

Performing PREVENT: Anti-Extremist Theatre-in-Education in the Service of UK Counter-Terrorism, a Freirean Analysis

Abstract

This article reveals a new trend in UK counter-terrorism: the emergence of anti-extremist Theatre-in-Education (TIE) to deliver counter-terrorism projects in schools and colleges. Using Paulo Freire's vision of dialogic pedagogy, I offer an analysis of anti-extremist TIE against a backdrop of the UK counter-terrorism strategy PREVENT. The September 11 attack, the London Transport bombings and the more recent attacks in Europe and the UK have contributed to a strengthening of counter-terrorism measures in all spheres of public life. In 2015 the UK government introduced a statutory duty for education providers to prevent young people from being drawn into terrorism. This is known as the PREVENT Duty. The implementation of the duty has not been without controversy, with commentators noting a disproportionate focus on Islamist forms of terrorism. My study has shown that the guiding principle of TIE to enact social change is threatened in this climate, whilst maintaining the possibility of engaging young people in meaningful dialogue about terrorism and violent extremism.

Introduction

There is no such thing as a *neutral* educational process. Education either functions as an instrument that is used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, *or* it becomes "the practice of freedom," the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world (Shaull; cited in Freire and Trans 2005, 34).

This article reveals a new trend in UK counter-terrorism: the emergence of anti-extremist Theatre-in-Education (TIE) to deliver counter-terrorism projects for schools and colleges. Using Paulo Freire's vision of dialogic pedagogy, I offer an analysis of anti-extremist TIE against a backdrop of the UK counter-terrorism strategy PREVENT. In 2016 I initiated a study to examine the impact of PREVENT on current day TIE. I observed two anti-extremist projects carried out in the West Midlands and the North West of England and interviewed actors and drama facilitators from three TIE companies. I have informed my subsequent analysis with

critical readings on PREVENT (Heath-Kelly 2012; Qureshi 2015; Busher et al 2017), the cultural impact of the PREVENT strategy on young British Muslims (Lynch 2013; Qurashi 2018) as well as key reading in the performing arts (Boal 1995; Wooster 2016; Jackson 1993).

British TIE originated in the 1960s as a partnership between the Belgrade Theatre and Coventry City Council with a drama workshop for primary and secondary schools. The success of *The Balloon Man and the Runaway Balloons* (1965) ensured its development. The TIE movement is now global theatre form popular in the United States, Canada and Australia and a feature of many undergraduate and postgraduate degrees (Wooster 2016). Modern day examples are: *The Snap Trap*, a participatory play addressing the dangers of sexting (2engage Performing Arts); *Big School*, a theatre workshop on school transition (Belgrade Theatre); and *Worlds Apart Together*, a play and interactive workshop exploring homeland and identity through the lens of the First World War (Big Brum TIE).

It is, perhaps, unsurprising that TIE has been tasked with the role of providing anti-extremist projects given that most companies work in schools on a range of social and health education issues; for example: sexual health, teenage pregnancy, sexual grooming and drug and alcohol abuse (see: Ball 2014; Wooster 2010). Anti-racist and social cohesion projects are an obvious forerunner; indeed, one of the anti-extremist TIE projects examined in this study was developed from an anti-racism project. Similar examples include Kathleen McCreery's anti-racist TIE project *Flight Paths* (2009), which examined the experience of refugees in the North East of England and Alice Bartlett's youth theatre play *Not In My Name* (2011), a community cohesion project exploring the aftermath of a fictional terrorist attack.

However, the emergence of anti-extremist TIE brings new and significant challenges. For a start, there is very little written for drama practitioners and researchers with an interest in anti-extremist TIE; one exception is Winston and Strand's analysis of the *Tapestry* project (2011). The field tends to focus on histories of TIE and its relation to applied theatre, community theatre, theatre in health, theatre therapy and museum and reminiscence theatre. This said, terrorism is an emergent subject for playwrights and scholars of political theatre; of the latter, significant publications being: *Performance in a Time of Terror* (2011) by Jenny Hughes; and *Performance, Politics and the War on Terror* (2012) by Sara Brady. Plays dealing with terrorism include: *The Arab-Israeli Cookbook* (2004) and *Talking to Terrorists* (2005) by Robin Soans; and *Another World, Losing our Children to Islamic State* (2016) by Gillian

Slovo; *Pornography* (2008) by Simon Stephens; and *Attempts on her Life* (1997) by Martin Crimp.

There are little, if any, crossovers between the performing arts and the political and social sciences on the theme. This excludes film and media studies, of course, of which the field is well saturated. Publications include Des Freedman and Daya Kishan Thussu's edited book *Media and Terrorism: Global Perspectives* (2012); and Brigitte L. Nacos's *Mass-Mediated Terrorism: The Central Role of the Media in Terrorism and Counterterrorism*, (2007). Regarding the media's role in perpetuating negative stereotypes of Islam, Derek M.D. Silva offers a comprehensive analysis of the representation of Muslims in the New York Times (2016); see also Liz Sage's article on the Bethnal Green School Girls (2015) and Denise Carter's study of twitter analytics as a contributory factor in the othering of British Muslims (2016). Examples of counter-terrorist research crossing into the arts and humanities include Charlotte Heath-Kelly's reading of counter-terrorism policy through the lens of magical realism (2012); Tim Miles's examination of online Muslim comedy (2015); and Richard Jackson's novel *Confessions of a Terrorist* (2015).

PREVENT and the War on Terror

A critical reading of anti-extremist TIE has to take into account the significance of PREVENT and the impact of the "war on terror" on young British Muslims. Lynch (2013) shows that 9/11 and its aftermath was a defining moment in the construction of Muslim youth as the radicalised and terrorist other (see also, Qureshi 2015; O'Toole, Nilsson, and Modood 2012). This is mirrored in an earlier study of the representation of Islam in the British press (Moore, Mason, and Lewis 2008), and more recent research carried out by Pihlaja and Thompson (2017) on the experience of 19 Muslim university students from London and Birmingham. The authors find that hostility towards young Muslims, particularly for females wearing a hijab, is heightened after a terror-related event. Figures released by the Office of the Lord Mayor after the London Bridge attack showed a "fivefold increase" in Islamophobic incidents. Similarly, Tell Mama reported a 500% increase in hate crimes towards Muslims in the days immediately after the Manchester Arena Bombing. These statistics are echoed in a similar report produced by the Muslim Council of Britain. To put it simply, "Muslims [are] collectively held responsible for terror attacks" (Tell Mama 2017, 63).

Qureshi (2015) suggests that negative media coverage of Muslims following a terror attack is a contributory factor in the construction of anti-Muslim sentiment. Carter similarly finds that the “sensational media reporting [of Muslim women in particular] fuel the rhetoric of othering that reproduces Muslim as a racialised threat” (2016, 28). Silva, writing of American print media, argues, “Muslims continue to be negativized by the Western media, particularly since the events of 9/11” (Silva 2016, 139). He goes on to say:

The predominance of associations between radicalization and Islam suggests that the news media have increasingly narrowed their definitions of radicalization to focus solely on Muslim communities, despite relatively few Islamic-inspired terrorist attacks. This is indicative of an overall neglect of the news media to include non-Muslims in their depictions of terrorism-related phenomena while focusing primarily on Muslims as the source of radicalization. (Silva 2016, 156)

Sage offers an example from the British media. In December 2014, a 15-year-old schoolgirl from Bethnal Green Academy left her home in East London. Her name was Sharmeena Begum and a few months later, in the spring of 2015, three more girls from the same school flew from London Gatwick to Istanbul, Turkey and from there into Syria. Kadiza Sultana, Shamima Begum, and Amira Abase were age 15 and 16 years, respectively. Dubbed the “jihadist brides” by the press, CCTV footage taken of the girls as they passed through border control at Gatwick Airport has become somewhat of an emblematic image for the British public – that of the radicalised Muslim teenager(s). The schoolgirls were not the first to leave Britain to join ISIS in Syria. A database of “British Jihadists” produced by BBC News (2017) lists 27 teenagers under 18 who’ve travelled to Syria since the conflict began. Sage writes, “it is estimated that between 50 and 60 girls and young women had left the UK in efforts to join Islamic State, yet none of these cases garnered quite the coverage sparked by these three girls from London” (2015, n.p). Media attention was no doubt fuelled by the fact that the girls were school friends and studying for their GCSEs and described by their teachers as “straight A-grade” students. Sage goes on to say that the sensational media coverage of the Bethnal Green schoolgirls not only shapes how radicalisation is understood, it also “[underpins] how we respond to such behaviour” (2015, n.p). That the media has a significant role in shaping public opinion on the causes of terrorism and violent extremism is well established (Spencer 2012), the impact of which can be seen in the worsening excesses of public behaviour, such as Islamophobia, hate crimes and far-right violence.

PREVENT is the UK counter-terrorism strategy for schools' and education providers. There have been a number of iterations of the strategy, introduced in 2006 by the Labour government and updated in 2011 by the Conservative Liberal–Democrat Coalition. The 2015 revision included a statutory duty for providers, “to have a due regard to the need to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism” (GOV 2015). In England and Wales, local authorities have responsibility for PREVENT and the duty extends to schools, colleges and universities, as well as prisons, health-care settings and early childcare providers.

Critics of PREVENT argue that a focus on Jihadist forms of terrorism has contributed to an unfair and disproportionate focus on Islam (O’Toole, Nilsson, and Modood 2012; Heath-Kelly 2013; Qureshi 2015; Versi 2017; Qurashi 2018). These worries are not without merit, given that Islamist extremism is prioritised in the scope of the duty: “[t]he most significant of these threats is currently from terrorist organisations in Syria and Iraq, and Al Qa’ida associated groups” (GOV 2015, 2). The inclusion of fundamental British values (FBV) in order to build resilience to extremism has also provoked unease. The National Union of Teachers (NUT) referred to the inclusion of FBV as akin to “cultural supremacism”, while a Home Affairs Select Committee called for an independent review of PREVENT, saying that “active opposition to fundamental British values’ is believed to be regarded as too broad and could be legally challenged as constraining freedom of speech” (Home Affairs Select Committee 2016, 19). Likewise, in a comprehensive analysis of teacher responses to the duty, Busher et al. find, “widespread discomfort and uncertainty around the focus on the specifically British nature and content of these values and concern about how this can be translated in to inclusive curriculum content and practice” (2017, 6; original emphasis).

PREVENT in schools falls within the scope of existing safeguarding duties. Guidance, issued by the Department of Education (DfE), define the duty in the context of vulnerable and at-risk children:

The Prevent duty is entirely consistent with schools’ and childcare providers’ existing responsibilities and should not be burdensome. Ofsted’s revised common inspection frame- work for education, skills and early years, which comes into effect from 1 September 2015, makes specific reference to the need to have safeguarding arrangements to promote pupils’ welfare and prevent radicalisation and extremism. (DfE 2015, 5)

Heath-Kelly suggests that the concept of risk, a central feature of the PREVENT strategy, is closely associated with Muslim groups. She writes, “[w]hile not recipients of a ‘politics of pity’, British Muslim communities are classified by PREVENT as ‘at risk’ – necessitating interventions under a bio-political duty of care to ‘increase the resilience of communities to violent extremism’” (2013, 405). For example, in the period April 2015 to March 2016, a third of all PREVENT referrals to Channel came from the education sector (33%). Overall, there were 7,631 referrals and 65% (4,997) linked to Islamist extremism, and 56% (4,274) involved young people. According to Versi (2017), Muslims were 40 times more likely to be referred than non-Muslims. However, the take-up of Channel was relatively low; of the total, 381 individuals received further support and 76% (273) were 20 years and under (Home Office 2017). To put it simply, the number of PREVENT referrals vastly exceeded the follow-up of specialist de-radicalisation programmes.

Following on from this argument, Qurashi argues that increased surveillance of “suspect communities” has led to the criminalisation of Muslim youth. Indeed, that PREVENT operates as a covert form of surveillance is at the forefront of his criticisms of the strategy. Qurashi writes:

The PREVENT strategy has been at the forefront of disseminating and normalising Islamophobia across society, by inscribing its assumptions and prejudices into the structural operation of numerous institutions, and shaping the practices of public sector employees. In the strategy, the problem of extremism and terrorism is closely tied to Muslims and Islam, so that the terror threat is regarded as an Islamic threat. (Qurashi 2018, 3)

For Qurashi, “[s]urveillance is at the heart of containment mechanisms in the PREVENT strategy and it has fundamentally reshaped relations between Muslims, the state, and wider society” (2018, 4). Heath-Kelly underpins this argument when she says, “a major assumption behind PREVENT is that a ‘radicalisation process’ exists” (2013, 397). It cannot be overlooked that PREVENT funding was initially allocated to communities with a “concentration of Muslim populations with 5% or more” (Parliament 2007, n.p). Of the period, Heath-Kelly observes, “funded projects were divided into seven types of governmental intervention within Muslim communities aimed at conducting the conduct of those deemed vulnerable to ‘extremist ideology’” (2013, 403). From 2011 to 2015, the Home Office funded 180

PREVENT projects in 30 “local authority priority areas”. These included sporting events, youth clubs, online and digital awareness workshops and outreach programmes at Mosques and community centres. Project leaders were also required to submit monitoring reports and assessments.

While PREVENT funding is not a focus of the article, it does raise serious questions about the purpose of anti-extremist TIE. Primarily, it asks: for whose benefit is the work created? Perhaps, at worse, it is another way to monitor Muslim communities or at best, a box-ticking exercise for schools to fulfil the requirements of the duty. The practitioners involved in the study, however, would argue that their work ultimately benefits young people, as the aesthetic qualities’ of TIE encourage all learners to enter into meaningful discussions on terrorism and violent extremism, regardless of faith and background. The following section investigates this argument, beginning with a contextual overview of TIE.

Theatre in Education (TIE)

A belief in theatre to promote positive social change is a guiding principle for many TIE companies. Wooster, writing of the origins of British TIE, says: “TIE is *not* putting on a play at school. Further, it is *not* about teaching theatre skills nor about building mainstream theatre audiences – though both of these may be incidental outcomes” (2016, 57; *original emphasis*). In its simplest form, TIE is learning through theatre. Jackson describes TIE as “[harnessing] the techniques and imaginative potency of theatre in the service of education” (1993, 1). A straightforward definition of TIE is elusive, the form lends itself to a range of applied theatre practices and there are close similarities to Theatre-in-Health education (TiHE), Drama-in-Education (DIE), applied theatre, community theatre and theatre therapy (see Freebody and Finneran 2017; Woodson 2015).

This said, the symbiotic relationship between theatre and education is a defining characteristic and it is this focus that marks TIE from other forms of theatre for young audiences. Wooster shows TIE emerged at a point in time when progressive ideas about education, such as those espoused by Dewey and Montessori, and later by Holt and Freire, were gaining traction in the second half of the twentieth century. With reference to Dewey, Wooster writes, “progressive education was not just a matter of rejecting formalist education of the past but rather to return to questions of why we educate and how we learn in order to see ‘a new mode of practice’” (2016, 21). *How* we learn and *why* we learn became an increasing concern for the TIE

movement and with it a growing awareness of the importance of active and critical reflection in the classroom.

Helen Nicholson suggests that the cultural revolution of the 1960s in art, music and youth politics inspired TIE practitioners to see the relationship between theatre and education in a new light. Of the period she says, “it was time for experimentation, for playfulness [and] to question the boundaries between art and life, theatre and revolution, dramatic action and social activism” (2009, 21). This is mirrored in Tony Jackson’s historical account of TIE. Jackson finds that the TIE of the 1960-70s was premised on a ‘structured and coordinated’ approach between the theatre and the school curriculum. He writes:

The TIE programme is not a performance in schools or a ‘one-off’ event that is here today and gone tomorrow, but a coordinated and carefully structured pattern of activities, usually devised and researched by the company around a topic of relevance to the school curriculum and to the children’s own lives presented in school by the company and involving the children directly in an experience of the situations and problems the topic throws up. (Jackson 1993, 4)

The idea that theatre can be a force for social change can be traced in large part to the philosopher and educator Paulo Freire; the theatre practitioner Augusto Boal; and the theatre practitioner and playwright Bertolt Brecht. In his much-cited handbook for theatre and therapy *The Rainbow of Desire*, Boal argues, “theatre has nothing to do with buildings or other physical constructions. Theatre – or theatricality – is this capacity, this human property which allows man to observe himself in action” (Boal and Trans 1995, 13). Boal proposes a view of theatre that transcends the physical and the literal to embrace the philosophical, social and political. He goes on to say, “[t]heatre is a vocation for all human beings; it is the true nature of humanity” (1995, 14).

A view of theatre as a humanizing force is not a new idea. Hamlet suggests theatre holds a mirror to nature, but for advocates of TIE learning through theatre offers more than a reflective lens to the world. The aesthetic quality of theatre “in the service of education” (Jackson 1993), is an opportunity for young people to engage in matters that affect their own lives and communities. Moreover, as Chris Vine suggests:

Central to the work, in all its variety of theatre forms and educational strategies, are the twin convictions that human behaviour and institutions are formed through social activity and can therefore be changed, and that audiences, as potential agents of change, should be active in their own learning. (Vine, 109; cited in Jackson 1993)

A parallel can be found between Vine's description of an active audience and Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed. Wooster says, "when Freire states that, 'just as objective social reality exists not by chance, but as a product of human action, so it is not transformed by chance', he is stating a truth that most TIE companies would endorse" (2016, 67). Here, Wooster makes the point that even if TIE owes more to Boal, whose ideas gained currency in the late 1970s, Freire's radical re-thinking of education, a critical pedagogy based on dialogue, reflection, and action, goes to the heart of much TIE practice. In defence of a dialogic curriculum, the antithesis of a 'banking concept' of education, Freire writes, "[L]iberating education consists in acts of cognition, not transferals of information" (2005, 79). Wooster sums this up somewhat succinctly when he says, "TIE wants pupils to think" (2016, 68).

Of course, *what* to think (or indeed what learners *should* think), in essence - the *raison d'être* for education changes over time, depending on governments in power and broader economic imperatives; the current day bears little resemblance to the cultural and political landscape of the 1960s-70s. Put simply, the issues facing TIE companies are not the same as they were five decades ago, cuts to arts funding, not to mention an erosion of drama in schools, has created somewhat "precarious working conditions" (Slade 1999). To survive TIE has had to adapt. A significant development for the TIE movement was the Citizenship agenda for schools and the introduction of Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE). This facilitated a move towards message-based TIE. Wooster writes:

Whilst classic TIE has been in decline since the mid-1990s the number of companies describing their work as TIE as continued to increase. Students emerging from drama, Applied Drama and Applied Theatre courses, are passionate about using the emollient effects of theatre to achieve social change... Much had been learned about engaging pupils through theatre, though the educational environment became increasingly less conducive to the developing of critical thinking. (Wooster 2016, 187)

Here, Wooster expresses a concern that TIE had become message-driven and instructional in nature. The reason was largely economic: “the key source of income switched from LEAs to parcels of project funding. In order to survive, companies began to accept project grants to teach ‘about’ specific issues determined by the purse-holders” (Wooster 2016, 189). Anti-extremist TIE falls into this category. As stated earlier, PREVENT projects are Home Office funded and as such have a specific political remit. The challenge for these companies is to work within the parameters of a prescribed government agenda while remaining loyal to the guiding principles of TIE. Companies also have to manage stakeholder interest in the project, which may or may not agree on the focus or direction of the work. For example, a typical anti-extremist project will have a number of partners: schools, local councils and constabularies, safeguarding panels, faith groups and community leaders.

For the study, I interviewed 2engage Performing Arts, a TIE company based at the University of Chester. They specialise in risk-based issues and provide interventionist theatre projects for schools on themes of child sexual exploitation (CSE), sexting, teenage pregnancy and drug, alcohol and substance abuse. Their ethos is to engage young people in conversations that matter to their lives and communities in playful and imaginative ways: “we want our audiences to feel more informed about the world we live. Drama allows for the dull and mundane [as well as sensitive and risky issues] to be enjoyable” (2engage Performing Arts 2018ⁱ). In 2017 Lancashire Police and Blackpool Council commissioned *Love & Hate*, a new TIE play on far right extremism, for a large further education college in the North West of England. The project, though, raised unforeseen issues. For example, the company usually develop a script after spending time with stakeholders who have knowledge and understanding of the issue(s). With reference to a TIE project on teenage pregnancy:

We don’t simply say that teenage pregnancy is bad. None of the young parents we interviewed regretted having a baby. But, they showed us the problems they faced and how it affected their lives – the good and the bad. As a TIE company, our job is to show the problem in its entirety so that we can help young people to make informed decisions about their own lives. (2engage Performing Arts 2018ⁱⁱ)

For 2engage Performing Arts, understanding the real world of their audience creates a possibility for critical and reflective action. It is a view that has its roots in the pedagogy of the

oppressed. Freire writes, “[e]ducation as the practice of freedom... denies that man is abstract, isolated, independent, and unattached to the world; it also denies that the world exists as a reality apart from people” (2005, 81). However, when it came to scripting *Love & Hate*, the company were unable to speak to anyone involved in far right extremism, an issue compounded by a lack of research about the everyday experience of young people in far right groups:

We spend a lot of time talking to professionals and usually, there’d be agreement about what causes the problem, say if we’re working on a project about drug or substance abuse we’ll talk to drug teams as well as young people who’ve experienced the issue. Knowing the cause and the risk helps us to find solutions with our audiences, and we are then able to signpost support mechanisms, counselling services, mental health teams, NHS... But, when we talk about British values there’s far less agreement. It’s much harder to sit on the fence. (2engage Performing Arts 2017)

Albeit unknowingly, 2engage Performing Arts raise similar concerns about FBV, as articulated by Busher et al (2017), and the previously cited Home Affairs Select Committee (2016). They also suggest that TIE is most effective when they allow the ‘drama’ to inform the decision-making process. Similarly, Freire says, “the teacher cannot think for her students, nor can she impose her thoughts on them. Authentic thinking, thinking that is concerned about reality, does not take place in ivory tower isolation, but only in communication” (2005, 77). This, however, opens the work to misinterpretation, making it much harder to ‘sit on the fence’. For example, the company described their unease when, in a performance watched by Syrian refugees, a handful of the audience clapped the monologue of a far right character. The necessity to ‘take a side’, however, whether this is for or against a particular ideology or faith, sits uneasily for advocates of TIE, for as Boal reminds us, “the centre of gravity is in the auditorium, not the stage” (2005, 40).

With this in mind, I’d like to move to an analysis of two anti-extremist TIE projects: *Game On* (Reveal Theatre) and *Tapestry* (The Play House). They are by no means the only examples of anti-extremist TIE, but they are illustrative of the domain (see also ‘Odd Arts’, Manchester and ‘Curious Minds’, Lancashire). While *Game On* is a drama workshop and *Tapestry* is an interactive play, they address common themes:ⁱⁱⁱ

1. Vulnerability to radicalisation is not seen in isolation or specific to a particular group and/or community and the relationship between the far right and Islamist extremism is perceived as symbiotic and interdependent.
2. Racism, prejudice and cultural intolerance in some circumstances leads to violent extremism.
3. National and cultural identity is not fixed or singular, identity is plural, complex and multi-faceted.

I saw both projects in 2016. I observed two full-day workshops of *Game On* at two secondary academies in Stoke-on-Trent and two performances of *Tapestry* at a secondary academy in Birmingham. In Stoke-on-Trent, the majority of the learners were White British, although a significant proportion of learners from ethnic minority groups attended the *Game On* workshops. In Birmingham, the majority of the learners were from an ethnic minority background. All the schools were co-educational and the learners were age 11-14 years. Teachers attended the workshops and performances; they occasionally joined in with the group discussions but did not take part in the drama activities. Across both projects, I saw a range of TIE practice, including role-play, hot seating, image theatre, ice-breaking games, and group discussion.

My approach to the study has been wholly qualitative and informed by methodologies aligned to participant observation in educational research (Denzin & Lincoln 1994) as well as research methods in the performing arts (Kershaw & Nicholson 2011). With respect to the analysis of data, for *Game On* I've reflected on diary and field notes, meanwhile, my analysis of *Tapestry* is based on a reflective account of the performance(s), supported with extracts from the play.^{iv} I also refer to Winston and Strand's (2013) analysis of *Tapestry*, which pre-dates my own observations. My analysis is supported by in-depth interviews with drama facilitators and artistic directors from three TIE companies. For reasons of sensitivity, I have not interviewed the learners themselves, while not overlooking the importance of recording the experience of young people; Lynch's (2013) study of young British Muslims is pivotal in this respect.

To clarify, my focus has been to explore the emergence of anti-extremist TIE against the backdrop of PREVENT. While I am convinced that TIE has a unique ability to engage young people on matters that affect their lives, I do not enter into a defence of TIE as an art form per

se. Given the centrality of Freirean (and Boalian) philosophy, I am interested in exploring anti-extremist TIE through this lens. Freire says, “[h]uman beings are not built in silence, but in word, in work, in action-reflection” (2005, 88). Learners, however, may avoid entering into a meaningful discussion of terrorism because of a worry that criticism of British foreign policy or an expressed sympathy towards an extremist idea may have punitive consequences. Boal coins this as the ‘Cop in the Head’, a self-internalisation of oppression, which manifests as an “external reality” (Boal and Trans 1990, 35). A guiding question, then, is to ask whether anti-extremist TIE has the potential to be critically dialogic in the Freirean sense of the word, given the concerns outlined here.

Game ON: Reveal Theatre

Game On is a drama workshop for schools and colleges and was initially conceived as an anti-racism project partnered between Reveal Theatre, Stoke-on-Trent City Council and Port Vale Football Club. The topic is based on far right and Islamist extremism and is framed around the idea of ‘our town’ to enable the learners to make sense of the theme from the perspective of their own lives and communities. The workshop began with a group conversation about the far right. There is a long history of the far right in the city of Stoke-on-Trent. In 2009 there were 9 British National Party (BNP) city councillors^v and there have been a number of high profile protests by the English Defence League (EDL), Britain First and the Stoke-on-Trent Infidels, an anti-Islam group. In the following exercise, learners discuss the demonstrations they’d witnessed (or heard about). ‘DF’ stands for drama facilitator:

The Micra

DF talks to the group about different kinds of extremism, he refers to the Holocaust and mentions book burning by the Nazi’s in World War II as well as ISIS destroying the library at the University of Mosul. DF tells the group that he once saw someone in Hanley (a town in Stoke), do a Nazi salute. The group discusses this in more detail and a pupil says, “don’t you think that’s a bit dumb? Weren’t we fighting them anyway?” This leads to a conversation about the thousands of Muslims who fought and died in World War I [the class had been learning about the topic in their school lessons]. It was a lively and friendly conversation and DF encourages the group to share their own examples. A pupil says: “Once when I was in year 2, year 3, there was an EDL (English Defence League) riot in my street. This guy was smashing a Micra [car]. Then, this other guy fixed the Micra. Why would you do that?” The group laughed - the joke being why would you fix a Micra? (Diary notes).

Significantly, the learners were not asked for a personal opinion of the riot or their attitude towards the EDL. Freire writes, “[t]o deny the importance of subjectivity in the process of transforming the world and history is naïve and simplistic. It is to admit the impossible: a world without people” (2005, 50). But, subjectivity is not quite the same as a personal response to lived experience, since subjectivity positions the individual in *relation* to the world. Freire says it’s the difference between, “four times four is sixteen; the capital of Para is Belem [or] what Belem means for Para and what Para means for Brazil” (2005, 71). In this context, subjectivity enabled the learners to make sense of far right extremism in relation to Stoke on Trent and ergo, to the rest of the world.

This idea was reflected in a conversation about the difference between Islam and Islamist extremism. During an image theatre exercise, a pupil volunteered an explanation of the word Jihad and the Qur’an. In the following extract, DF challenges the pupil’s thinking to provoke a response:

Pupil: Muslims use the Qur’an.

DF: ISIS uses the Qur’an.

Pupil: But, they use it in a different way.

The exercise created an interesting power shift between the pupil and DF, which led to a positive discussion about Islam and faith. For some learners, it was an opportunity to discuss the Qur’an with a sense of authority and ownership and to counter some of the harmful stereotypes around their religion.^{vi} More importantly, it was an opportunity for all learners to see the world from a subjective perspective. Boal describes this as ‘first-person plural’:

The Theatre of Oppressed is the theatre of the first person plural. It is absolutely vital to begin with an individual account, but if it does not pluralise of its own accord we must go beyond it by means of analogical induction, so that it may be studied by all the participants. (Boal and Trans 1995, 45)

To invite a subjective response is to accept a degree of risk. Hunter, writing of applied theatre practices, says, “within the school classroom, community hall, factory floor, heritage site, or local public space, the creation of a space both physically and metaphorically safe is without

question a high priority for the applied performance practitioners” (2008, 6). This is not to say that TIE is risk-averse, far from it (and in the main, dealing with ‘risk’ is part of the job). This said anti-extremist work is ethically charged – a view not unnoticed by the learners. At the time of the *Game On* workshops, the UK government had undertaken military airstrikes against Islamic State strongholds in Syria and this dominated the conversation. The learners did not appear to be intimidated by the discussion, at least in the workshops I observed, and asked challenging and, at times, provocative questions. There was little evidence of Boal’s ‘Cop in the Head’:

- Sir, would you rather die or join ISIS?
- Cameron has no money for the NHS, but he has money to bomb Syria.
- Why are other countries not helping Syria?
- The Sun [newspaper] says that all Muslims are terrorists.
- David Cameron is bombing innocent civilians in Syria because of ISIS.

Whilst, the imaginary aesthetics of traditional theatre allow for a degree of emotional distance, TIE practitioners have to find other strategies to ensure the personal and social wellbeing of the participants. Typically, TIE practitioners use games and ice-breaking exercises to encourage a positive experience for their learners. Reveal Theatre extend the metaphor of a game (hence the workshop title), beyond its immediate practical use to address the broader themes of the project:

The Shufflebottom Game

DF explains the rules of the game. Shufflebottom requires the learners to place their chairs across the room so that there is enough space to move in-between them. DF selects a shuffler – the shuffler can only move by walking as if their knees are glued together, while the rest of the players can move as normal. The shuffler leaves their chair and goes to the opposite side of the room. The purpose of the game is for the shuffler to reach the empty chair and the only way the players can stop the shuffler is by sitting in the empty chair, but in doing this they must leave a new chair empty. The players cannot block the shuffler or move the chairs. (Diary notes 2016).

On a pragmatic level, *Shufflebottom* acts as an emotional safety valve to offset the more challenging aspects of the workshop. But, beyond the simple humour it generates (learners compete for a chance to be the shuffler), the game segues into a more serious conversation on terrorism. For example, the goal of the shuffler is to reach an empty chair from the other side of the room and as long as there are players willing to move the game continues. At one point in the game, DF said to the group, “if this was a real-life situation which one of you is the leader?” *Shufflebottom* is without a leader and an action taken on one side of the room creates a ripple effect on the other. DF used this a metaphor to discuss the Syrian Civil War, and the shifting alliances between Al Assad’s government forces, Western-backed insurgencies, and radical Islamist factions. In another workshop I observed, *Shufflebottom* led to a discussion about what it means to be British. Here, learners were encouraged to see their own identities as plural and multifaceted. DF asked the group, “how many of your parents (and grandparents) are from another country?” He then asked, “how many of you support Port Vale or Stoke City?” Most of the class raised their hands.

Humour was a strategy to defuse the more challenging aspects of the workshop. It’s not that *Game On* is purposefully funny, but rather humour, when it is a shared experience, and not at someone else’s expense, can be seen as, “an important social bonding mechanism, it aids the formation, enhancement, and maintenance of social relationships, and enhances feelings of connectedness and closeness” (Papousek et al 2017). Outside of a workshop, DF conveyed the following anecdote:

I was delivering a section of the workshop about racism and prejudice and a boy said something like, “I don’t like the hijab, they’re dangerous.” A girl, who was wearing a hijab, reacted and stood up. “No”, she said, “they’re not dangerous”, but as she turned around the fabric of her hijab hit the face of a boy sitting next to her, causing him to fall off his chair. I said, “I have to disagree with you there, look what’s happened to poor old Jim...”^{vii}

The humour of the moment (the boy falling off the chair), allowed DF to challenge the boy’s statement about the hijab in a friendly way, because the group (including the boy himself), saw the absurdity of the remark. DF’s comment, ‘look what’s happened to poor old Jim’ (said in the spur of the moment), caused everyone to laugh, as well as those directly involved, and this helped to maintain a positive and collaborative atmosphere in the room.

Reveal Theatre recognise that ‘signs of extremism’ are often and unhelpfully predicated on religious signifiers, such as the adoption of the hijab, a beard or the wearing of traditional dress, conversely, the far right, while a growing issue for Europe, has tended to be overshadowed in the public sphere. For this reason, a key theme running through the project was the relationship between far right and Islamist extremism. Arguably, showing extremism on this way allows a greater potential for dialogic thinking because a learner cannot approach either form in isolation:

The Blue Burqa

DF shows the group a picture of a woman in a blue burqa, pointing a gun. In red font are the words: “Terror Attack Level: Severe – an attack is highly likely. For security reasons, it’s now time to ban the burqa.” DF asks the group to discuss the picture and the words. A boy says it makes him think she’s a terrorist, someone else says because we can’t see her face she might be a man and a terrorist. The Paris attacks are mentioned and some of the learners said that the picture made them feel scared. DF shows a second picture, it’s the same image, but this time it is without the words. He asks if this changes their opinion at all. A girl, who has said very little up to this point, says a man once shouted at her mum for wearing a veil.

DF tells the group that the woman in the picture used to be a female police officer in Afghanistan.^{viii} A photograph had been taken of her in a police uniform (the blue burqa) for a newspaper because she was the first female police officer in her hometown of Kandahar. DF asks the group if knowing this changes their opinion. He tells them that the officer is no longer alive and the Taliban had murdered her. DF tells the group a far right group had added the words to the picture for an anti-Muslim campaign on social media. He asks, “Why do you think they did this? Why did they add the words?” After reflection, a boy replied, “To make us scared... of Muslims”. (Diary notes)

The exercise required learners to reflect on their own prejudices and to see their observations mirrored in the expression of others. Boal explains it like this: “[o]n stage, we continue to see the world as we have always seen it, but now we see it as others see it: we see ourselves as we see ourselves, and we see ourselves as we are seen” (1995, 26). An example was when the girl told the group about the hostility her mum had experienced, thus mirroring the findings of the Muslim Council of Britain (2016) and Tell Mama (2017). It was an important moment; not

only did it offer non-Muslims a personal insight into Islamophobia, but it also enabled learners to see their attitudes towards Muslims reflected in a wider, public debate on terrorism and the role of the far right in promoting negative stereotypes of Islam.

Tapestry, The Play House

Tapestry is a participatory TIE play for schools and colleges in the West Midlands. It is a story of three characters, Jason, Hassan, and Nazia, who are caught up in a protest between the *Young Patriots*, a far right group and, the *Circle of Truth*, a radical Islamic group. *Tapestry* has been touring schools in the West Midlands since funding streams were made available to PREVENT projects in 2009. In an article for the theatre journal, *Research in Drama Education (RiDE)*, which pre-dates my own analysis, Winston and Strand offer a vivid description of the play:

[*Tapestry*] opens inside an abandoned shop to the sounds of a violent demonstration outside. Sheltering here is Nazia, a British Muslim girl of Pakistani origin, quickly joined by her brother-in-law, Jason, a white working-class British youth who has been on the demonstration, and by Hassan, a young Muslim of Nigerian descent, an acquaintance of hers who has been part of a counter demonstration... Nazia strongly admonishes both young men for becoming involved in such a violent protest, and they each counter her challenges by laying out their opposing positions, recounting key incidents from their lives that have shaped their thinking and their attitudes (Winston and Strand 2013, 64).

Winston and Strand's analysis of the *Tapestry* project was undertaken at the cusp of PREVENT-projects for schools, initiated by the Labour government as part of a host of counter-terrorism measures after the 7/7 bombings. Their analysis, which combines quantitative surveys and qualitative responses to the project, is hugely relevant, particularly their view of TIE as a site of civil and dialogic exchange. However, they fail to take into account the significance of PREVENT for British Muslims. To return to an argument stated earlier, "the cultural 'threat' of Islam, characterised as 'non-violent extremism' in the PREVENT strategy, has come to dominate the construction of Islam in the public imagination such that it has become commonplace to view Muslims and Islam through this lens" (2018, 4). The Play House show that violent extremism is not simply a Muslim issue, hence the inclusion of a far right character. Nevertheless, their audiences (and funders), receive the project through a mediated lens; TIE does not sit in a cultural vacuum, far from it. For example, The Play

House asked for reassurance that my research would not present learners in a negative light due to public sensitivity following the ‘Trojan Horse Affair’; an investigation of an alleged plot to promote Islamist and Salafist teachings in Birmingham City schools (2014). Their request was not based on a fear of criticism of the project itself, but a genuine desire to maintain the wellbeing of participants involved in the project.

Freire says that “the oppressed must confront reality critically, simultaneously objectifying and acting upon that reality” (2005, 52). The ‘reality’, as expressed here, is a community in conflict. In 2009, at the time of the project’s inception, violence erupted at an EDL march in Birmingham city centre, between far right demonstrators, counter-protestors and the police. Similarly, in the fictional world of the play, Nazia, tired of Jason and Hassan arguing, leaves the safety of the shop to go home. The demonstration outside has turned ugly, however, and she is hurt in an altercation between rival groups. United in their care for Nazia, Jason and Hassan reach an understanding with each other. They realize, that despite being on opposing sides, they’ve experienced similar forms of oppression: Jason is bullied at home and Hassan is racially abused. Even Nazia, who challenges Jason and Hassan’s extremist ideas, struggles with her identity:

Nazia. Where do I belong? Am I Muslim, or Pakistani or British? When I go to Pakistan I feel like a tourist, but sometimes I don’t feel like I belong here either. So what am I? Muslim, British or Pakistani? (The Play House Online 2010).

Jason’s sense of identity, as a young British male, is caught up in his abusive relationship with his stepfather:

Jason. [as the stepfather]. I don’t sit around all day watching daytime telly, waiting for them Polish blokes glad of the work to come swanning here, to work for half the money of our British boys. And, here’s you sitting around letting ‘em. You got to learn to stand on yer own two feet, ain’t ya!.. When are you gonna take some responsibility? When is it you’re gonna grow up? When is it you’re gonna be a man! (Tapestry Online 2010)

In addition to their ‘named’ role, Jason, Hassan and Nazia multi-role characters from each other’s lives and these scenes have humorous overtones, while being shocking in nature (see also Winston and Strand 2013). For example, in a scene at a bus stop, Hassan is spat on by a

passerby, and in another scene, Nazia is accosted by a thug. Jason and Hassan also multi-role Peter Jeffrey and Dr Farooq, the leaders of the *Young Patriots* and the *Circle of Truth*. In a split scene showing Jeffrey and Farooq address their supporters, the words: ‘they’, ‘their’ and ‘we’, reinforce the similarities between the two groups:

Peter Jeffrey. They force their strange customs upon us, and parade their bizarre festivals up and down our streets. They take our jobs and our homes and what do they put back in? Mosques are being built where church bells should ring out (Tapestry Online 2010)

Dr Farooq. We have tried to fit in. But, they want us to forget who we are. If they want to bring the fight to our streets, then we shall do the same for them” (Tapestry Online 2010)

The scene ends with Jeffrey and Farooq saying in one voice, “We must fight, and fight to the end. The war has just begun.” Unlike other scenes in the play, there is far less ambiguity: the choice of staging, script construction and staging reinforces that extremist thinking comes from the same mindset, regardless of the form it takes. Written as one monologue, spoken by two characters, The Play House foreground the similarities between Peter Jeffrey and Dr Farooq, thus avoiding an antithetical reading of the far right and Islamist extremism. Following on from Boal, on stage we see the world clearly and as if for the first time. Boal writes, “[I]n creating the stage-auditorium division, we transform the stage into a place where everything acquires new dimensions, becomes magnified, as under a powerful microscope. All gestures, all words spoken there, become larger, clearer, more emphatic” (1995, 27).

The use of humour to provoke laughter is also a deliberate strategy and, despite the seriousness of the subject matter, *Tapestry* is a funny play. Lewis, writing of the importance of laughter within Freire’s pedagogy of the oppressed, refers to something he calls ‘critical laughter.’ He writes:

Critical laughter is transformative and revolutionary. It is on the side of a rupture with society’s norms, principles, and ways of life by opening up a new logic of action for which we do not yet have the word. To laugh with the people (rather than *at* them) is

to engage in a transformation of the relationship between self and other. (Lewis 2010, 640)

This is not to say that *Tapestry* is a comedy, far from it. On the contrary, the play is poignant and at times deeply moving. Critical laughter does not undermine the efficacy of the work, rather it provides space for learners to reflect on the play's underpinning themes. Again, referring to Lewis, "[L]aughter is not sufficient for a critical comprehension of the world, yet it does form an affective rupture of dichotomous student-teacher relations" (2010, 635-6). In the context of TIE, critical laughter gives license to say what normally can't be said or acted-upon, especially in a school setting. The far right character Jason illustrates this point, his thick Birmingham accent and comedic physicality produced the most laughter in the room, while his views towards Muslims and ethnic minorities were incendiary and offensive. In the following extract, Jason blames his lack of employment on his Muslim counterparts:

Jason. 9 months I've been going there [the job centre]. 9 months and there's nothing. How am I supposed to get the experience, 'ay, if they never give me the job? Ask me that, I'd like to know? But you lot, you've got it sorted, ain't ya? Got some uncle in a corner shop you can go and work in, or maybe round the back fixing a few cars by the garages? Well, I could do that. I could be good at that. I might even enjoy fixing cars. (The Play House Online 2011)

Critical laughter serves an important function, especially if the work deals with controversial subject matters. Here, humour allows the actor to present extreme ideas with a degree of warmth; we laugh at Jason's antics, his vocal expression and the way he behaves on stage while not agreeing with his views. To echo the observations of the *Game-On* project, the ethical implications of this argument are acute. If we invite allow an audience to laugh with a character, a learner may end-up expressing viewpoints not endorsed by the school, or even the company themselves. Indeed, Winston and Strand's findings show that "racist/extremist views [were held] by a minority of the respondents" (2013, 68). Bartlett sees a similar tension in her own anti-extremist play, *Not In My Name*. Referring to a moment in the play, she writes:

On one occasion a small group within a college audience cheered the bomb's detonation. Whilst this was not a typical or lasting response (I later observed members of this same group listening attentively and soberly to the play), it was nevertheless

shocking in its manifestation... Subjective interpretation is necessarily the prerogative of any audience, and thus it must be allowed that even the most conscientious artistic stimulation cannot ensure a universally aligned response. (Bartlett 2011, 187)

Bartlett makes a valid point, to invite a subjective response is to accept a degree of risk. But, as asserted earlier, managing risk is fairly standard practice for TIE companies, particularly those working in the tradition of Boal's theatre of the oppressed and Brecht's political theatre. Reveal Theatre adopt the metaphor of a game, while The Play House use other techniques to encourage learners to critique the material presented to them. At one point in the performance, the actor playing Nazia stepped out of her role and invited the audience to hot seat Jason. Hot seating is a popular TIE technique used by drama practitioners to break the fourth wall and to transfer action from the stage to the audience (the character sits on a chair facing the audience). It was an animated conversation - the audience challenged Jason on his attitudes towards Muslims and his reasons for joining the *Young Patriots*, at one point telling him he was racist, an accusation, which the character initially denied. This progressed into a longer discussion with Jason, which focused on his friendship with Nazia. That Jason expressed racist sentiments was beyond doubt, the purpose of the exercise was to offer an opportunity for the audience to sway Jason's thinking away from far right extremism and in doing so, to project their understanding of the world into the imaginary life of the play. While, this raises potential ethical issues, underpinning the technique is a belief in the learner and trust in the learning process. Freire writes:

Students, as they are increasingly posed with problems relating to themselves in the world and with the world, will feel increasingly challenged and obliged to respond to that challenge. Because they apprehend the challenge as interrelated to other problems within a total context, not as a theoretical question, the resulting comprehension tends to be increasingly critical and thus constantly less alienated. (Freire and Trans 2005, 81)

Conclusion

Winston and Strand describe effective TIE as a "dialogic and civil exchange" (2013, 69) and these were qualities I observed in the study. At no point were learners/audiences made to feel foolish, ashamed or guilty about what they said or did. To return to the example of the '*Blue Burqa*', the exercise relied on the learner having the freedom to express what they honestly

thought about the image. Similarly, the use of hot seating in *Tapestry* enabled learners to critique the play from the perspective of their own lives. From a Freirean perspective, it shifts the responsibility for learning from the actor/facilitator to the learner, thus destabilizing traditional pedagogic relationships. Freire says, “[e]ducation must begin with the solution of the teacher-student contradiction, by reconciling the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers *and* students” (2005, 72).

My observations of workshops and performances, as well as interviews with drama practitioners and actors, leads me to support the view that TIE can make a valuable contribution to the development of critical thinking on terrorism. I am not suggesting this is unique to TIE, of course, but it is an opportunity for young people to examine the theme in inclusive and participatory contexts. The work I saw was many-sided, conflicted and, at times, challenging and herein is the value. TIE resists a polarized reading of violent extremism as a Muslim concern because it brings into the frame the interdependency between far right and Islamist forms of extremism. Tahir Abbas’s analysis of Muslim and white working class youth sees similar connectivity:

Part of the radicalisation of both European-born Muslims and the far right youth is an aspect of their coming to terms with hegemonic masculinity in the context of intergenerational disconnect, combined with economic insecurity... Britain First, the English Defence League and what were organisations such as Al-Muhajiroun and Islam4UK consisted of young men with limited education, employment or social status. These men are outraged and simultaneously embittered by the spiritual or material challenges of their existence. (2017, 55)

Likewise, as shown in the analysis of *Tapestry*, the play’s characters arrive at extremist ideas through a shared disconnect; neither feel at home in their communities nor do they believe those in power have their best interests at heart. To echo Abbas, Jason and Hassan are “simultaneously” disaffected: in economic, educational, social, cultural and political terms. For young men, lost in a world they don’t understand, the extremist group’s they’ve joined offer powerful counter narratives of brotherhood and belonging. For Abbas, a reading of extremism as a manifestation of identity politics allows for the issue to be seen, “not simply as a task for

particular communities. It ultimately places accountability on government and authorities to take greater responsibility for the problems *and* the solutions to violent extremism” (2017, 59).

This, though, is essentially the problem. If, as Abbas suggests, responsibility lies with the government, TIE can do little other than to illuminate the issues and challenges for young people and to challenge the stereotypes around its root causes. Whilst admirable in itself, this may not be enough. The article has shown that the terror attacks of recent years have contributed to a strengthening of anti-Muslim sentiment and an associated rise in Islamophobia. TIE may enlighten, but, ultimately, young people, especially those from minority groups lack the power to change anything – let alone influence domestic counter-terrorism policy. To put it simply, schoolchildren, the intended recipients of the work, are without political agency. Notwithstanding the value of the projects examined in the article, it is difficult to see Freire’s vision of dialogic pedagogy as truly effective in this climate.

In the first section of the article, I referred to Heath-Kelly’s observation that underpinning PREVENT is an assumption of a ‘radicalisation process’ (2013). The TIE analysed here moves beyond a simple cause and effect; nonetheless, the work is premised on the view that there is a radicalisation process, whether it is towards far right or Islamist extremism. Despite the best intentions, TIE may end up reinforcing the status quo – leading to the idea that some learners are more vulnerable than others. Heath-Kelly reminds us that despite, “the assertions of the new PREVENT that *all* extremist ideologies would be subject to investigation, and that the funding of community cohesion work would be separated from counter-terrorism, have not succeeded in making PREVENT benign” (2013, 411).

Finally, I would like to return to Qurashi’s argument that surveillance “is an essential feature of the PREVENT strategy” (2018, 1). There is no escaping that the Home Office fund anti-extremist TIE in the service of the war on terror and this is dependent on the submission of evaluative reports and assessments. The study has only touched on this aspect and much more research needs to be undertaken on how PREVENT projects are monitored (and with it a consideration of what happens to those reports). Perhaps, a final critique of PREVENT rests with its origins of authorship, which reside in the corridors of power, for as long as the strategy reinforces a disproportionate focus on Islam, fear and a politics of surveillance will continue to divide communities.

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ⁱ Personal communication, January 16, 2018.

ⁱⁱ Personal communication, October 23, 2018.

ⁱⁱⁱ It should be noted that the theatre companies cited in the article offer a range of TiE workshops, covering curriculum matters, PSHE and career development as well as their anti-extremist work.

^{iv} In the absence of a script, I refer to a promotional video produced by The Play House. Due to the liveness of the theatrical event, there may be slight differences in the performances I observed.

^v The British National Party subsequently lost all seats in the 2011 Local Council Elections.

^{vi} It would overly simplistic to suggest that Muslims learners in the room responded to the exercise in equal measure. In every learning environment, there are some learners who dominate the room and some who say very little and, in this exercise, some learners were more vocal than others.

^{vii} Jim is a pseudonym.

^{viii} The woman referred to in the Blue Burqa is Colonel Lieutenant Malalai Kakar. The original photograph was taken by the Canadian journalist Lana Slezić.