

BBC rejects David Hare's play about COVID: Ensuring there is nothing to see here

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The BBC's decision to reject an acclaimed play by Sir David Hare about his terrible experiences after catching COVID-19 points to a deliberate suppression of artistic and cultural responses to the pandemic.

Hare is one of the most celebrated figures in British theatre today, with a high profile in television drama. Part of an important group of playwrights radicalised in the 1960s, his work has focused frequently on aspects of capitalism and the structures of official British politics on both stage and screen, and he remains a highly critical voice. Last year's BBC series *Roadkill* concerned a fictional Conservative MP attempting to stave off scandal surrounding his business history. Previous stage plays have explored the consequences of rail privatisation (*Permanent Way*, 2004), the cultivation of the war drive leading up to the invasion of Iraq (*Stuff Happens*, 2004), and the 2008 banking collapse (*Power of Yes*, 2009).

Hare was diagnosed with COVID on March 22, 2020, the day the first British lockdown was announced. His doctor feared he would not survive. In the autobiographical monologue *Beat the Devil*, which premiered last year at London's Bridge Theatre starring Ralph Fiennes, Hare discusses his experiences of the virus, which he describes as "a sort of dirty bomb thrown into the body to cause havoc," and the criminal failures of the official government handling of the pandemic.

Critics described the play, directed by Nicholas Hytner, former artistic director at the National Theatre, as "revelatory," and Hare at his "furious best."

Hare was unflinching in his description of the impact the illness had on him physically, from diarrhoea to conjunctivitis, shortage of breath, vomiting, and finding that all food tasted of sewage. When his temperature hit 40°, he assumed the thermometer was broken. He experienced delusions of being "several separate identities which all sleep in the bed together." At one point he asked himself "Am I dying?"

The description won praise from medical journal *The Lancet*: "it sounds every bit as awful and scary as it should."

Making this worse was his despair at the government's callous and incompetent response to the pandemic, where "The preferred route through the crisis is bullshit." Hare rages at such failings as "the lack of personal protective equipment, which has led to mass infections and the deaths of several nurses and doctors," and the "mass slaughter" that followed the transfer of infected patients from hospitals to care homes.

Hare has sought to draw political lessons from his own horrific experiences of the virus and encountering censorship for trying to do so. He did not hesitate to point the finger at the guilty, as he was forced to listen to ministers as they "stuttered and stumbled" on air. "People complain that this is a cabinet of mediocrities. But this does violence to the word. Mediocrity suggests middling ability... These people are incompetents."

After his recovery, Hare told *BBC Radio 4*, "To watch a weasel-worded parade of ministers shirking responsibility for their failures and confecting non-apologies to the dead and dying has seen British public life sink as low as I can remember in my entire lifetime."

In return for "lockdown, isolation, commercial disaster and social distancing," he said, the public needed honesty. Ministers "must own up to their mistakes, stop dodging and waffling and start to trust us with the truth."

Philip Ball, writing in *The Lancet*, felt Hare could have said more. In his denunciation of the official line that Britain was an "exemplar of preparedness," for example, Hare did not note that the remark was made by Deputy Chief Medical Officer Jenny Harries, who also dismissed the value of mask-wearing.

The medical journal commented that "the handling of the pandemic is a reflection of a style of governance that draws on the tactics of authoritarian regimes in never admitting to or accepting responsibility for error, but instead asserting excellence and deflecting blame elsewhere ... Maybe, for all the fury of Hare's piece, we are not yet angry enough."

Hare decided to film his play for television. Over three days' filming at his home, with Mike Eley as director of

photography, Hare directed Fiennes, with Hytner producing.

When Hare first took it to the BBC, there was enthusiasm. “Everyone was very keen on the show at the BBC until it went upstairs. Suddenly, mysteriously, something they were very keen to show, they became less keen to show.”

He describes a brick wall on the pandemic: “The basic difficulty is that everybody is absolutely convinced that nobody wants to know anything about COVID-19. If you talk to, for instance, people at the BBC, they will just say: ‘Oh, give me drama on any other subject but COVID—people are not interested in COVID.’ There is absolutely no evidence for this.”

All evidence testified to an opposite public response. Hare pointed to Jack Thorne’s Channel 4 drama *Help*, which had a consolidated average audience of 3 million viewers, making it the channel’s second highest-rating one-off drama. It also registered 1.1 million streams in four days on All4, the platform’s biggest launch of a new drama.

Hare said, “It strikes me as so derelict. I have just absolutely no idea what the BBC now thinks it’s doing if it is absolutely determined to avoid anything which is remotely contentious because it simply then isn’t fulfilling its function as a public broadcaster. In drama, it’s not just crime series and police series—and it won’t take on anything like this.”

He indicated some of the context in a recent opinion article in the *Guardian*, where he urged the BBC to become “more expert at defending itself.” When investment banker and Tory party donor Richard Sharp was appointed BBC chair, he targeted Hare’s *Roadkill* for its left-wing bias, saying the playwright is “not considered to be impartial.”

Hare said the BBC has been cowed into submission by “Threats from the government, and alleged interference from one member of the BBC board itself.” News at Ten was “too often reduced to the cheerless reiteration of government press releases. It has become more like a state broadcaster than a public service, with serious investigations abandoned and all mention of the prime minister’s history of lying censored.”

He could have gone much further. The BBC has fallen in line with the government’s murderous policies. Its health correspondent Nick Triggle is a loyal champion of herd immunity, with articles like, “Why goal is to live with the virus—not fight it.”

Echoing Johnson’s “Let the bodies pile high in their thousands,” Triggle wrote complacently in February, “Covid isn’t something that can be eradicated like smallpox was... Thousands will still die in winters to come.”

Reviewing *Help*, the *World Socialist Web Site* noted that the *Guardian*’s Lucy Mangan produced a “decidedly sniffy” review downplaying its significance by describing

the drama as an addition to “the wealth of pandemic testimonies that can and must be entered into the record in any way they can be.” We replied, “The truth is that *Help* is unfortunately not merely one addition to a wealth of ‘pandemic testimonies’, not artistically at least.”

The BBC’s refusal to take *Beat the Devil* confirms that the failure to address the pandemic is not only an artistic failure, but a refusal to challenge an undeclared policy of the major producers and broadcasters. When not even a recognised piece by David Hare can find its way onto the BBC, that can only be read as a determined statement that this is a pandemic-free zone—move along, nothing to see here.

The play will now be broadcast on *Sky Arts* on November 11. This will make it one of the very few dramas or comedies to have touched on life under lockdown, of which most are from an individualistic, petty-bourgeois standpoint of “How terrible its inconvenience to me!”

Help demonstrated that a receptive audience is desperate for serious works on the social crisis of the pandemic, but broadcasters and newspapers parrot the government line. That big names have been censored—the *Guardian* refused to publish former children’s laureate Michael Rosen’s letter denouncing the government’s herd immunity policy, again based on his own harrowing experiences—is intended to deter any critical response or comment.

Reviewing the original stage production, *The Lancet* described *Beat the Devil* as “a raw early product of art’s response to COVID 19,” insisting “There is much more to be said.” This will require a broader view.

Above all it demands some serious addressing of the science and the social impact of the disease, which is falling chiefly on the working class. The *Lancet* review points to a growing recognition of these questions among scientists, as did the World Socialist Web Site’s October 24 webinar “How to stop the pandemic,” where scientists explained that COVID is an eradicable and controllable disease.

Informed and angry testaments of survivors like Hare and Rosen, who are determined to get to the core of this crisis, must turn deeper to these questions in defiance of a deliberately fostered and politically stultifying artistic orthodoxy.



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