

The Gulf between Us

Trevor Griffiths

Trevor Griffiths' new play about Thomas Paine, A New World, has its première at Shakespeare's Globe, London in August 2009.

The Gulf between Us *had its première at the West Yorkshire Playhouse in Leeds in 1992. Trevor Griffiths explained its genesis.*

'I'd started working on an idea with Paul Slack and Dave Hill some time before Christmas 1990 and the idea involved building a wall in real time, on stage, every night. Originally I wasn't involved as a writer, I was just there as a sort of ideas man and a possible director for this project – it interested me, and the idea of creating a company to do new work interested me.

While we were discussing this, talking through these ideas, the deadline was set for the Gulf War. So out of the corner of my eye I was always watching the geopolitical scene and sensing with increasing horror that this was a deadline that would not be met and that was intended not to be met. The Western Alliance had decided that it needed this war of retribution.

When the war actually began, on the night of 16-17 January 1991, I was in America discussing a screenplay I'd just written about Eastern Europe with the director Bob Rafelson, and I watched the bombs dropping on Baghdad from the comparative safety of a Beverly Hills hotel. I remember the sense of rage and horror and pity in me, feelings that were going to grow and grow over those forty-four horrific days of slaughter. When I got back home, about a week after the outbreak of war, I called Dave Hill and said, "I think these guys should be building a wall in the Middle East," and that's really where *The Gulf between Us* started.'

The scene we have excerpted from the play is set around the site of what used to be a mosque, which was used as a children's crèche until it took a direct hit from an American missile. O'Toole, Ryder and Chatterjee are rebuilding a wall under the watchful and impatient eye of Ismael, a government official, while Dr Aziz, inspector of crèches, has finally gained access to the site through the wall ...

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O'Toole returns to the crater, squats before it, checks watch, sky. Stares into the water. A faint gold glow strikes up at his face from the pool, turning it ghastly. The glow comes and goes, like his fragmenting narrative. Shouts echo around the site. The sun's on a slow dip; reddening.

(Blank) Gilder Builder Minder Soldier Major

Caliph Wall War Play Lamp Crown

Prisoner Doctor ...

(Tries again.)

Doctor ...

He had not lied, he told himself.

Lying.

Between the alarm and the attack

Between the heart and the brain-pan

Between us the Gulf ...

The dark.

Two minutes, in and out, the barn would be repaired, they
would gain their release ...

Long ago, on an arch in the great Alhambra, he had written
in letters of gold the words of Gilgamesh, king of the
first city, builder of the first wall:

Be what you are. Seek not what you may not find. Let
your every day be full of joy. Love the child that holds
your hand. Let your wife delight in your embrace. For
these alone are the concerns of humanity.

And now, the dark.

Half blind. Half gone in the head. Half ...

Ululations set up abruptly, single voices, tiny clusters, this time out front. The pool lamp flickers out. O'Toole stares at the city. Ismael barks instructions, on the approach. The sentries turn to see him in. He's telling them to help in the search; they slither away.

ISMAEL: You finished, Ryder Billy?

RYDER: (*Edging back towards shrine*) All but, chief.

O'TOOLE: (*Calling*) How we doin', Chat? Almost ready to unveil?

Chatterjee moves into vision, downstage end of scaffolding, waves his trowel, smiling benignly. The women's calls lift, grow more intense.

ISMAEL: Show. Uncover. (*Chatterjee doesn't move.*) Ryder Billy! Do it.

Ryder looks at O'Toole, begins to haul the canvas back and up from the scaffolded wall. Several blocks have been picked out from lower courses, to ease her entry. Ismael moves a pace or two forward. O'Toole stands.

(*Slow*) What you do here? (*Scans the three.*) What the story? O'Toole?

O'TOOLE: The story. Let me think ...

A strange unearthly sound begins to build from within the shrine: dog breath, shrieks of infants, the crack of burning bone. The calling women fall abruptly silent. The site reddens, sun dipping on. At the heart of the sound, Dr. Aziz's voice, a growing wretched terrifying wail, outlasting the rest.

Silence.

Ismael edges forward. Stops at movement beyond the wall. Militiamen begin to appear on the ridge. Ismael sends them away. Dr Aziz returns through the gap in the wall, her headshawl bundled around something in her hands.

ISMAEL: (*In Arabic throughout*) Put it back. You put that back, that's an order.

He opens his jacket. Dr Aziz looks at him steadily.

DR AZIZ: (*In Arabic*) May God forgive you, Ismael. (*She scans the three workers; in English*) May God forgive you too. (*A glance out front.*) May God forgive us all ...

She heads for the crater. Reaches Ismael. He stands for some moments, turns abruptly away, goes back to his perch on the hulk above the site, stares out towards the perimeter.

O'Toole sits on the rubble ridge, face blank, in the dark.

O'TOOLE'S VOICE: (*Relay*) The bits we never remember. The bits we edit ... out.

Dr Aziz has sat by the pool. Rocks a bit, the bundle held close to her breast.

A single mother's voice, close, awful, calls her child's name: Ibrahim.

DR AZIZ: Al-Aker. Ibrahim. Three years four months. *(To the sky beyond the city)* Who do you think you are? Mm? Who do you think we are?

She lays the shawl down on earth. Unwraps it. Examines the contents.

Perhaps. How can we tell?

A second mother calls a name: Hanin.

On the shawl, an almost abstract shine-black sculpture of abbreviated limbs and torsos fused and reworked under intense heat, gleams on the cloth.

Al-Kurdi. Hanin. Four. Recently recovered from dysentery. *(To sky)* What have we done to you, mm? What awful wrong? That you would kill children ...? *(To the charcoal)* Hanin, is it? What shall I write in my report ...?

MOTHER'S VOICE: Mamdouh. Waseem. Fadia. Eman. Shamma'eh

DR AZIZ: *(To sky)* I have travelled in your countries, taken food in your homes, shared feelings and hopes, thought of you as brothers and sisters in the long struggle for human dignity. And I have seen you, Mr President, with your sensitive expression and sorrowing eyes on my television screen ... And I had forgotten, what you will not acknowledge but the world knows, that yours is a country forged and shaped in brutal genocide, the destruction of whole peoples, lives, customs, beliefs, men, women and children who had learned respect for the place that nourished them, who had learned to tread gently on this good earth ...

A WOMAN'S VOICE: *(A child's name)* Ghazi.

DR AZIZ: *(To sky still)* You destroy your past with these acts. Your future too. Wars only have beginnings. No endings.

ANOTHER VOICE: *(Another child)* Samzi.

DR AZIZ: What kind of world have you in mind, Mr President, Mr Prime Minister, Mr Secretary-General, what kind of world do you work to preserve, where a mere 20 per cent on your side of this tiny planet take and hold and consume a full 80 per cent of its bounty? Tell me, please. I would know this. I would know this ...

VOICE: *(Name)* Nidal.

She looks down again at the charcoal figure.

DR AZIZ: Qassem. Nidal. Four years one month. Hard of hearing. I will pray to my God for you, child. *(She looks up again.)* And what will you say to yours? No no no, please, this will not be justified by invoking the evil of my rulers or the unavoidability of your ‘collateral damage’, gentlemen. This world is full of evil rule, look at those you bought or bribed or bullied to give you houseroom here, look at those you would restore to their thrones, and tell me how we are worse. As for the unavoidable, how stupid, how very stupid you must think us, to imagine a decent human being believing you for one second, when you have told us and you have shown us your ability to tell the time on a child’s wristwatch from one hundred miles, the side a woman parts her hair, the stubble on a man’s face. We have a holy place, a place of worship, a place your cameras tell every day is filled with children. And you send a missile, not a wayward falling bomb, to burn it up ... In the name of God? In the name of humankind? In the name of ...

A FINAL VOICE: Suad.

She stands, gathers the charcoal sculpting in her hands, holds it to her face to kiss it.

DR AZIZ: Jubeh. Suad. Three. Arab. How can it matter? Yes. Not quite ... one of you. Arab. Yes. But when the mouth takes the nipple, the womb shivers just the same. *(Silence.)* Gentle. Men. *(She peers around the space. Ryder looks away. O’Toole sits on, retruded, scarcely there. Ismael stares out at the perimeter. In Arabic)* You knew? Are you mad?

ISMAEL: *(Not looking; in Arabic)* I had my orders.

DR AZIZ: *(Slow; in English)* So did they. They had their orders too ...