

Honour Bound director Nigel Jamieson speaks with WSWs

Richard Phillips
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Honour Bound director Nigel Jamieson is best-known for his large-event productions—*Tin Symphony at the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games* and the closing ceremony of the *Manchester Commonwealth Games*. But before migrating to Australia from Britain in 1992 he worked with the Royal National Theatre and founded and directed the acclaimed *Trickster Theatre Company* and several other theatre groups. In 1985, he was awarded the Greater London Arts Award for outstanding contribution to the fields of Dance and Physical Theatre.

In Australia, Jamieson has worked with the ABC, the Adelaide Festival, *Legs On The Wall* and the *Rock 'n' Roll Circus*. His local productions include, *Theft of Sita*, *All of Me*, *Wake Baby*, *In My Name* and *Homelands*. He recently spoke with the WSWs about Honour Bound.

Richard Phillips: Why did you decide to develop a production on David Hicks?

Nigel Jamieson: I was approached by the Sydney Opera House and asked whether I had any ideas for a new work. I was in the middle of three other things at the time but had just seen *The President versus David Hicks* and was very moved by it. I walked down into the cavernous space underneath the Opera House and had this image of a suspended figure in orange boiler suit spinning in white space. This was the initial image around which the show was developed.

What has happened to David Hicks is traumatic and highlights some fundamental principles about our society. His plight, and *Honour Bound* itself, asks whether we're going to stand by habeas corpus, trial by jury, presumption of innocence, the declaration of human rights, the Geneva Conventions and all those things that we've signed up for as a democratic, humanitarian people.

I'm always interested in creating heightened forms of physicality and David's story had many elements that could be explored. There was Guantánamo itself, which was established to be outside the law, almost as if it doesn't really exist—not part of the US or Cuba. This meant we could develop something on a number of different planes—upside down, in the air and on the walls. The prisoners are always chained up and being interrogated and manipulated so various aerial images came to mind, with ropes, pulleys, levers and other devices used as metaphors.

Theatre is always the strongest when it covers the extremes of humanity and it seemed to me that Guantánamo has a terrible inhumanity and barbarism that should be exposed. At the same time, there is Terry Hicks [David's father], who has an incredible

warmth, and I thought that with his assistance we could develop a wonderful production.

RP: Did you meet Terry after watching the documentary?

NJ: Yes, I saw the film last year and then visited Adelaide and met Terry and Major Michael Mori [David Hicks's military lawyer].

Terry is an astonishing person—totally open, engaging and warm. How he and his wife Bev cope with the pressures they're under I can't even begin to imagine. I know that if my son were in David's situation I'd be in a terrible state but Terry maintains his integrity and never appears to get angry.

Obviously there are many difficult moments which affect him deep down but this never seems to stop him from communicating a very reasonable message. And he always treats everyone in the same straightforward way. Four and half years ago he'd never been outside Australia and then suddenly he travelled to Afghanistan, Pakistan and the US to try and secure his son's basic rights.

RP: There are many striking scenes in the production. How did you develop the sequence with the suspended Guantánamo prisoner walking along the Geneva Conventions?

NJ: These documents can be quite dry reading so we wanted to find a way of presenting these principles in a living way and at the same time illustrate the dilemma facing the prisoners. The solution lay in trying to make the process somehow interactive. We began experimenting with various video programs, which allowed the text to be manipulated, and combined this with walking on the wall.

RP: Washington and the Howard government would certainly like the Geneva Conventions to become a dead letter.

NJ: US Attorney-General Gonzales has described the Conventions as "quaint". Their attitude seems to be that these principles are only OK in peaceful times and as soon as there are real problems they should be dispensed with.

As terrible as 9/11 and other terrorist atrocities around the world were, these Conventions were put in place in 1947 and 1948 in response to the deaths of 200 million people who lost their lives in the most terrible circumstances. There was, of course, the Holocaust, where six million Jews were exterminated, and millions of others in atrocities in other parts of the world, so the Geneva Conventions were not born in a period of peace and harmony but out of the horror of the Second World War.

Now we're told that these principles are old-fashioned or

impractical because the situation is different and we're dealing with "bad guys". But to describe terrorists as "bad guys" doesn't explain anything. Of course, they're bad guys, that's a given. In any case, if the aim is to stop terrorism, what's going on in Guantánamo and Abu Ghraib only provides ammunition for the terrorists.

RP: Two other sequences are striking: the video footage of Terry and Bev Hicks's home and the suspended dancer attempting to lifting himself via leather straps. Could you elaborate?

NJ: The decision to use shots of Terry's home came after I'd seen footage of US President Bush declaring that these people—the prisoners in Guantánamo—have no country, have no place, they're just parasites. I wanted something to deflate this demonisation, which has been constantly used in the war on terror. David Hicks does have a home and a country and he has parents and he has his own kids.

With regard to the leather straps, they were inspired by the photos of prisoners strapped into transport planes and the cruel images from Abu Ghraib. This sequence is very vigorous and physically difficult but [gymnast and circus performer] DJ Garner is a master of this sort of routine, which really conveys the struggle and pain facing the prisoners.

The dance routine attempts to depict what it's like to be locked up for four and a half years and then suddenly given hope that you might be released because of various legal victories—the US Supreme Court decision or being granted British citizenship—and then those hopes being dashed. How do you deal with this and how do you keep your sanity?

The routine is also related to the problems David confronted as a teenager and a young man. He struggled at a school, then his parents split up and he fell to pieces. He struggled to get off drugs, and eventually did so, then he met his wife and there were kids and then all that fell apart, so he had to deal with a lot of difficult issues. This sequence was originally 27 minutes but we had to edit it down to three and a half minutes because it is so physically demanding.

RP: The Arabic song that concludes the show is very beautiful.

NJ: Yes, the lyrics go something like: "Forgive us for our cowardice but we have been tortured beyond what we can bear". It's a traditional Egyptian song which Mishline Jammal sang and recorded especially for the show.

RP: What's been the response to the production? I read somewhere that some newspapers have refused to review it.

NJ: I read that too but it isn't really correct because virtually every newspaper has written reviews and they've been very good. I heard that someone on the radio claimed it was a waste of money to be defending David Hicks but the truth is that the Australian government is not defending David at all.

If we take a step back on these basic legal rights then the most terrible brutality is unleashed which undermines everybody. The lesson of history is that if people don't fight for these basic democratic principles then it doesn't take very long to arrive at the kind of hell that we saw in the images from Abu Ghraib and what happened there was introduced by General Miller who used these methods in Guantánamo.

This is the main point that the show makes and is shown in the

Pentagon reports that are read during the performance. These are not reports from prisoners but the Pentagon itself, which describes the most horrendous crimes—people being stripped naked and put on leashes, people being molested with dogs, people put in stress positions, people being drowned, etc., etc.

RP: One thing that *Honour Bound* doesn't deal with, however, is the Howard government. David Hicks remains in Guantánamo primarily because the Australian government refuses to call for his release or challenge Washington. Can you comment on why this isn't in the performance?

NJ: I just didn't want the production to be an attack on the Howard government. Yes, it has refused to demand his return but I don't think this is the main thing. On opening night some people in the audience hissed when there was footage of Bush. Of course, they're free to do that, but I think this distracts from the emotional power of the show.

The production is primarily to try to physicalise what we have discovered, read and explored about Guantánamo and make it more visceral than what it is when reported in the media.

In the end, we had about six and a half hours of text from Terry and Bev and they covered the role of the Howard government in these interviews but we couldn't put it all in. There are references to the fact that the British, French and Spanish governments all insisted on their people coming home and right at the end Terry says it is, "about bloody time they did something about it".

The Australian government keeps saying it has been assured by the Americans that David Hicks is not being abused but all you have to do is pick up the widely available literature documenting the atrocities in Guantánamo. Does the Australian government think it appropriate to be smeared in menstrual blood, to be tied on leashes, to interrogate people for days on end, with sleep deprivation? This is torture and abuse in any language but I guess the government will continue to claim David is being treated OK as long as Australian people don't care.

RP: Apart from the Opera House and the Malthouse in Melbourne are there plans to perform *Honour Bound* in other venues, working class suburbs, for example?

NJ: It all depends on funding and dealing with the costs of getting it out there. Obviously we want to do it as widely as we can and there has also been some interest from overseas. Hopefully whoever sees the show will begin thinking more deeply about these important issues. It isn't just about David Hicks, it's a question of basic human rights.



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