

# A passionate exposure of the David Hicks case, with one glaring omission

Honour Bound, co-designed and directed by Nigel Jamieson

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*Honour Bound*, a 90-minute multimedia performance co-designed and directed by Nigel Jamieson at the Sydney Opera House until September 3 and Melbourne's Malthouse Theatre from September 15 until October 1, dramatises the plight of David Hicks, a 31-year-old Australian citizen imprisoned in Guantánamo Bay for almost five years in violation of the Geneva Conventions and his basic democratic rights.

Hicks was captured by Northern Alliance forces in Afghanistan November 2001, just after the US-led invasion of the country. He was sold to the US military, which transported him to Guantánamo in January 2002. Since then Hicks, who had not broken any Australian laws at the time of his seizure, has been subjected to physical torture, ongoing psychological humiliation and extended periods of total isolation.

Denied access to a lawyer for two years, until he was charged in June 2004 under the now illegal US military commissions, Hicks has been falsely accused of being an Al Qaeda terrorist and demonised by the US and Australian governments and the corporate media.

Nigel Jamieson is a well-known figure in Australian performing arts and a specialist in large-scale theatrical productions and mass events. These include the *Tin Symphony* for the opening of the 2000 Olympic Games in Sydney and the closing ceremony of the 2002 Manchester Commonwealth Games. He has also produced *Homelands*, an outdoor performance that explores the problems facing refugees seeking asylum in Australia. Jamieson, who has been deeply concerned about the growing assault on basic rights implemented under the so-called "war on terror", began working on *Honour Bound* after watching the Curtis Levy documentary, *The President versus David Hicks*. (See "Honour Bound director Nigel Jamieson speaks with WSWs".)

The production's title is from "Honor Bound to Defend Freedom", the motto of the US military joint task force that runs Guantánamo military jail. As many commentators have noted, the phrase bears a chilling resemblance in its bureaucratic double-speak to "Freedom is Slavery" in Orwell's novel *1984* or "Arbeit macht frei" (Work will free you), which adorned the gates of several of the Nazi concentration camps.

*Honour Bound*, which was developed in consultation with Terry Hicks, David's father, is a passionate and at times harrowing work. It is set inside a stark, eight-metre square cage-like structure and involves six dancers attired in the infamous Guantánamo bright orange boilersuits. The back wall, which is also used to project video-footage and graphics, includes a small moveable cage the same size as those used in Guantánamo. The dancers, using a complex system of wires, leather straps and pulleys, are able to run up and down the walls and other surfaces to create an astonishing multi-dimensional effect. The show also touches on Terry and Bev Hicks's determined efforts to rescue their son from Guantánamo and the tremendous pressures they've had to deal with and overcome.



A scene from *Honour Bound*

The dance sequences, which were developed by Garry Stewart, artistic director of the Australian Dance Theatre, are complex and physically demanding. Dancers interchange as prisoners and interrogators and are called upon to perform a range of aerial manoeuvres. Walls become floors, and vice versa; elaborate lighting, sound design, and various other effects are used to create some sense of the psychological disorientation inflicted on the prisoners.

While the dancers have no dialogue, there is a narration which supplements projected photographs of David Hicks and scenes from Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo Bay, as well as animated texts of the Geneva Convention, the Declaration of Human Rights, FBI emails and American military torture manuals and various video clips.

*Honour Bound* has many striking moments. The most

memorable is when one of the dancer/prisoners, who is suspended about two and a half metres above the stage, appears to walk along the projected text of the Geneva Conventions on the treatment of war prisoners. Just before he reaches the end of the animated and moving words, they suddenly flip over and he plummets to the floor, forced to reascend the wall and begin the process all over again.

Another scene symbolically portrays a young David Hicks attempting to overcome a range of social and personal difficulties that he faced at the time. Dancer and acrobat DJ Garner performs this physically strenuous section of the production, hoisting himself high above the stage against a backdrop of snapshots of Hicks and video footage of his parents' home. This scene not only humanises Hicks, who continues to be slandered by the Howard government and a small group of extreme right-wing Australian media commentators, but helps to illustrate why he left Australia seeking adventure and later converted to Islam.

*Honour Bound* is an artistically ambitious work that powerfully recreates the claustrophobia, dashed hopes, despair and moments of insanity that face Hicks and hundreds of other Guantánamo prisoners every day. Audiences are confronted on a range of emotional levels and the production makes it terrifyingly clear that the Bush administration's treatment of prisoners in Guantánamo is a war crime.

The production, however, has one serious and frustrating omission—it fails to make clear that the Australian government is a co-conspirator with Washington in Hicks's incarceration and the quashing of his basic legal rights.

As everyone knows, the Howard government slavishly endorsed the US detention and torture of Hicks from the outset, in order to demonstrate its loyalty to Washington and justify its participation in the "war on terror". Prime Minister Howard and his senior ministers have shamelessly denied the mountain of evidence from human rights organisations, lawyers and sections of the US military and the FBI proving that Guantánamo prisoners have been tortured. In fact, the Australian government is virtually alone in backing these violations.

But apart from a passing reference by Bev Hicks to Australia's foreign minister Alexander Downer, and former defence minister Robert Hill, and a brief concluding appeal by Terry Hicks for the Australian government "to do something" to end the illegal treatment of his son, *Honour Bound* does not mention the Howard government. This is not accidental, given the detailed research that went into the production and the passionate concern of those involved, and is no doubt bound up with increasing government pressure on writers, artists and filmmakers.

It is no secret that the Howard government has moved to silence any critical voices in the state-funded Australian Broadcasting Corporation and is acutely sensitive to any oppositional commentary from artists and intellectuals. At the

same time, cash-strapped theatre companies, desperately in need of government grants to keep operating, are nervous about the impact of any production that directly challenges the government's right-wing agenda.

Over the past 12 months these pressures have intensified. Last year Canberra reacted with great fury and anxiety to the Melbourne Theatre Company's production of Hannie Rayson's *Two Brothers*, a political thriller that attempted to explore the political psychology behind the Howard government's treatment of refugees and asylum seekers. The play became the subject of an unprecedented—and lengthy—cabinet meeting, with some senior ministers demanding that the Arts Council, Australia's most important funding body, be shut down because it backed the production.

In other measures, two dramatic works, one of them *Wages of Spin*, an exposure of the political and media spin to justify the war on Iraq, were denied tour funding. Late last year, Canberra suddenly withdrew promised funds to a festival of Australian films in Jakarta, the Indonesian capital, jeopardising the long-running event, because it included Levy's *The President versus David Hicks*.

In this atmosphere, the reticence of the creators of *Honour Bound* to make mention of the Howard government's role is perhaps unsurprising, but none the more commendable. Things need to be called by their proper names. No authoritarian or would-be authoritarian regime has ever backed off because artists showed forbearance. On the contrary, such an attitude only encourages those in power.

Moreover, the reluctance to criticise the Howard government represents a misreading of the present political situation and underestimates the degree of hostility to its policies, on Hicks and every other question. An open challenge by artists to the government would receive widespread support and help clarify a considerable layer of the population as to the real state of affairs.

Notwithstanding Jamieson's refusal to indict Canberra, *Honour Bound*, which involves some of the country's finest dancers and multi-media directors and technicians, has an objective significance. Above all, it is a measure of the government's deep unpopularity and isolation.

Four and a half years ago, few Australian dramatists or choreographers would have imagined themselves writing and directing a show about the plight of Guantánamo prisoners. But today, such is the extent of anger and opposition to the Howard government and its assault on long-established democratic and legal rights, that this sort of production is now being staged at the Sydney Opera House, Australia's most prestigious venue.



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