

I'll Huff and I'll Puff

Play about the Trojan Horse affair, autumn 2019

Keywords: a self-evident forgery; relics of colonialism, white supremacy and Islamophobia; hopes, energies and courage; mending and healing.



Long before the play starts, the five actors are on stage. They are far apart from one another and each is sitting at a school desk. All have their backs to the audience and all appear to be writing. Presumably they are all taking part in an exam – they are being tested on what they know and can do, and their chances of future happiness, success and sense of self-worth are at stake.

Suddenly the lighting changes and the actors spring into action. They dash all over the stage at breakneck chaotic speed, pushing their desks before them. Within seconds they have cooperatively assembled the five desks into a single formation reminiscent of the dock in a court of law. One of them, a young male, makes a passionate speech from the dock. 'I'm a big bad Muslim man,' he declares, 'and I'll huff and I'll puff and I'll blow your school UP.'

Self-evident forgery

Then for the next 75 minutes the five actors recall key events that took place in east Birmingham in the period 2014–17 and that are collectively known as the Trojan Horse affair. Millions of pounds of public money were spent on the assumption that a self-evident forgery was in fact genuine; thousands of schoolchildren were given a tragically interrupted education; several teachers and headteachers were falsely accused of professional misconduct in an outrageous miscarriage of justice; and relationships of many kinds were horrendously, and it seemed irreparably, damaged. An appendix at the end of this review mentions various sources of further information.

The documentary play about the affair involves five actors darting hither and thither in a chaotic, manic and dazzling kind of dance, continually re-forming the stage furniture into new arrangements and constellations. Each actor plays many cameo parts and they switch between these from one accent, generation, language and mood to another, acting out their personalities with gesture, posture and extra bits of clothing which they keep in school desks when not wearing them.

Relics of colonialism

At one moment, for example, an actor may be playing the part of a swearsy, stropky, teenage Pakistani girl full of fury, angst, hormones and desperation, and then a few moments later the same actor is a Roedean and Oxbridge educated barrister mercilessly deconstructing the muddled sophistry of an Ofsted inspector, and a few moments after that she's a stressed mum at her wits' end, and then a young city councillor doing her valiant best to defend the city's children against the casual cruelties and sheer bloody ignorance, and the self-serving opportunism, of Ofsted and the Department for Education at Westminster and Whitehall. Also they are up against decadent relics of colonialism, white supremacy, racism and Islamophobia.

The play ends with the same words with which it began, 'I'm a big bad Muslim man, and I'll huff and I'll puff and I'll blow your school UP.' But it's much clearer the second time round that the words articulate an imaginary being like the big bad wolf of infancy and folklore, not a real person. The big and the bad being is projected and constructed by forces which are part of everyone, and everyone suffers in tragic consequence. Schools are blown up not by real children but by the infantile fantasies and projections of those who manage and inspect them.

Tenderness

Amid all the dazzling chaos on stage there are occasional moments of great tenderness, stillness, dignity and spirituality, expressing a sense that in east Birmingham, and in east Birmingham everywhere, there are reserves and resources, and hopes, energies and courage, that will eventually prevail, and will heal and mend that which is currently breaking or broken.

These positive energies are seen in the individual and collective ensemble skills of the five young actors – Komal Anin, Mustafa Chaudhry, Gurkiran Kaur, Qasim Marhmoood and Keshini Misha; and in the writers – Helen Monks and Matt Woodhead; and the director, Matt Woodhead. Also the skills and determination of many other people have contributed to this amazing work of art, including John Holmwood the academic adviser and Madiha Ansari the engagement manager. Respect, gratitude and admiration for the whole company.

Robin Richardson (robin@insted.co.uk)

APPENDIX: FURTHER INFORMATION

The play

Fuller information about the play, including details of the current tour in autumn 2019, is available at <http://lungtheatre.co.uk/trojan-horse/>
There is a fascinating interview with Matt Woodhead, the play's co-author and director, at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4ONujqmZJO8>

Commentary in 2014

THE TROJAN HORSE DESTABILISING MUSLIM MAJORITY SCHOOLS

By M G Khan, *The Guardian*, 27 March 2014

<https://www.tes.com/news/so-called-trojan-horse-document-being-used-destabilise-muslim-majority-schools>

THE MUSLIM PLOT THAT WASN'T

By Assed Baig, *Huffington Post*, 7 April 2014

http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/assed-baig/muslim-plot_b_5103347.html

NAMING THE NARRATIVES: THE TROJAN HORSE AFFAIR IN BIRMINGHAM

By Robin Richardson, *Institute of Race Relations*, 5 June 2014

<http://www.irr.org.uk/news/naming-the-narratives-the-trojan-horse-affair-in-birmingham/>

READINESS TO BELIEVE IN MYTHICAL TROJAN HORSES

By Sarah Soyei, *Equaliteach*, 19 June 2014

<https://www.equaliteach.co.uk/islamophobia-and-the-readiness-to-believe-in-mythical-trojan-horses/>

TROJAN HORSE, OFSTED AND THE PREVENTING OF EDUCATION

By Shamim Miah, *Discover Society*, 1 July 2014

<http://www.discoverociety.org/2014/07/01/trojan-horse-ofsted-and-the-preventing-of-education/>

HATRED, HYSTERIA AND A TROJAN HORSE

By Robin Richardson, *Institute of Race Relations*, 31 July 2014

<http://www.irr.org.uk/news/hatred-hysteria-and-a-trojan-horse/>

THE YEAR OF THE TROJAN GIFT HORSE

By Robin Richardson, *Institute of Race Relations*, 23 December 2014

<http://www.irr.org.uk/news/the-year-of-the-trojan-gift-horse/>

What next?

INVESTIGATE THE BIRMINGHAM TROJAN HORSE PLOT

by John Holmwood, *Open Democracy*, 2 October 2018

<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/investigate-birmingham-trojan-horse-affair/Tested>