

## War and Truth

In an interview to promote my play *The War Play*, the interviewer asked me what I thought the theme was. I said, ‘The truth’, and went on to talk about the way we mythologise our lives, and the stories we cling to because they symbolise a quality we like to believe is about ourselves and our identities. Sometimes it’s a ‘national’ myth, like Gallipoli, sometimes it’s a personal one, like the kind of man your grandfather was, or indeed, your great uncle.

The story of my Great Uncle Jack in the war is now reasonably well documented, but it has been embedded in the DNA of my family for the last hundred years. I don’t remember the first time I heard it. I do remember how it polarised members of my family. Some wanted to talk about it, some preferred it stay buried. It’s understandable: Jack’s remaining siblings, the ones who survived the war, thought their fallen brother had been a traitor. His father, Joseph, once a stalwart of society—mayor of Dunedin and owner of ‘Braithwaite’s Book Arcade’, then the biggest bookstore in Australasia—died about six months after Jack. Whether it was, as the speculation goes, from a broken heart, we cannot know, but certainly he took to his grave a profound misunderstanding of what happened to his son. They all did. That’s why my grandfather, John Rewi Braithwaite, never wanted to talk about it. Some of that reticence bled down to the following generations, and created an overall sense of disquiet.

Why did I want to write about it? Was it just because the story was there, available? Was it some kind of attempt to cleanse my family of this ‘stain’? Was it the startling injustice of the whole affair—the tragedy, Shakespearian in its scale?

It may have initially been some or all of these things. But I think it was also a desire to brush the edges of what we might call the truth.

Every writer is probably looking for the truth. If you ask a selection of writers they might say that’s the main reason they write. And indeed, the truth is difficult to pin down, as Harold Pinter so eloquently wrote:

Truth in drama is forever elusive. You never quite find it but the search for it is compulsive. The search is clearly what drives the endeavour. The search is your task. More often than not you stumble upon the truth in the dark, colliding with it or just glimpsing an image or a shape which seems to correspond with the truth, often without realising that you have done so. But the real truth is that there never is any such thing as one truth to be found in dramatic art. There are many. These truths challenge each other, recoil from each other, reflect each other, ignore each other, tease each other, are blind to each other. Sometimes you feel you have the truth of a moment in your hand, then it slips through your fingers and is lost.

As a writer I understand that completely. I see exactly what he means, and will attempt shortly to expand on it. For the moment, though, I am interested in locating the facts, and trying to separate them from the dressing of mythology.

The really infuriating thing about Jack's story is that the facts of his wartime exploits are so maddeningly simple you can summarise them in just a few sentences:

Jack went to war, where he behaved badly as a soldier. He was sent to a military prison, Blargies, in the north of France. While there he witnessed an altercation between a British guard and some Australian prisoners. Jack intervened to pacify the situation, mostly because he wanted to pull together a petition to return to the front and he didn't want this event to jeopardise it. As a result, he and the Australians involved in the altercation were accused of mutiny. Whereas Australia forbade the execution overseas of its serving soldiers, the New Zealand government deferred to the British. Also, General Sir Douglas Haig was keen to see conscription introduced in Australia, and a soldier execution would hardly advance that cause. For those reasons, Jack was the only man executed, because he, with his poor military record, was easy to make an example of, and because someone had to pay.

This was not the story that was delivered to Jack's family. The documents at the trial, all of which exonerated Jack of any real wrongdoing, were suppressed, and did not resurface until the 1980s. Jack's parents would not have been told much at all, in fact, but they would have heard about the mutiny at Blargies, and would have connected the dots. Added to which, there was a garbled retelling of the event in parliament, which no doubt lingered in the public consciousness. One of the more heartbreaking moments is a letter that Jack's mother apparently received, which informed her that no medals were to be sent, a sure indicator that her son had been disgraced.

## Myth

Sometime in the seventies, film-maker George Lucas discovered the writings of Joseph Campbell. Campbell was a 'mythologist' and his landmark book, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, became the bane of every film school student's existence. In it, Campbell tried to compress all the world's myths into one single narrative, which he called 'The Hero's Journey'. Lucas drew from this narrative to create *Star Wars*, and the fact that the film has endured all these years and bled into American (and world) popular culture is due in some part to Campbell's formulation. In this narrative he showed the power of myths, how they can give a set of events meaning beyond themselves.

Gallipoli certainly happened. It was, in fact, a disaster. But we have attached to it a series of ideas, or perhaps ideologies, that speak of our national character. We have mythologised the event. It has been taken as a marker of national identity: the 'hard men' aspect of our culture, the emergence of the 'Anzac spirit'. These are mere ideas, but they have come to symbolise something essential; something that is little more than a series of stereotypes, perhaps, but a country develops and grows up on stereotypes.

Mythology coils itself around a fact and then crystallises, forms a hard skin, so that the fact is no longer discernible from the myth. Then, if the skin is punctured and the fact is laid bare once again, as happened with Jack, it is often still the myth that is accepted. I think there's a reason why mythology has this power. I think 'the truth' that Pinter referred to is the result of a violent collision of fact and myth. It's a story containing a nugget of wisdom or instruction that speaks to us on a fundamental level. As such, it feels so universal that it seems to speak for all of human experience. Or at least the experience of a family or a country: its values, its most cherished ideas about itself.

This can, of course, be dangerous. Pinter was right to point out that 'the real truth is that there never is any such thing as one truth to be found in dramatic art'. One of the major critiques of Campbell is that inherent within his philosophy was the conservative notion that people don't change. It's easy to see how pernicious this concept can become, how it can lead to misuse through propaganda. And indeed it does, as in the case of any narrative that tries to summarise identity, whether national or personal.

When Helen Clark publicly pardoned Jack and three other New Zealand

men executed during the war, there was a sense of alleviation: lifting of a taboo, freedom to talk openly about this story, even acknowledge and atone for the mistakes of the past. This is when I became properly interested. I was at university at the time. David Braithwaite, then mayor of Hamilton, was one of the cheerleaders, trying to reinstate posthumous war medals for Jack. They now sit in Toitū Otago Settlers Museum, a legacy restored.

And yet, Clark was wrong. It was a good gesture, but it sent out the wrong message. She said, ‘These men were obviously drunk or shellshocked.’ Whether they were or not, this implies guilt. They did something that is shameful, for which we can now *forgive* them in the spirit of a twenty-first-century mindset, an acknowledgement that it was a time of irrational decisions and actions. I can’t speak for the other men, but this is not true of Jack. Jack was innocent, at least of the charges that led him to that bleak end in a French military prison. He doesn’t need forgiveness; he needs understanding.

But there is still this discomfort. I feel it a little from some members of the Braithwaite clan. It’s as if our family cannot fully bury Jack. His myth, therefore, lingers far beyond the reality. But that sense of the spectre of the past hanging over us can in fact be very useful creatively, and helped mould the play into its current state.

### **My family in context**

The conservative estimate is that there were 18 siblings in my grandfather’s generation, but it could have been as many as 22. Some definitely died at birth. The brothers who went to war were not saints, of course. It’s said that some of the brothers stole a tank. It’s said that one of the brothers, Horace, was shot in the head and continued to fight for three days with a gaping hole in his forehead. What is reality and what is myth is difficult to separate now that time has done its work and repackaged their exploits as bite-size stories, meant to emphasise the extremes of personality in our family.

My grandfather went to war as well. When he returned he played soccer for New Zealand, and was selected for the national rugby team too. After that he was a goldminer in a small village called Wangapeka, where my father was born.

Once, when I was a boy of about 10, I was playing rugby at school. I

somehow came into possession of the ball. This was possibly the first and last time the egg-shaped object ever made its way into my hands, and it was probably by accident. I was astonished and dumbfounded, but also determined to capitalise on this success. So proud was I of my newly acquired possession that I ran with it; I ran and ran. Finally, when I realised that no one was chasing me, I stopped. I looked back. In my fervour I had run right off the field and some way into the adjoining one. I could see the teacher and other students doubling over with laughter.

My dad used to take me out and try to teach me how to play cricket. Eventually we agreed to give up the bat and ball in mutual frustration. To him it was inconceivable that I could be so uncoordinated: I must be doing it deliberately to try his patience. My father, like his father, was an extremely good sportsman: the two of them used to play cricket in the back yard. In trying to replicate that sense of bonding, my father tried it with me, but alas, I could never get the hang of the forward stroke.

What I have written above, about my father and grandfather, about myself, is factually true, and shows how far my genes have drifted from their founders. The mythology I inherited—of hard men and sports champions—apparently ends with me. I can no more kick a ball than wield a rifle at another man. Perhaps that's because I only own a quarter of the genetic material of my grandfather. But, in a family, your heritage is part of the myth of the self. Am I an anomaly, or is there some wrenching of the romantic and the real still to be done? I wouldn't be suited for war, and Jack wasn't either.

He called himself a 'bohemian journalist', and whatever he meant by that, I felt some affinity with him as a writer. He was not meant for war. It's not clear why he even went, but when he was there he misbehaved. He managed to become a lance corporal before being stripped of his rank for going AWOL, falsifying a leave pass and various other petty offences. At the British military prison, Blargies, the final tragic act of his short life played out.

### **The play**

I'd been thinking about writing a play of this story for many years. I'd had a couple of tries: once as a film script, once as a TV play when I was in England. Neither worked, nor ever saw the light of day.

Why didn't they work? There are some conclusions I could draw. First, I am

not very interested in military history, or the mechanics of warfare. The aesthetics, yes: an attraction to the bleakness in depictions of the trenches; that grainy film footage of soldiers in the battlefields holds a visceral emotional appeal. But I don't know or care about the ins and outs of military campaigns. Perhaps you've been at a party, trapped in a corner by an amateur military historian who will explain to you tactics, the particulars of attacks, formations, generals and battles in great detail, probably offering an analysis of why this or that campaign succeeded or failed. Perhaps you are one of those historians. If so, I recommend that you don't engage me in the conversation.

So a play set predominantly in the war was a difficult prospect for me. But also the story itself is difficult. How do you come to any conclusion about a man whose life is cut tragically, meaninglessly short by government machinations? It's an interesting story, it's a dramatic story, but it's a downer. Not that I mind that: *Othello* is a downer; *King Lear* is a downer. But they deliver their bleak message with poignancy and power. It's not that a story even has to end on a note of hope, but it has to have some kind of conclusion beyond the expected, from which you can draw no understanding, solace, or meaning. There needs to be something about it that is poetic.

Kubrick's *Paths of Glory* is a brilliant, if flawed film. Set in a World War I camp, it tells a similar story to Jack's, and it ends not with hope, but with a sort of ironic, ambiguous moment. After some of the men are executed, the remaining men gather in a barn, where an announcer brings out a German girl and explains that they are in for 'a little diversion'. The general, played by Kirk Douglas, stands outside, observing the men as they observe the German girl sing a haunting, elegiac song that seems to distort reality, twisting it into another shape: some kind of saccharine other world. The men are unaware that they have to return to the front, and the general allows them this moment of escape. It's a counterpoint, a juxtaposition, sentimentality in brutal contrast with reality, a place to transcend. This is what the men's faces seem to communicate, as Kubrick's camera probes them, measuring every tear that drops from their eyes as they are all, momentarily, stunned into silence.

A similar kind of poetic denouement never presented itself to me in the case of Jack's story. Unable ever to find the right shape for the play—and sometimes you have to talk in those terms—I put the idea aside for some

time. Years, in fact. But then in 2014 a fund became available: the WW100 fund, for commemorative works of art about the war. I thought of the story of Jack, and dug it out of my memory. I talked it over with Lara Macgregor, artistic director of the Fortune Theatre in Dunedin, who had never commissioned a work before. I was given the commission (part of me had feared just that!) and now had to write the play.

As I've said, the basic story of Jack's rise and fall is very simple, and yet when I started to write the play I realised one massive ingredient was missing: the question of *why*. Why did Jack behave in this apparently arbitrary way? Why did he go to war in the first place, given that he really just wanted to be, in his own words, a 'bohemian journalist' and 'was not cut out for soldiering'? Why did he behave badly in the trenches, then suddenly try to pull his socks up once at Blargies?

We don't know the answers, but we can make educated guesses. Jack's older brother, Horace, had been badly wounded in Gallipoli. He returned home, but died soon after. For that reason, and given the military fervour in all the Allied countries at the time, the pressure on Jack to enlist would have been overwhelming. No doubt he did want to stay home, but that was not an option. He might also have been influenced by his other brothers still over there. Once enlisted he tried to behave in an appropriate manner—as mentioned, he rose to the rank of lance corporal—but was soon demoted. I have to assume, after his initial effort, he realised the whole business was untenable, and let himself slip. While at Blargies one can only surmise that he felt ashamed of his conduct and tried to play it straight. Perhaps he didn't want news of his shame reaching his family.

In any case the story, which appears so simple, is in fact unruly. Jack's arc, if there is one, wavers around like a drunk trying to walk the line. It's huge and complicated, and drama doesn't do complication very well.

I wrote the first draft in what I thought was an expressionist manner: I dipped and dived back and forth between Dunedin and France in the war. I wanted to keep in sight why the story was being told: because of those final scenes, where Jack is dragged to the pole and executed for something he didn't do.

I sent it to Lara. She read it and sent it to an outside script adviser, who came back with notes. In summary, they said, 'This comes across as just

another war play. Where is the personal connection?’ Lara in particular said she loved the initial story, and the script ought to ‘break her heart’, and yet it didn’t.

I felt in my bones that something radical had to happen. I still wanted to keep hold of that energy, that naiveté that is required when writing a play, or probably any piece of fiction, especially in the early drafts. You must feel free to play: to throw things at the wall and see what sticks. You cannot allow yourself to fall into safe territory.

I try to summon the feeling I had when I was first writing, back in my early twenties when I didn’t know any better (and when I was writing plays that people were excited about, probably because I didn’t know any better). It was a feeling of wanting to go there, to push my own boundaries to see what lay beyond. I used to give myself a little rule: if I am going down Path A, and an idea occurs to me that would change everything and send me irrevocably down the one-way street of Path B, I should take it. Why? Because it’s usually the more radical idea—it’s usually the idea that takes you off the ‘beaten track’, away from cliché, from comfort, from logic, and plunges you into the choppy waters of the new. Sometimes you later find that this newness is not all that new, and what you thought was original is in fact not, or sometimes just a different kind of cliché, but it’s always worth the experiment of departing from that initial path. Of course it also means it’s working. If you’re telling a story and a radical idea occurs to you, then you’re invested in that story, your brain is firing, your heart is pumping. You’re going along with the suffering of your characters. You’re feeling it.

Something occurred to me: a play I’d seen in London some years earlier. It was called *I Am My Own Wife*, by Douglas Wright. It had been a huge success. One of the things I remembered about it was the playwright claiming he’d suffered a debilitating bout of writer’s block that had delayed the final product by some years. The way he solved this problem was by putting himself into the text, so that the play became a kind of interrogation of the main character by the writer, on the subject of how frustrating and elusive that main character is. I took out the script from the library, to refresh myself on the play, but also in the hope that there would be an introduction. There was, and in it Wright described how someone else suggested the idea of putting himself into the text (he was initially opposed). He also described

workshops, wherein he would arrive with only fragments of text, and the director and actors would bring their own ideas to the table.

I was energised and excited by this, and realised I had to do the same: I had to put myself into the play. I assumed it would be an occasional voice interrupting the action, questioning it, as in Wright's play. But that's the pleasure of taking a new path: you never know where it will lead you.

In many ways, like Wright, I was against the idea, but I think that in itself is a reason to at least investigate it. Early on in my writing life I made a note of certain things not to do in a script. One was to overuse technology. I think the theatre is a primal space—as primal as banging on a drum—and the inclusion of technology always seems phoney to me. Film is the realm of technology. The movie industry is always redefining itself in terms of technology—which is not to denigrate cinema: I love movies as much as anyone else.

But the stage is something else. The stage is primitive. The stage is elemental. It can offer a deeper insight into emotions, motivations, what it is to be human. It pares down the human experience, stripping away technology, reality, sometimes even staging itself, and peering straight into the soul of a man and a woman, emotionally naked on stage.

I don't like to write about writers. I feel this is a cop-out—a sort of hole where an idea should be, which can too easily become self-indulgent and vacuous. Many have done it and produced great work, but I always felt it wasn't for me. Related to this, I wanted to avoid postmodernist meta-theatre devices like, say, including myself in a play (anytime someone uses the prefix 'meta' I shrivel inside, even though the title itself—*The War Play*—is intentionally self-reflexive: the Phil character is in the process of writing this 'war play'). These techniques—sometimes just gimmicks—were explored and exhausted in decades past. Pirandello was the master of this kind of game-playing. Dennis Potter, the great television playwright (back when such an occupation existed), messed with what constitutes the artifice of fiction, and we don't need to go back to the Absurdists to see that these ideas are not new.

But it's important to break your own rules. Lars von Trier founded Dogme 95 cinema with very specific rules about making movies, made one movie this way, then abandoned the rules he'd created. Art is the medium of rule-

breaking, and the old saying is true: you have to know the rules before you can break them. Then it's almost your duty to do so, especially if the rules are self-imposed.

When I decided to include 'Phil' as a character, certain ideas cemented themselves, and I think this is the key. I did not include the character as a gimmick. I remember Dennis Potter again, becoming indignant when an interviewer suggested that he was consciously trying to break a mould with his work—his landmark television play *Blue Remembered Hills* involved a cast entirely made up of adults playing children; his landmark series *The Singing Detective* and *Pennies from Heaven* included, as a central conceit, characters lip-synching songs. Potter said this was the one area in which he would 'stamp his feet', because he hated the suggestion that there was any intent on his part to shock or subvert merely for the sake of it. He did these things simply out of necessity. Using adults to play children was, he felt, the only way he could avoid the twee sentimentality of watching children: to push past that and see that for children, the threat of a bully is every bit as real and frightening as a thug on a dark street corner is to an adult. To have actors lip-sync to songs was a way of delivering to the forefront the 'cheap emotion' of that music, which says the world can be other than it is.

So it was for me. Although excited at the prospect, I was also somewhat against the inclusion of 'myself' as a character, and yet I knew it had to be there, because this is not 'just a war play', and what was missing from the first draft was what happened *after* Jack died. The ensuing hundred years. The effect on the family. The shame, the suppression of the facts. This was, crucially, a chance to analyse the truth, to chisel away at those hardened cells of myth and look inside. Jack had maintained a pervasive presence in our family, yet here he was now, stripped naked, looked at from the outside, his emaciated body and soul under a microscope—Phil's microscope. That is just as crucial as the story of Jack itself. It created a new dynamic: the idea that Jack is *back there*, a hundred years ago, and yet he is also *right here*, right in front of our faces, especially if you happen to share some of the same genes. The past is like that. It's both an event in time, and a reality staring you in the face.

There's a danger with World War I plays that they are about either the glorification or the futility of war, usually the latter (and the former only in a

sort of aesthetic or sentimental ‘brothers in arms’ sense). Establishing a contemporary timeframe can help jettison those tired themes. I didn’t want to make a proclamation on war, precisely because so many writers have done that already, and all have come to the same (obvious) conclusion. I wanted the war setting to be almost incidental. Drama creates immediacy—even if the action did happen back then, it’s happening before you on stage. And the inclusion of Phil allows a contemporary framework. Phil becomes our tour guide, showing us Jack, allowing us to see him from the inside and the outside.

It also reduces Jack to his true proportions. He was 31 when he went to war, which is an advanced age for a soldier but still quite young. He of course became, for our family, more than just a scared young man; he became a spectre of dread. Now I had the chance to return to that pathetic and lonely figure and interrogate him.

As soon as I started writing ‘Phil’ and his father, things seemed to work. A workshop was scheduled, and after that I planned to go to the Edinburgh Festival. I was very keen to get this Phil idea onto its feet, as we playwrights say, but I had very little time. I mentioned my plan to Lara and she was quite impressed. I cobbled together as much as I could of the new idea, and in the workshop we went through both scripts.

The response to the ‘Phil’ inclusion was mixed: people felt that aspects from both versions worked, but all were excited by the new script’s possibilities. There was an American woman present in the workshop, just observing. She was in town visiting friends. Afterwards she said to me, ‘Some of that seemed like another play I saw workshopped, called *I Am My Own Wife*.’

As the new draft progressed, I found myself distorting the facts and creating wildly inaccurate portraits of my family. I couldn’t understand why I was becoming so free and easy, twisting characters and their histories in any way I saw fit, remaining faithful to only one set of facts: those that explained what happened to Jack in that prison. I think perhaps I wanted to create an ‘alternative universe’ version of my family. Allowing ‘myself’ and ‘my father’ to walk the boards was making me so vulnerable that I had to fictionalise them.

The play was produced at the Fortune in March 2015. There was a lot of

publicity, and the production seemed to be successful. The director commented in the programme, ‘*The War Play* is full of lies and half-truths.’ This is correct, but to bring it back to the initial question of ‘the truth’, I think the lies are justified. The lies are more heavily weighted on the contemporary side than the historical: the only thing I really share with my namesake is the name, and even that is never mentioned in the play. The father is really nothing like my own father. But the director’s note continues:

‘Philip has bravely played fast and loose with other details of his family’s century-old story—all in service of arriving at some greater truths about men and war, fathers and sons, and the way events of World War I still ripple through time to haunt and challenge us.’

Brave or not, these ‘greater truths’ are the ones we’re all looking for.

I didn’t write the play to exonerate Jack, or to promote deeper understanding in my family. I wrote the play because it’s a good story, and because I wanted to deconstruct the myth: the myth of the family, the myth of the self. Can these be wrenched apart, at this late stage? It has been a hundred years since my Great Uncle Jack was executed on a pole in a French prison for a crime he didn’t commit, but I feel like it’s right beside me, that story, that man, running alongside me. I shout out to Jack across the ages and he seems close: close enough to shout back.