GREGORY BURKE’S BLACK WATCH (2006): AN ILLUSTRATION OF POST–VERBATIM THEATRE

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Abstract: Gregory Burke’s *Black Watch* (2006) is a documentary play based on the common soldiers’ authentic accounts of the war in Iraq. Coinciding with the foundation of the National Theatre of Scotland, Burke’s play was innovative in the sense that it “departed from the hyperrealist trend of verbatim plays of the post 9/11 era, infusing music, projection, movement and song to contextualize the accounts of local soldiers caught amidst a foreign policy disaster” (Beck 2013: 131). Taking into account the political, in–yer–face and verbatim theatre’s influences, whose main postulates are detected in Burke’s play and illustrated in the paper, the study focuses on Beck’s claim that *Black Watch* represents a vivid example of a post–verbatim theatre, employed in the service of demystification of the prevalent Western imperialist and nationalist tendencies. Apart from Beck’s inspiring analytical views, the theoretical framework of the paper relies on acutely relevant critical insights of Cull, Hammond, Soans, Sierz, Rich, as well as Burke himself.

Introduction:
The National Theatre of Scotland and Black Watch

Bearing in mind the fact that the National Theatre of Scotland celebrates its tenth anniversary this year, the attempt of reminding the world–wide audience of its humble beginnings and early history seems to be rather adequate. Initially, it was conceived as a theatre without walls (Holdsworth 2010), whose main goal had been to bring its performances to small theatres, village halls, schools, sport centers, primarily across Scotland, the rest of the UK and, potentially, to international locations. It is worth pointing out that the need for the foundation of the Scottish National Theatre can be traced back to the beginning of the twentieth century; however, it was in 2006 that this concept was finally realized, most certainly as a result of the political devolution of the United Kingdom that was finally put into practice in 1997. After the opening of the new Scottish Parliament by Queen Elizabeth II in 2004, it was quite logical that the opening of other relevant institutions significant for the strengthening of national awareness would instantly follow, the National Theatre of Scotland just being one of them. The main issue for the newly appointed Artis-
tic Director of the National Theatre of Scotland, Vicky Featherstone, was to find intriguing subjects, as well as skillful playwrights, that would capture the attention of the Scottish and, hopefully, international audience.

Coinciding with the foundation of the National Theatre of Scotland, the infamous controversy regarding the engagement of the Black Watch regiment in the war in Iraq in 2004 became a political issue the Scottish public was set out to resolve. The Black Watch formation (or Royal Highlanders as they are popularly termed) is a celebrated Scottish military regiment whose existence dates back to the eighteenth century. Its wide-known, and for the shaping of Scottish identity, highly relevant, military engagements include the glorious service at Waterloo and in the Great War, among others. It is not surprising that the Scots strongly believe that “members of its pipe band had been informal ambassadors for Scotland for generations“, as Cull claims, rightly asserting that the confirmation of the regiment’s present relevance is definitely the fact that “it still recruited from the same tough neighbourhoods in Perthshire, Fife and Angus“ (Cull 2007: 1).

The controversial Iraqi event, important for the staging of the first play at the National Theatre of Scotland, happened some fifty kilometers south of Baghdad, in the area of Camp Dogwood. On November 4, 2004, “three young Scottish soldiers of the 1st Battalion Black Watch—Sergeant Stuart Gray and Privates Paul Lowe and Scott McArdle—and their Iraqi interpreter died in the blast from a suicide car bomb. They were part of a force of over eight hundred British soldiers who had recently moved from the relative stability of Basra to the so-called ‘Triangle of Death’ in Babil to free up American forces for their assault on Fallujah“ (Cull 2007: 1). The burning issue of young Scots becoming the collateral damage of American politics, in the period when the American presidential elections were close at hand, became a “perfect metaphor for Britain entangled at America’s behest in the Middle East“ (Cull 2007:1). Immediately after this problematic event came the announcement of the UK Ministry of Defence that “the Black Watch and four other individual Scottish regiments were to merge into a single Royal Scottish Regiment“ (Cull 2007: 1). The Scottish/British public opinion was divided on the matter, to say the least. Amidst different accounts and debates on the Iraq War, Vicky Featherstone felt it was necessary to offer a new angle to this controversy, the views of local soldiers caught in-between the foreign policy crisis, which is why she appointed Gregory Burke, a young, acclaimed Scottish playwright, to write and produce a play on this disputable issue.

**Black Watch as a Fusion of Political, In-Yer-Face and Verbatim Theatres’ Influences**

Born in 1968 into a Fife family that had already experienced continuous recruitment of its men into the British armed services, Gregory Burke
was a perfect candidate for writing a story of the Black Watch regiment. Although he had spent his formative years in Gibraltar, where his father worked at the naval dockyards, he returned to Scotland in the mid–1980s. Not particularly interested in higher education, Burke had fortunately identified his main aspirations as voracious reading and attentive theatre–going. Young and exceptionally gifted, Burke rejoiced in watching unconventional “in–yer–face” theatrical performances of the early 1990s.

The main postulate of this theatrical genre includes the transgression of widely accepted norms and conventions with aggressive, provocative, brash conduct of its practitioners on the stage. Originally coined by the British theatre critic Alex Sierz, as the title of his study dedicated to the investigation of the contemporary British drama (In–Yer–Face Theatre: British Drama Today, 2001) suggests, the term implied the unveiling of “the vulgar, shocking and confrontational material on stage as a means of involving and affecting their audiences” (Sierz 2001: 5). Burke was particularly fascinated with the extremism of its language and images and the way the audience got simultaneously unsettled and disturbed by emotional frankness and controversial questioning of moral norms. The fact that in–yer–face theatre playwrights were not “interested in showing events in a detached way and allowing audiences to speculate about them”, but were instead wishing audiences “to feel the extreme emotions shown on the stage” (Sierz 2000: 1) was of special significance to young Burke, whose theatrical beginnings reflected the controversial praxis of this “experiential” theatre, as Sierz (2000: 1) called it.

Another significant, relatively new mode of theatre writing that served as an inspiration to Gregory Burke was the verbatim theatre, whose foundation logically followed from the main postulates of the experiential “in–yer–face” theatre. Although first created at the end of 1980s and beginning of 1990s, it was the beginning of the new millennium that witnessed the masterpieces of this theatrical genre. The term “verbatim” was coined in reference to the origins of the texts spoken in the play. The technique typical of verbatim theatre implies the recording and transcription of real people’s statements, histories, elaborations and testimonies (or their appropriation, in case the transcripts of an official enquiry are consulted) by a playwright. These declarations are then edited, arranged or recontextualized, as Hammond claims, “to form a dramatic presentation, in which the actors take on the characters of the real individuals whose words are being used… In this sense, verbatim is not a form, it is a technique; it is a means, rather than an end” (Hammond 2008: 1958).

1 “The big three of in–yer–face theatre are Sarah Kane, Mark Ravenhill and Anthony Neilson. Other hotshots include Simon Block, Jez Butterworth, David Eldridge, Nick Grosso, Tracy Letts, Martin McDonagh, Patrick Marber, Phyllis Nagy, Joe Penhall, Rebecca Prichard, Philip Ridley, Judy Upton, Naomi Wallace and Richard Zajdlic. A vital contribution to the new style of writing in English was also recorded by Scottish writers such as David Greig and David Harrower.” (see Sierz 2000: 1)
According to an acclaimed British verbatim theatre playwright, Robin Soans², the main goal of this kind of theatre (and arts in general) is to be “the vessel which houses the conscience of a nation” (Soans quoted in Hammond 2008: 1963). Instead of offering mere entertainment, the purpose of the verbatim theatre is to “ask the difficult questions others would rather leave unasked”, Soans claims, and insightfully adds:

In recent years, as those in power have grown cleverer and cleverer in news manipulation, the need to ask such question has grown. It can be no accident that, as the art of spin has become more sophisticated, leading to a decline of standards in honesty in public life, there has been a simultaneous proliferation of political theatre…Only in the arts is the study of the human condition considered more important than ambition or money, so it is left to artists to ask the relevant questions (Soans quoted in Hammond 2008: 1963).

At the very beginning of his writing career, Burke got extremely interested in asking the difficult questions that Soans highlights as indispensable for a genuine artist. Being extremely aware and proud of his Scottish nationality, Burke found it necessary to “house the conscience of his nation“ (Soans quoted in Hammond 2008: 1963), so he dedicated himself to portraying the centuries-long puzzle of the Scottish/English as well as Scottish/American animosity. In this sense, one of his favourite playwrights from whom he drew the most inspiration and who could rightly be called a Scottish predecessor of contemporary verbatim and documentary theatre, has definitely been John McGrath.

McGrath’s memorable play *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil* (1973), represents an excellent piece of political theatre exemplifying the playwright’s theory of “a political theatre praxis outside established, building–based theatres and beyond the confines of the literary play-script” (Nelson 2002: 5). It is precisely this idea of political theatre and the lack of conventional literary scripts that Burke was about to adopt in his depiction of the popular Scottish military regiment.

The political content of *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil* (1973) based on the exploitation story of the Scottish Highlands by the British and American business corporations in the twentieth century, as well as the “forcible displacement“ (Dawson, Farber 2012: 31), that is the infamous Highland Clearings of the Scottish population from its ancestral homes during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, is potently reflected in its popular form, which highly appeals to a wide working-class audience. Here McGrath employs a stereotypical Scottish manner of direct address to the audience with specific local references through traditional folk songs, jokes, sketches, anecdotes and documentary material, purposefully aiming at breaking down the barrier between the actors on

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the stage and the audience, so that a sort of conversation or, better yet, a political discussion, “follows naturally from the engagement of the show” (Nelson 2002: 5). It is precisely this “egalitarian forum for exchange of ideas” (Nelson 2002: 5), as Nelson termed it, that made *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil* a great success on its rural Highland tour during the 1970s. The actors basically urged the audience into political action “as if all present at a given performance were involved in an open conspiracy against authority” (Nelson 2002: 6).

This way of writing had a great impact on Burke. McGrath’s idea of active involvement in the existing Scottish social queries and his perception of modern political theatre became the chief goals Burke was set on recreating in his writing career. Another idea that Burke found most appealing was that McGrath devoutly believed that art could help the marginalized articulate their own voice and thus become aware of resistance alternatives, although he personally thought that theatre cannot actually cause social change:

> The theatre can never *cause* social change. It can articulate the pressure towards one, help people to celebrate their strengths and maybe build their self-confidence. It can be a public emblem of inner, and outer, events and occasionally a reminder, an elbow-jogger, a perspective-bringer. Above all it can be the way people find their voice, their solidarity and their collective determination. (McGrath 1993: xxvii)

In accord with McGrath’s definition of the main purpose of theatre, Burke perceived the necessity of offering the opportunity to the common soldiers of the Black Watch regiment to be heard, since their voices were precisely the ones left unheard and neglected in the mass disarray of chaotic individual opinions and numerous subjective viewpoints regarding the Black Watch case. The solidarity and collective determination of the Black Watch soldiers were never to be questioned. A unique possibility to make people aware of their side of the story represented a rather innovative and constructive approach to a burning political issue. Burke did not promise solutions to the existing Black Watch queries; he wisely used a revolutionary opportunity to state their problems more clearly.

According to Soans, the main purpose of the theatre is exactly to make the existing problems more visible to a wide audience, whereby the task of a verbatim or documentary playwright is primarily to “interview people who have knowledge and experience that relates to the “problem” under consideration, and edit their responses into a play” (Soans quoted in Hammond 2008: 1963). It goes without saying that for a genuine verbatim artist stating the problems more clearly is not just a case of asking interesting questions, it is also about widening the number and variety of people you listen to, to include the people who traditionally have not

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3 The fact that the play witnessed its revival at Dundee Rep Theatre in 2015/2016, under the guidance of Joe Douglas, testifies to its timeless relevance for the shaping of Scottish identity.
been seen and heard in the theatre: “With someone in the public domain, the process involves persuading them to speak off the record, then really listening to them, not just going through the motions. Ultimately, stating the problems more clearly is a case of trying to give the audience a broader base of knowledge of whichever subject is being tackled“ (Soans quoted in Hammond 2008: 1963).

Thus, one of the most significant advantages of the verbatim theatre is, in Soans’ opinion, that its audience will enter the theatre with the understanding that they are not going to be lied to: “They may be unsettled by the unusual way the play is constructed, but they will be compensated for the lack of convention by the assumption that what they are looking at and listening to is revelatory and truthful” (Soans quoted in Hammond 2008: 1964). It is precisely this unique flair of confidentiality between the actors on stage and the audience that Burke was aiming to achieve in staging his play, bearing in mind the fact that soldiers and their relatives and acquaintances would, among others, definitely constitute his audience. Burke had thus found himself on an artistic quest to recreate the raw truth of the Black Watch regiment, without any attempts at softening or beautifying its burdensome bits and pieces.

**Black Watch as an Example of Post–Verbatim Theatre**

According to Alecky Blithe⁴, another modern British verbatim playwright, the contemporary audience is often amazed at how willing people are to tell their stories. She explains her verbatim experience by stating that “since we do not listen to each other enough in daily life, when someone offers an attentive ear, people grab the opportunity to talk – even about highly personal information. You can gain access to many hidden worlds simply by giving a person the opportunity to speak“ (Blithe quoted in Hammond 2008: 2004). However, making his target group speak proved to be a rather problematic and challenging task for Gregory Burke.

Burke’s insertion of the Black Watch soldiers’ testimonies in the script represented a breakthrough in the earlier theatrical practice, and the methodology of obtaining these interviews was quite different from the one that verbatim playwrights, Soans and Blithe, had applied in their respective works. Initially, the Black Watch soldiers refused to allow their words to be tape–recorded, although there were rather strict rules concerning the confidentiality of their personal data. An advantage in this unfavourable situation was definitely the fact that Burke himself grew up in the neighbourhood and could understand the locality of the ex–soldiers, their fears and suspicions, so he literally became a proper represen-

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tative of the unique Scottish working-class voice. Instead of approaching them in an official manner and conducting formal interviews with them, Burke found himself a regular customer in the pub where the Black Watch ex-soldiers used to hang out, whereby he would engage in their discussions, be it the match of the day or the war in Iraq. As Sarah Beck explains, “without recorded interviews Burke (2011) had limited verbatim material to work from and began writing fictional scenes based on the pub session“ (Beck 2013: 133). Burke himself explained the difficulty related to the soldiers’ testimonies upon drafting his play:

I kind of wrote down all of the things they were telling me and whenever I got to a part about Iraq, whenever I got to a bit about Iraq I’ll just write that, rather than write them telling me about that, I’ll write that scene happening. So when they arrived at Camp Dogwood—when we first arrived it was a shit hole, it was this it was that, I’ll just write that with them arriving. It’s a shit hole (Burke 2011 quoted in Beck 2013: 133).

Although thoroughly horrified with the prospect of Camp Dogwood, it is worth pointing out that the soldiers did not express their dissatisfaction with the personal engagement in the war in Iraq, the ways they would justify the deployment of their regiment there or, for that matter, the political climate either in the UK or Iraq. What they found most disturbing was “the lack of glory upon their return home, the betrayal of the ‘golden thread’, the promise of glory and tradition, a ‘lie’ repeated throughout history that Burke was familiar with growing up near Dunfermline, an area with a high recruitment rate“ (Beck 2013: 313). In addition, the ex-soldiers were rather reluctant to talk about the friends who died on the mission or the futility of the whole event; the dominant feeling they collectively expressed was that of being “misled in some way, not really manipulated but used just a bit disheartened that they weren’t going to be heroes“ (Anderson 2011 in Beck 2013: 314).

The lack of sentimentalism and philosophical accounts of the war in Iraq on the part of the Black Watch ex-soldiers made Burke rather inventive in his fictionalized narratives. Although greatly inspired by “verbatim plays of the post-9/11 decade that offered empathetic portrayals of subjects emulating the inflections and hesitations of subjects” (Beck 2013: 135), Burke intentionally diverted from this trend and embraced a documentary style of John McGraths’s *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil* (1973), mixed with traditional Scottish music, folklore and customs to “enhance the testimonies shared“ (Anderson 2011, Tiffany 2012 in Beck 2013: 135).

Burke’s creative projection of the soldiers’ transcripts from the pub resulted in a fictional dramatization of the Black Watch mission in Iraq in 2004. Viewed from this perspective, Burke was actually distancing his artistic accounts from the domain of reality and simultaneously detaching himself from the verbatim theatre postulates. Basically, the verbatim theatre approach was too limiting for the story Burke had set out to tell: “After
embracing a more permissive representation of the stories, Burke found this approach more liberating as a writer enabling an active dialogue amongst characters free from the constraints of replicating the interview setting from verbatim accounts“ (Beck 2013: 136). Burke’s dramatization of the Iraq scenes in the play offered more theatrical possibilities (Tiffany 2012 in Beck 2013: 136), so he found himself in a rather conflicting situation: how to create a balance between the verbatim theatre tradition (remaining loyal to the soldiers’ versions of the story, as well as their purposefully unrefined, raw and obscene language) on the one hand, and inserting his creative vision of the aforementioned event on the other.

The result was a quite innovative theatre technique, claims Beck: “Black Watch is not so much a verbatim play, but rather a ‘post–verbatim’ play, departing from the constraints of emulating word–for–word accounts in favor of channeling the essence of the stories through theatrical techniques“ (Beck 2013: 137). The musical director of the play, Anderson, defined this innovative technique succinctly:

It’s a total post–verbatim [...] there was such a movement, a verbatim style. And quite quickly there was a desire to react against the strictness of trying to get it down to the inflection of the interview subjects and just wanting to be freed up artistically and the limitations of that I suppose. And also a belief that by being strictly verbatim, and being very true and honest to the interviews, wasn’t necessarily, didn’t equal great art but also didn’t equal something that was truthful on a deeper level more than just being faithful to the words. (Anderson 2011 in Beck 2013:137)

The post–verbatim technique has thus become one of the distinctive features of Burke’s Black Watch, definitely marking it as one of the pioneering works in this recently developed theatrical field.

Demystification of War, Imperialism, Nationalism and Patriotism

Burke’s post–verbatim technique has greatly contributed to a clear, precise and concrete depiction of the play’s focus: putting forth the ‘face’ of the Black Watch soldiers, “demanding that spectators confront their own assumptions and everyday complacency while wars are waged in the name of nationalism“ (Beck 2013: 149). This is precisely the reason why the officers, NCOs and Iraqis have only a marginal part in Black Watch; as a matter of fact, they seldom appear on stage. In addition, the references to Islam are conspicuously absent from the play. Even the names of the leading political demagogues, Bush, Blair, Saddam, as well as popular media coinages of “the weapons of mass destruction“ and “the Enduring Freedom“ (the way the Americans named their military mission in Iraq in 2004), are not heard on the stage.
The play focuses on the common soldiers’ view of the war in Iraq, because they have the ability to see through the common disguises of the high–flown political rhetoric and offer credible demystification thereof: the war is only about “porn and petrol” (Burke 2010: 34). The result of the soldiers’ eye–view, as Cull claims, is a play which is pro–soldier – though not pro–war, but which refuses to sentimentalize its subjects (2007: 8). The Black Watch soldiers proudly reveal their sincere personal conviction that ultimately they are not fighting for any country or government, but for their mates. The notion of the soldiers’ brotherhood, expressed through an unrelentingly brutal and provocatively unsophisticated language, “appears like a perverse analogue of class consciousness: their regimental spirit, in Burke’s hands, seems like an embezzlement of the resource of class solidarity, which has been misdirected to serve the ends of the Imperial and post–Imperial state“ (Cull 2007: 8).

The plain manipulation of common soldiers who serve the ends of the Imperial and post–Imperial state, as Cull insightfully reveals, is represented in the play through a vivid description of the Black Watch regiment’s role throughout its history. One of the main protagonists in the play, Cammy, talks about the history of his regiment from its military service beginnings in the American revolution followed by Waterloo, Crimea, the Great War, to its actual engagement in Iraq. As Cammy narrates the history of his regiment, his fellow soldiers sing the most popular regimental songs and get dressed and redressed in the uniforms of the regiment matching the moment of his narration.

There is, however, a great discrepancy present in the accounts of the bygone military engagements of the Black Watch regiment and the actual one in Iraq. While narrating about the mission in Iraq, Cammy mentions the key themes related to it – the role of the media, the soldiers’ boredom while waiting for new orders, the huge gap between the economic power of the West and the impoverished people of Iraq. The futility and absurdity of the British intervention in Iraq is reiterated through a detailed description of a British anti–tank missile paradoxically destroying a donkey cart. The real asymmetry emerges, Cull claims, as the Scottish soldiers discuss their encounters with their American allies, and he adds:

The men watch in awe as American forces bombard an enemy village with a bewildering arsenal of pyrotechnics and discuss a visit from two absurdly over–pumped Marines eager to trade for regimental souvenirs. The Black Watch trade a redundant pair of extra, extra, extra, extra large t–shirts for a prized ‘US army field cot.’ The Scots’ uncomfortable conclusion is that what they and the Americans are doing is not real soldiering, but ‘bullying.’ (Cull 2007: 10)

In Cull’s opinion, one of the most revealing lines spoken in the play is by an officer of the regiment who grimly states that his men will not find glory in Iraq. In the last scene of the play, the same officer sums up the dominant sense of waste, shame and utter meaninglessness of the whole ordeal:
It takes three hundred years to build an army that’s admired and respected around the world. But it only takes three years pissing about in the desert in the biggest western foreign policy disaster ever to fuck it up completely. (Burke 2010: 71 quoted in Cull 2007: 10)

Burke’s play thus represents a potent demystification and condemnation of the war mission in Iraq in 2004 through sporadic but highly effective revelation of the Western imperialist tendencies (particularly those on the part of the USA), as well as constant provocative appeals to nationalist and patriotic impulses among the Black Watch soldiers on the part of the British governmental officials. Although the play symbolically begins and ends with a military tattoo, featuring the Black Watch regiment in all its military glory, immersed in the celebratory bagpipe and drum tattoo music, the last scene in the play painfully indicates that the shattered regimental parade actually reflects the conspicuous lack of the military prowess of its soldiers on the battlefield. There is absolutely nothing glorious and dignified about the picture of the soldiers stumbling and falling down, which ultimately results in a complete disintegration of the regiment. The only comforting image present at the very end of the play is that each time the parade begins to disintegrate and soldiers fall down, they are helped back onto their feet by their fellow men–at–arms. However, as the military tattoo music and movement climax, a thunderous drumbeat stops and the exhausted, breathless soldiers are left in the silhouette (Burke 2010: 73).

In other words, although the military mission in Iraq is definitely over, the soldiers who survived it cannot resume with their lives as if they had not been engaged in this painful experience. The very fact that they are still dressed in their war uniforms testifies to the previous claim. They have not yet fully processed the war experiences, which becomes most obvious in the character Stewarty, who becomes very aggressive towards the writer and tries to break his arm, which is, according to Kowalewski, Söhlmann, Miller, Uth and Leibing (2014: 2), a crucial scene in the play. Stewarty’s attempt to break the writer’s arm illustrates the impossibility of understanding a painful experience without having lived through it:

Trying to convey his apparently traumatic experience to the writer, he goes from simply telling him that he broke his own arm repeatedly to attempting to break the writers arm to make him understand – “write it down with a broken arm.” This scene shows that Stewarty equates the emotional trauma that he has experienced to physical pain. Further, this allows him to make his pain visible and thus make it understandable to others. The fact that he attempts to break the writer’s arm is important in regard to the overall topic of communicating experience – since the experience itself stems from violence and pain, it cannot be understood unless the recipient of the message feels the pain himself. (Kowalewski, Söhlmann, et al. 2014 :2)

One of the most relevant aims of Burke’s post–verbatim theatre can rightly be deduced from this crucial moment in the play: a formidable
demand on the part of Stewarty to break the writer’s arm in order for him to, at least partially, experience the pain of the Black watch soldiers, definitely corresponds to the creative urge of the playwright himself who has the same shocking demand for his audience. When watching Burke’s play, the contemporary audience should at the very least be disturbed, if not utterly provoked, by the soldiers’ inglorious destinies. Symbolically, Burke’s unconventional and appalling story represents the only possible path of understanding (and potential sharing) of the Black Watch regiment’s painful experience without their audience being literally and personally engaged in the horrible atrocities of the war in Iraq.

Furthermore, through the post-war experience of the Black Watch soldiers, the audience is revealingly and purposefully presented with the raw truth of violence, corruption, cruelty and crimes of (post)modern culture in general. One can easily detect the prevailing symptoms of despair in the Black Watch regiment, stemming from the dissatisfaction with the way their lives are led after the painful military experience. It could be rightly asserted that these war veterans suffer from a self-imposed amnesia and self-exoneration, a spontaneous flare-up of mass denial that ultimately results in the ‘deniability’ syndrome. This syndrome is unfortunately established as a desirable political goal regarding governmental actions – although the Scottish (British) public is quite aware of the fact that the war in Iraq was a watershed, it also became a part of the history to which they willingly closed their eyes. Thus, Burke’s ultimate goal was definitely to reveal the hypocrisies behind the façade of the modern (Scottish/British) society in which, nowadays, the great majority is saying ‘yes’ to new laws that will effectively divest people of many civil liberties, and ‘yes’ to increases in military spending to the detriment of domestic issues. At the same time, Burke passionately criticizes a rather problematic attitude of the British Government towards these soldiers – stuck in the middle between the global US military policy and random Scottish casualties, it has unfortunately been proved that the common preference is given to the political demands of the powerful overseas ally, most frequently at the cost of the genuine needs of its own citizens. This is precisely the reason why the main characters in Burke’s play face an inevitable personal fall in the troublesome Iraqi adventure; however, after the uneasy experience of an unavoidable mental breakdown, they are given an insight into what had befallen them – and, symbolically, they rise by falling: by accepting their own misapprehensions regarding the nationalist and patriotic impulses, remarkably they heal and redeem themselves afterwards.

The individual bone of contention of each Black Watch veteran is the return to a country that willingly turns a blind eye to their Iraqi experience. The ex-soldiers generally notice that they cannot share the vision of reality with their fellow compatriots anymore – they can only share a drink in the pub (and even a random drink in the pub may constitute a problematic experience, as already seen). In other words, what is expected
from the veterans is to become invisible and not to disturb the glorious saga of the Black Watch regiment. Their inevitable fall into the troubling reality represents, at the same time, a final reawakening, because, after the return from the war in Iraq, they are able to see the raw truth about their country for the first time. What these veterans start to realize is that war is not taking place only in Iraq, but that it is present in everyday life as well. War expresses a total contempt for human creativity since it encourages a kind of existence in which role-playing is substituted for bare survival and common subsistence. Viewed from this perspective, the mother country (the UK in general and Scotland in particular) betrayed its sons who were desperately in need of guidance regarding their new recuperating way of life.

Like many others from his generation whose youth ideals remained unrealized, because they had been altered and falsified by those who appropriated and reinterpreted them for the masses, Burke focuses himself on the consequences of Scotland’s retreat from its past promise. Deeply concerned with dysfunctional individuals, Burke presents a gallery of characters ranging from homicidal to alienated, and in that way satirizes the renowned Black Watch myth, by openly revealing the crippling processes that its loyal subjects are inescapably exposed to. However, the very fact that the play was put on stage at the beginning of the new millennium testifies to an unmistakable ray of hope that remains as long as one’s personal system of beliefs is left intact and unshaken. Although physically and mentally lost in Iraq, and on the verge of becoming an easy prey to global (and local!) indoctrination and ideology, the Black Watch soldiers manage to gather their crumbled bits and pieces. The stoic willingness to offer their unheard war stories to the playwright who then successfully staged them is certainly a valid confirmation of this claim.

Concluding Remarks

In her influential study What is Found There: Notebooks on Poetry and Politics (1993) the politically engaged American poetess Adrienne Rich discusses the officially disputable but dominant flair of inevitability and indispensability served to the general public regarding the matter of military conflicts. She writes about the involvement of her country in the Gulf War in 1991 and argues that, in general, one of the most powerful ideological means for fighting a war is its absolute approval and justification on the part of the silent majority of the population. Horrified by the fact that a publication entitled A Gulf War Feelings Workbook for Children could be easily purchased at the San Francisco airport in 1991, in a bright spiral plastic binder, decorated with yellow ribbons, Rich rightly asserts that, unfortunately, feelings have become instant commodities nowadays. A successful erasure of critical thinking and logical reasoning desirable in the early childhood is definitely one of the crucial aims of the afore-
mentioned publication, since, in Rich’s opinion, it purposefully leaves no question open and keeps doubt, confusion, bitterness, fear and mourning at bay. Writing about her country’s role in the military conflicts of the twentieth century, Rich perceives war as an absolute failure of imagination, bestowed on the depressive nation like an electroshock, whose most perilous side-effect is the loss of memory: “That a war can be represented as helping a people to “feel good” about themselves, their country, is a measure of that failure” (Rich 1993: 16).

This is precisely the idea that Rich recognized at the beginning of the new millennium, when the US Government justified the military mission in Iraq unconvincingly terming it “The War on Terror“ (first coined by the Bush administration in 2001 after the September 11 attacks on the United States), whereby most Islamic organizations, as well as the regimes that supported them, were designated as terrorist. It is with a keen sense of justice and integrity that Rich participated in numerous anti-war activities, protesting against the war in Iraq in the early 2000s. In her opinion, the creative act of writing corresponds to a form of political activism, and a true artist, a dissident, represents the voices of the silenced and the deprived, since his/her art should break boundaries, “break silences, speaking for, or at best, with the silenced“ (Rich 2009: 130). The result of this revelatory process is “an art that talks back, that would act as part of the world, not simply as a mirror of it” (Rich 2009: 130).

In his innovative post-verbatim theatre, Gregory Burke, one of many contemporary British artists who have insightfully pointed to the overall political, military and media machinations of the war in Iraq, has definitely become the prophetic voice of the silenced and deprived – the Black Watch soldiers. As Sarah Beck claims, “Black Watch excels is in putting forth the moral ambiguity soldiers face in contemporary warfare and the invisibility soldiers feel amongst civilians so that audiences can consider their own relationality to soldiers, some who have been killed in war-torn Iraq” (Beck 2013: 150). By making soldiers’ accounts accessible to theatre audiences all over the world, Burke raises important questions regarding the responsibility of spectators/civilians to soldiers: “How are we accountable for their lives? How are we implicated in the violence in Iraq? What of the civilians’ dead—how are we as citizens accountable for the lives lost and shaped by war?” (Beck 2013: 150).

Thus, one of the most relevant advantages of the fact that Black Watch departed from traditional verbatim constraints is definitely the conspicuous enhancement of the necessary exchange between the theatre group, on the one hand, and audience, on the other, where mutual vulnerability and ethical responsibility can be recognized through performance. (Beck 2013: 151). Bearing this idea in mind, perhaps the best recommendation for watching Burke’s play was given in Philip Fisher’s review for the British Theatre Guide: “It might well affect your life or at the very least, your perception of the War on Terror and those who are waging it on your
behalf" (Fisher 2008:1). By all means, Burke’s *Black Watch* provides a provocative and disturbing theatrical experience not easily forgotten, or, as Rich defiantly put it, “an art that talks back” (Rich 2009: 130).

**REFERENCES**


Документарна драма Грегорија Берка Црна стража (2006): илустрација Јоси–вербатим шеајра
Сажењак

Документарна драма Грегорија Берка Црна стража (2006) заснива се на аутентичним исказима обичних шкотских војника о рату у Ираку. Писана у исто време када је Национални театар Шкотске започињао своју уметничку мисију, Беркова драма свакако је представљала иновацију у смислу да се „удаљила од хипереалистичког тренда вербатим драма из периода који је уследио након терористичког напада на Куле близнакиње у Њујорку, 11. септембра 2001. године, стапајући музику, пројекцију, покрет и песму ради контекстуализације исказа локалних војника усред катастрофе британске владе у спољној политици.“ (Бек 2013:131) Узимајући у обзир утицаје политичког, прстом–у–око (in–yer–face theatre) и документарног позоришта (verbatim theatre), чији су основни поступати уочени у Берковој драми и илустровани у раду, ова студија се заснива на тврдњи Бекове да Црна стража представља очигледан пример пост–вербатим театра, који аутор користи у сврху демистификације преовлађујућих империјалистичких и националистичких тенденција запада. Поред надахнутих и аналитичких ставова Бекове, теоријски оквир рада почиња на актуно релевантним критичким увидима Кала, Хамонда, Соунса, Сирза, Ричове, као и самог аутора, Грегорија Берка.

Кључне речи: Национални театр Шкотске, Црна стража, пост–вербатим, демистификација, национализам, империјализам, патриотизам

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