 2008: ix-x). Could the U.S. administrators be moved enough by the plight of their Iraqi colleagues to help barter their safety and the safety of their families? Would the U.S. government, along with other Coalition governments, be prepared to actively provide asylum and alternative arrangements for 'the Iraqis who trusted them the most'? In short, are those who supported the War the most capable of seeing in these lives a little of themselves; to see all Iraqis as part of the solution—however messy and objectionable that solution may be—and not endemic to the problem?

In many ways, the transcendence from the 'official' to the 'human' also signifies Packer's personal longing to transcend the political with the artistic. Like the U.S. officials who could not see beyond the letter of their mission's law to the heart of human suffering, politics and political analyses only take us so far. Bounded by the demands and parameters of pragmatism, rationalism and economic viability, political engagements can and often do disclose the 'texture of life' that lies beneath the thrust of history and the grand narratives of the day (Packer, 2008: xii). But rarely do they adequately embed us in and emancipate us from the very real and often absurd human emotions, desires and urgencies that propel political actions. Something more or something else is needed: something at once personal, psychological, emotional, and rational, something that communicates what is otherwise often lost in translation. Left unsatisfied by his own political analysis, that is to say caught 'in between,' Packer quickly found himself 'haunted' by the 'inadvertent bluntness' and 'accidental poetry' that is at the heart of politics but which politics cannot always adequately express.

This was why he wrote the play. Employing techniques drawn broadly from Verbatim Theatre, Packer's play is the composite of all that was said during his interviews and, more importantly, of all those who said it. As an article dotted with the fragmented accounts he accumulated during his interviews, it provided an ideal repository for dramatic expression. Verbatim Theatre is a technique that essentially straddles the divide between reality and fiction, or between politics and art (Paget, 1987). Based often on actual interviews conducted as part of real life research, these plays use the exact words and the personal and political predicaments of their authors to inspire art. The current 'War on Terror' climate has left a multitude of individuals haunted by what politics did and by what it now can not do. Within this context, the resort to Verbatim Theatre has been widespread and somewhat inevitable, as witnessed in such well-known examples as David Hare's *Stuff Happens* and Robin Soans' *Talking to Terrorists*. Both plays, like the many others of this genre, were attempts to cope with what lies 'in between' politics and art. In writing his play, George Packer's desire was no different.

The product, *Betrayed*, is at once political and artistic. Again, with the theme of the 'in between' at its heart, the play centres on a series of dialogues and flashbacks between its three main characters: Adnan, Laith and Intisar – three Iraqi translators employed by the U.S. to aid their various missions throughout Iraq. These characters represent the amalgam of individuals who Packer interviewed during the course of his investigation. Not surprisingly, the semblance is resounding. Both plot and structure were drawn from the incidents that his article had initially analysed. The dialogue, more than half of which is transcribed directly from his interviews, literally wrote itself as Packer recalls. There is little point to improving on what the Iraqis themselves said and no point in fictionalising reality when it so viciously stretches the limits of our imagination.

The result, though, is a play that can often be frustrating. Frustrating, firstly, because of the blindness and cavalier oblivion that can mark the American attitude (among others) to what is actually happening in Iraq to Iraqis, especially to those closest to them. 'I don't think you're going to win this war if you don't win the hearts of your allies' (Packer, 2008: 89). These were the words of Laith, a supporter and employee of the U.S. effort in Iraq, as he was forcefully led out of the U.S. compound, suspected of being a double-agent. 'All the sacrifices, all the work, all the devotion mean nothing to you,' Adnan exclaims: 'We are still terrorists in your eyes' (Packer, 2008: 88). When Prescott, a junior U.S. embassy official and friend of the translators, finally snaps it is difficult to know whether one's frustration actually subsides or intensifies. 'You have no idea what this office does,' he screams at the U.S. Regional Security Officer: 'You have no fucking idea what these men do for us,' referring to the likes of Adnan, Laith and Intisar (Packer, 2008: 88).

But beyond this, the play is frustrating because of the dialogue used. Drawn as it is from Packer's interviews, it conveys an unmistakable rawness. At times the dialogue consciously stops short of the potential it has, both politically and artistically. But going further, in reality, is often to have gone too far. Because of this, it can be difficult to separate the potential and the pitfalls of Packer's writing, and of Verbatim Theatre more generally, from the potential and pitfalls of reality. The gritty realness, a reminder of just how gritty reality is, can really grate as it reverberates throughout the play. Perhaps none more than when Adnan, the self-proclaimed non-belonger, discloses:

I would say I am working for a cause – so if I die for it, let it be. All Iraqis are fatalist – we believe that if it is time to die, then let it die, so what? We don't know about the pleasures of life so much, so death to us wouldn't mean that much. To leave a miserable life, it's not that much to die. For you as an American, you can go everywhere and you do things you like and money is not a problem for you. Life is beautiful for you! Not for an Iraqi who doesn't have electricity, who is under threat. So what's the big deal to die and leave all this? (Packer, 2008: 51)

Words so dangerously real—both in the lives of these young Iraqis as well as in the lives of those who so violently *oppose* them—convey what is so often missed or misunderstood. Stopping short, at the end of scene eleven, Adnan's words seem unsatisfactory, unappreciated, incomplete. Their power is not acknowledged—only affirmed in the following sequence of the play, and in reality.

A critical realization is triggered at these moments. The illusion is real just as reality can be illusory. The play, *Betrayed*, and its technique, Verbatim Theatre, consciously blur the boundaries between reality and illusion. But this is, for many, precisely what the War in Iraq does. 'The problem,' as Packer identifies, 'lay not with the individuals but with the institution and, beyond that, with the politics of the American project in Iraq, which from the beginning has been conducted under

the illusion that controlling the message mattered more than the reality' (Packer, 2007). Famously, and dangerously, the echoes of Jean Baudrillard, among others, can be heard. Iraq today, as it was in the early 1990s, is a simulation that obfuscates and undermines reality with something that closely resembles yet supersedes it. Mainstream conceptions and consciousness of the War in Iraq come to us more as a simulacra that threatens the crucial distinction between truth and falsehood, reality and the imaginary. The flux of news television, embedded journalism, the limitlessness of Internet sources, not to mention raft after raft of official reports and scholarly contributions have made the conflict in Iraq what it is. And in so doing, it has spawned another, more pervasive domain and battlefield. Often the realm of the possible is, in actual fact, anything but. However, this is something that has become increasingly difficult to decipher. No longer can we really gauge whether our perceptions of Iraq really correlate to what is actually taking place in Iraq. And it is not just the general public who suffers from this debilitating sensory lapse. Prescott reiterates this very point in a telling passage of the play, saying: 'I just feel like ... I need to get out of here,' referring to the constructed reality of the Green Zone within Baghdad. 'It's like a sensory-deprivation tank. I don't know what the hell is going on out there' (Packer, 2008: 58). 'You have your intel reports,' Adnan rebuts (Packer, 2008: 59). 'Don't mess with me,' Prescott replies: 'The blind leading the blind' (Packer, 2008: 59).

Such insights, though important, are not necessarily new. What is new, however, is the intervention or mediation that theatre can provide. In contemporary society, 'reality' can be an illusive commodity. What is real? What is the relationship between reality and fantasy? Are the two indistinguishably and inextricably fused? These are the very concerns of Verbatim Theatre. By blurring reality and illusion, fact and fiction, Verbatim Theatre is only a reminder of what is actually taking place everyday and at every level of our existence; the War in Iraq being but the most explicit example. In its own unique way, it mediates reality and in so doing creates a new simulacrum. The 'real' trick or test, then, is to see whether we can collectively visualise what emerges from Verbatim Theatre—and from art more generally—as part of or at least no less real than the reality we live our lives in. Seeing Adnan, Laith, Intisar, and Prescott as real, offering very real insights into the situation in Iraq, even though they are fictitious fabrications, is perhaps only to see the world as it actually is.

Verbatim Theatre, in recognition of the 'realities' that exist, reminds us all that it is high time we arouse from our slumber, to become conscious of and to begin to simulate our own, unique realities. Dramatising 'reality' may seem perplexing, less than intriguing. It is not. Precisely because the 'reality' that is now imposed on us is often mediated and simulated, it is itself drama. Seeing reality as drama is to see it in a new light, which then enables us to see it as changeable. The flux of realities, whether virtual or real, is perhaps inevitable. The point is not to deny or to repress them, but to become more conscious of them. Both emancipating and real, Verbatim Theatre if done right

will do just that: helping us to reclaim, perform and emancipate our own realities. Whether as political activists, everyday citizens or as academics and intellectuals, these aesthetic lessons cannot go unheeded, especially if we are to more fully grasp what politics can and can not do.

In the closing lines of the play, our attention is turned to the power of the affirmation of betrayal, an insight crucial to any understanding of the current situation in Iraq. As Adnan laments:

Betrayed? Not really. I have this nature – I don't expect a lot from people. I always assume the better but don't expect a lot. Not betrayed, no, not disappointed. I can never blame the Americans alone. It's the Iraqis who destroyed their country, with the help of the Americans, under the American eye. Until this moment I dream about America. (Packer, 2008: 108)

When caught 'in between', wanted neither by your homeland nor the land of the free, hope quickly evaporates, anger rages then subsides and emotions harden only to fracture. Nothing could be less simple or more complex here. The Iraqis whom George Packer interviewed and then dramatised did what they did, are still doing what they do, not because they are brave. They are beyond that ...*Betrayed? Not really.*

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Good theatre can stimulate interest, stir opinions, demand reflection, and let loose all sorts of emotions. This was clear enough, speaking with the audience members of *Betrayed* after the performances and from their comments and questions during the facilitated forum discussion. When asked by Aurora Theatre Company's Education Officer: 'this show is dealing with the issue of?' audience members spoke of: cultural misunderstanding; trust; moral obligation; misrepresentation; idealism; arrogance; incompetence; moral ambiguity; indifference; hope; lying; fear; cruelty.

But as engaging and as laudable as the discussion was, it did not go nearly deep enough. Sometimes the themes raised were done so in a superficial and speculative manner. This, of course, is understandable. 'A work of art, be it a drama, a novel or a piece of music, never reveals itself completely on first acquaintance' (van Erp Taalman Kip, 1990: 19).

What is less understood or acknowledged, however, are the limits of theatre (or of any genre or discipline for that matter), which in and of itself can never go deep enough. The importance of such a point only goes to reiterate, in part, the virtues of Packer's work and the reasons why he felt stifled or limited by one medium. This was why he had to resort to different, multiple ways of expression. No single medium or way of understanding permits us to see all that there is to see.

Faced with transnational political, moral and legal questions—such as those raised in Packer’s work—we cannot limit ourselves and the tools we use to tackle and understand these complex issues. Sometimes in order to understand politics we must go beyond political discourses and embrace other human faculties and ways of comprehension and expression.

For those seeing Packer’s play and confronting these issues for the first time—now stimulated and provoked—they must also see in it the limits. Only then, will a better appreciation of Packer’s work, and works like it, begin to emerge.

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