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THE FALKLANDS WAR AND THE BRITISH STAGE

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Abstract. *The paper examines the way the Falklands War of 1982 was reflected in the creation of British playwrights. Officially, the war was seen as a heroic act, as another glorious page in the book of British history. But for many writers it contained nothing heroic; it was just noisy brandishing of weapons and useless loss of human lives.*

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The Falkland Islands are a group of islands in the South Atlantic, sparsely populated and considered British territory since 1892, but subject of territorial dispute between Britain and Argentina since the eighteenth century. In 1982 they were invaded by Argentina, but soon recaptured by the British. When the Falklands War broke out, everybody wondered why this happened as the islands were not strategically situated and did not contain and fuel ores. But, as it soon turned out, the event offered Margaret Thatcher and her government an unexpected life-buoy to recover some of their lost popularity by stirring the people's dormant feelings of patriotism and demonstrate that another glorious page was turned in the book of British history:

There was a feeling of colossal pride, of relief that we still do the things for which we were renewed. (Margaret Thatcher, qtd. in Young 1991:281).

Although certain newspapers had a different point of view, for quite a while events were envisaged from their heroic side and certain official (pro Thatcher) documents that were issued somewhat reflected this perspective placed in the context of the fact that the prime minister's ratings in the opinion polls soared from very low in late 1981 to 51% in June 1982 (after the Falklands events) (Young 1991: 280):

In the political history of Margaret Thatcher the war [i.e. the Falklands War] played the part of an unqualified triumph. Because it ended in a great victory, eight thousand miles from home, it made her position unassailable, both in the party and in the country. It guaranteed her what was not previously assured: a second term in her office. [...] The Falklands war showed her qualities of decision and fortitude at their most brilliant, but only after a certain fallibility had been exposed which originated, paradoxically, in indecision. The war was the culmination, if not necessarily the product, of a fatal unwillingness to grasp a diplomatic nettle and a parallel failure to decide whether her Government was more interested in maintaining defence commitments or in cutting defence expenditure. (Young 1991: 258)

No sooner was the Anglo-Argentinian conflict over and the initial elation diluted than the war backslided to what it really was: noisy brandishing of weapons and a loss of 255 British and 650 Argentinian lives. The territory was actually recaptured but the sacrifice in

human lives could not be disregarded. On 2 May the Argentinean ship *The General Belgrano* was sunk by the British submarine *Conqueror* and 368 sailors drowned. This was an act which escalated the war and, as a result, two days after HMS *Sheffield* was hit by an Exocet missile with the loss of another 21 lives and many sailors grievously injured (Young 1991: 276-7). It turned out that this business of war was definitely not a series of victories and triumph.

The act of sinking the *Belgrano* was interpreted by those who considered that the Argentinian government would not have accepted any concessions in other circumstances as a wise and necessary demonstration of force and superiority, whereas others regarded it as fortuitous. Anyway, this was probably one of those seminal moments when the whole Falklands affair was questioned with arguments pro and against:

There are those who feel that the Falklands War was inevitable and right, that the operations were carried out with great courage and expertise by the great leaders and soldiers of Britain, that it was an expression of British determination to stand up aggression no matter what the cost in men and materiel and, indeed, that it was a glorious chapter in our history.

There are other who feel that the Falklands War should never have happened and that it did happen is a reason for shame, regret and anger. (Wood, Preface to *Tumbledown*, 1987: xiv-xv)

If the war in Vietnam was the disseminative soil for stories, novels, films, songs, paintings, photographs, dissertations and so on, the Falklands War was an opportunity which artists could not miss. In the UK it seemed that Margaret Thatcher herself set the fashion, although what she meant was the glorious side. The moment is recorded by H. Young (1991: 277). At her Christmas reunion in 1983 among the artists that she entertained were film producer David Puttnam, who had recently (1981) been awarded the Hollywood Oscar for his film *Chariots of Fire* and Andrew Lloyd-Weber, composer of heroic musicals. It was then that she indirectly suggested that the memorable *Belgrano* episode should be chronicled on celluloid. To make things more obvious she told the visitors 'This is the chair I sat in when I decided to sink the *Belgrano*.' (Young 1991:277)

These are the historical facts of the spring and summer of 1982 and what came after them, with their heroic and catastrophic side. How they were transposed into art, how the events were reflected on stage is contained in what follows.

Falkland Sound is a small scale play based on David Tinker's poems and letters home written before his death. Lieutenant David Hugh Russell Tinker was a Royal Navy officer who was killed in action during the Falklands War on 12 June 1982. His father, Hugh Tinker, a writer and university professor, published his son's earlier letters home and poems, reminiscent of Wilfred Owen's earlier work, in a volume called *A Message from the Falklands: The Life and Gallant Death of David Tinker*. This book was subsequently adapted into a stage play called *Falkland Sound* by Louise Page, first staged in 1983. The result was documentary theatre based on documentary reportage.

Our Boys by Jonathan Lewis is another anti-militarist drama about battle stress that starts from the ascertained fact that at the Falklands War victory parade and thanksgiving services the wounded and the crippled were carefully kept out of sight. Its author, like Charles Wood, was an ex-Army officer turned dramatist, actor and director. The play, terrifying and funny (Lyn Gardner, 1995) staged for the first time in April 1995, follows the fate of five recruits and an army officer confided to Queen Elizabeth Military Hospital in Woolwich during the mid-1980s. The play is a protest against the absurdity of obeying orders, however dangerous and absurd they might be – 'It is better to shoot than to think'.

If you train young men to kill then there should be an awareness that when you let them loose with gun they are going to behave like boy scouts. In any situation when they are frightened or aren't sure what

the hell is going on, their first response is always going to be to pull the trigger. (Jonathan Lewis, quoted by Lyn Gardner, 1995)

Sink the Belgrano! by Stephen Berkoff is directly associated with the Belgrano episode, previously mentioned in this article, about which the playwright forewarns in the introduction to his Faber and Faber volume containing the play:

It is apparent to everyone that the sinking of the Belgrano was a very dubious affair, [...] a typical product of [...] muddled and opportunist thinking. The irony is that brave Britons and Argentinians lost their lives needlessly ('Why I wrote it', in Berkoff, 1987:1)

In this play Berkoff resuscitates the drama in verse modelled on Shakespeare's *Henry V*, but his play takes the form of a stinging satire or pamphlet and the verses are most of the time simple, direct and often crude statements in lines interspersed with adult language and slang.

Steven Berkoff's play on the Falkland's War is one of the most vocal plays on the war with the writer's virulence directed against Margaret Thatcher and her role in The Falklands War. At the same time it is a grotesque representation of the war in a play that its author considers 'a caustic satire on the people who love to bask in the limelight of the world's adoring gaze' (Berkoff qtd. in Green).

The play deals with the first month of the war leading up to the sinking of the Argentine destroyer the Belgrano by the British nuclear submarine HMS Conqueror. A chorus similar to ones in Greek plays sets up the story, while scenes featuring the Prime Minister and her War Cabinet – reduced to a comic threesome of Maggot, Pimp and Nit – the sailors on the HMS Conqueror and the English public re-enact the days prior to battle.

Berkoff uses a variety of means, most of them metaphors, to express his reactions to the Falklands War and his opinions of war in general. The most apparent and striking in *Sink the Belgrano* are the names of the key characters Maggot Scratcher, Pimp and Nit. The character of Maggot Scratcher most evidently represents that of Margaret Thatcher; Berkoff makes it very plain who Maggot is as she is continuously addressed as Prime Minister. Pimp and Nit represent Francis Pym, the Foreign Minister, and John Nott, the Minister of Defence, both members of the War Cabinet who advised Margaret Thatcher throughout the war. The two are posterously summoned by Maggot:

MAGGOT: Where's my Foreign Secretary Pimp
And get me my good faithful Nit
Those two defenders of Tory strength.
PIMP and NIT: Here your most worshipful most honoured Maggot. (Berkoff 1987: 11)

It is directly observable that the characters' names reflect Berkoff's opinion of each of these government officials.

In an allusive way this play also deals with Britain and its everyday issues: unemployment, the mindless press, arms dealing, international economic interests. But by far, the aim of Berkoff's virulence and the most spiteful image in the play is Margaret Thatcher (Maggot Scratcher) caricatured for her cynicism and ignorance:

MAGGOT: ... we need a war
Establish once again our might and strength
Shake our old mane, out fly the moths
Oh, God, I start to feel myself again
Now *where is this damn Falkland Isle?* (Berkoff 1987: 7, my italics)

Ignorance reappears elsewhere in the play when Maggot stupidly asks again: ‘By the way Pimp... where *is* the Falklands?? (Berkoff 1987:5, my italics)’. But this is not the only negative side associated with the Prime Minister; her lack of commitment and care, for breaking important talks to go shopping,

MAGGOT: Oh, never mind... just f[...] all that,
Oh shit... a pound of bacon with no fat
I’ll be back, just chat away...
I’ve got to get the groceries...
And please don’t quarrel when I’m gone
Or plot behind my back! You scum. (Berkoff 1987: 13)

and not wanting to move from Downing Street – ‘I’ve just decorated this bloody place!’, she says (Berkoff 1987:22) – are also included in the farcical list.

Far from flattering is also the treatment of the enemies – the Falklanders appear as mutinous slaves to big business (the FIC – the Falklands Island Company), as people who toil for their home that they call ‘this pisspot’:

FARMER 1: Oh toil, oh strife, oh bleeding bloody graft
Is this the life for us I daily spout?
For sixty quid a week they bleed our veins
And us poor farmers slave for next to nought
We live in this pisspot, this dreary rock
Where no one has invested, not a jot...
The profits never go to thee or me,
Where then? The bloody bleedin’ FIC. (Berkoff 1987:5)

Sink the Belgrano also tells the story of the war from three different perspectives: the Prime Minister and government, the soldiers, and the English public. These point-of-views are represented through Berkoff’s recommended and by some means bizarre staging, with the stage divided into three areas representing the Prime Minister’s house 10 Downing Street, the HMS Conqueror and an English pub area. In Berkoff’s staging, 10 Downing Street represents the government’s viewpoint, the submarine represents the soldiers at the front’s viewpoint, and the pub area is the ‘voice of England’ (Berkoff, *Collected Plays* 143 qtd. in Green), the chorus.

The threat of war and war itself, similar to other plays about war, casts a terrible shadow on the laurels of the conquerors and deprives them of all heroism. Like in the scene at the end of the play where images of carnage, appalling fragments of dead bodies, bloodshed and destruction are associated with the images of the sinking Belgrano:

CHORUS: The first torpedo pierced the ship like
It was made of butter – sunk right through
Then tore inward and upward through
Four steel decks... It spun its deadly
Groove... It sunk itself into its guts
And ripped its soul apart... The old ship
Then simply turned round and died...
The light were out... just silence...
(Darkness)
Dead men were everywhere, in bits
A piece of arm and here a leg...
Upon the deck a figure covered in burning oil
All black and running as the heat roasted
His flesh. Three hundreds and thirty sailor died at once...
The others dragged their shredded flesh

To rafts to face the icy sea, thirty-six hours more
Or less... The conscripts, boys of eighteen years
Stayed disciplined and kept their nerve
Each one ready to sacrifice himself to
Help an ally or a wounded friend. At
Seventeen O one just one hour more. *The Belgrano*
Sank stern first beneath the waves. (Berkoff 1987:38)

Sink the Belgrano, though making a strong political statement, was not well received by English audiences during its premiere at London's Half Moon Theatre in 1986. But Stephen Berkoff, on the other hand, was pleased with his work and was untouched by such criticism. He stated about the virulent reviews and attacks against the play:

It was curious that their reviews, which were almost hysterical cant, resembled so closely the threats and poisoned mail I received from Fascist thugs. (Berkoff 1987:1).

It was all proof of the fact that Berkoff's grotesque version of the Theatre of Cruelty had attained its goal.

The Falklands Play is a notorious war play – or, rather, a screenplay – written by Ian Curteis, initially commissioned by the BBC in 1983 for broadcast in 1986, meant to be a dramatic account of the political events leading up to the Falklands war and a subsequent reconstruction of the blood-spattered event of 1982. Its representation was postponed several times as a result of its bellicose or combative tone.

The play focuses on the methods by which British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and the British government handled the Falklands crisis. The play focuses on the behind-the-scenes dealings between the British Conservative government and the United States, and Argentine governments, in what became a diplomatic collapse whose result was war and eventual British victory. *The Falklands Play* tries to explain why and how the war was fought stressing the fact that much of what happens in a war happens far from the public eye, behind the scenes and closed doors, as the direct result of the influence, interest, cynicism and will of professionals.

Such 'professionals' are the political figures of the day, such as Ronald Reagan, the American President; Alexander Haig, the American Secretary of State at the time of the Falklands War; Henry Kissinger, assistant to President Nixon for national security affairs between 1968-1973 and then US Secretary of State between 1973-1976, a man who in 1973 was awarded the Nobel peace prize; John Nott, the British Defence Secretary; General Leopoldo Galtieri, the chief of the junta government of Argentina or Nicanor Costa-Mendez, the civilian Argentinian foreign minister. The following extract which contains two scenes has, just as the rest of all the play, strong characteristics of a docudrama, and offers a significant example of how such political figures are re-drawn and made to react in the context of the menacing threat of the almost unavoidable war:

86. INT. THE PRESIDENT'S BEDROOM. THE WHITE-HOUSE. A CORNER
Close shot of the loudspeaker-telephone beside the bed.

HAIG (*distort*): I could start for London tonight, if this coincides with your crisis perception, Mr President.

Pulling back, we see a valet packing clothes for Reagan's coming Caribbean tour. They are distinctly exotic. Reagan is putting out ties and shoes.

REAGAN: A diplomatic shuttle between London and Buenos Aires? Trying to patch something up?

HAIG (*distort*): That's right, sir.

REAGAN: Like Henry Kissinger used to do?

HAIG (*distort*): Kissinger? Oh, yes, yes, but that was different.

REAGAN: Will your heart stand up to it?

87. INT. THE SECRETARY OF STATE'S ROOM. STATE DEPARTMENT

Haig on the telephone at his desk. He is as tensed up as the President is relaxed.

HAIG (*rattled*): Sure, sure, [...] nothing whatever wrong with my heart.

REAGAN (*distort*): Anyone who's had – what was it? – triple bypass coronary surgery –

HAIG: Mr President, I'm one hundred per cent fit! One hundred per cent!

REAGAN (*distort*): All right, Al, all right...

HAIG: And we've only got seventeen days, OK? Before the British get down there, and a REAL hot war blows up! (Curteis [2002])

Charles Wood, the author of the TV script *Tumbledown*, was a professional soldier himself, but soon gave up his job because it was against his conceptions of pacifist. This is why his writings and his film participation are openly against myths of military life. He explores military life and the military mind, as exemplified in the British army, at its worst.

Tumbledown is a BBC production based on the real *Tumbledown* episode in the Falklands war when, on 14 June 1982, the Scots Guards battalion of the British army launched an assault on Mount Tumbledown situated near the town of Stanley (Port Stanley) – the capital of the Falklands Islands – and succeeded in driving Argentinian forces from the mountain. One of the participants in the assault was Lt Robert Lawrence, a real figure and the play's main protagonist. Charles Wood learned about him from *The Guardian* of 17 August 1974. The newspaper article said:

Lt Robert Lawrence was a 21-year-old Scots Guards officer with five years' army service when he was sent to the Falklands on the *QE2* [the Queen Elizabeth II] in April 1982. A few days before his 22nd birthday and 1½ hours before the Argentinian surrender, he was shot in the back of the head by a sniper during the assault on Tumbledown Mountain. For his part in the action, he was awarded the Military Cross. (qtd. in Wood, Preface to *Tumbledown*, 1987:ix)

As Charles Wood confesses, he met him personally, listened to his story and the result was the screenplay.

The BBC spent a lot of money on the TV production of *Tumbledown* which aroused great antagonism and debates in the press and which should have been shown in 1987, but was withdrawn and banned for a year for being considered too outrageous in its unswerving attack against the British government. On its first transmission *Tumbledown* attracted 10.5 million viewers, which was a stunning success for a serious drama obtained from a public accustomed most often to watch TV commercial productions.

Tumbledown is one of the most dramatic and well-known plays about the traumatic events in the Falklands Islands, a genuine document, where real events and real people are recreated with actors. Here the theme of the proud soldier who goes to war to demonstrate his heroic qualities is replaced by the desperate fight of a physically crippled and mentally traumatised young man (Robert Lawrence, a Lieutenant in the Scots Guards) to survive with the help of his father and, if possible, in spite of the shamefully inert government officials. There is no glory, but traumas and violent memories of carnage and atrocities, a sample of which is contained in the following stunning and detracting dialogue Robert, now a disabled 'hero' moving in a wheelchair, has with his Major:

MAJOR: ... We wonder if you would care to answer a few questions... (*Opening a file*)... Robert. We're asking all the wounded for their impressions of the casualty evacuation, the whole think for a report. Would you care to?

ROBERT: What for?

MAJOR: So that next time we do it better.

ROBERT: Next time? All right, but you'll have to answer some questions from me. Am I still going to be able to serve in the Army? What sort of pension can I expect if I am discharged? How much will I get from the South Atlantic Fund?

MAJOR: Hasn't anybody told you these things?

ROBERT: No, my father writes letters. He tries to find out. Nobody seems to know or wants to know.
 MAJOR: All right, I'll try... But, first, name, rank and number... (*His pen is poised over the questionnaire.*)
 ROBERT: Do you know, you're the first person I've seen in combat dress for months.
 MAJOR: I'm sorry?
 ROBERT: You must enjoy wearing it.
 MAJOR: What is it like to kill? [...]
 (*The Major is staring at Robert who is sweating and writhing in his wheelchair*)
 ROBERT: They don't die.
 MAJOR: How does it feel? Do you feel anything – elation, pleasure, sick?
 ROBERT: You push the thing in and nothing happens. Mine broke off. I had to kill him with the broken end if it, stabbing and stabbing at him, and he was shouting at me, talking all the time in Spanish, and I was stabbing him with my snapped-off bayonet, everywhere, in his face, his mouth, everywhere I could. He kept trying to hold it. He said 'please' in English.
 MAJOR: What did it feel like?
 ROBERT: When?
 (*Robert is very distressed. His leg is in spasm, and his arm is jerking wildly.*)
 MAJOR: When he said 'please'.
 ROBERT: It didn't feel like anything. [...]
 MAJOR: How many did you kill?
 ROBERT: I don't know... (Wood 1987: 68-70)

What this fragment points to is that the result of war visible on Robert Lawrence is not only physical mutilation but also mental impairment. Indeed, a study of 25,000 soldiers who took part in the Falklands War proved that one in five suffered from post-traumatic stress syndrome, a reality found in the case of the later Gulf war (the campaign against Iraq of 1990-1991), as well (cf. Lyn Gardner). The same study reveals that the victims received no counselling and continued serving in the Army, living through the nightmare of Northern Ireland sectarian violence and the Gulf conflict.

In spite of its being associated with a political problem, however, Wood strove to prevent *Tumbledown* from being viewed as a political statement. Wood advances no opinion as to whether the Falklands war was just necessary or desirable. It does not invite sympathy for the Argentinians. He is not even, in the end, particularly interested in the question of whether the military treats injured soldiers decently. What he is interested in is rather what we expect from our soldiers and the image we have of them and to what extent they raise up to our expectations of bravery.

The Second World War, Woods suggests, has led us to make an artificial and dubious moral investment in the image of the British army as a brave and glorious territorial army, drawn from and sharing the same values as the dignified society. The truth is unpleasant; the British highly-trained, well-equipped, thoroughly professional armed forces disturb us. But their competence is also shocking, their invincibility a mere myth. We recoil when we learn that behind the veil that they are magnificent patriots defending their fatherland, they may even enjoy doing their job of professional killers.

Besides moving along the trajectory from heroism and glory to neglect and impotence, *Tumbledown* contains another back, inverted turn in its construction: it opens with the English countryside shining in the summer heat against the sound of a military march and an RAF fighter plane soaring overhead – a combination designed to evoke Britain's 'finest hour' of hope and glory. It begins with Robert Lawrence's superior look and pride to be a member of the Scots Guards and an epitome for his country and ends with George and Helen Stubbs comparing Falklands veterans Robert and Hugh unfavourably with the 'heroes' they remember going off to fight the Second World War. But in this vision Robert and Hugh are not heroes, but 'killers'. In between there is Robert with his terrible experience in the Falklands War and his wound at the head, his paralysis and rehabilitation therapy, his traumas and drama of finding himself deserted by friends and cast aside by society.

What the reader should infer from the instances of war drama discussed in this article is that in Britain, unlike in many cases in America where the melodrama and sensationalism of Broadway, Hollywood and other similar institutions is often the big temptation when representing the war, such as the one in Vietnam, in Britain the war productions associated with the Falklands events are more derived from reality, more critical, more purposeful and more committed.

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