

## Preface

This book has taken a long time to complete. I am writing this final touch, a preface, on the day that Tony Blair is stepping down as the British Prime Minister, but it began more than twelve years ago, when John Major was in 10 Downing Street and Bill Clinton at the White House. This is a long time in anybody's politics. Indeed, it was plotted in my mind even before then, at the end of the Cold War, as a long essay for the US magazine, *The World & I*, on why George Bush Sr.'s New World Order was not new, not global and, except as a way of helping us all to conform to the myths of modernity, not orderly. It was never published.

I was then the chair of a very small cultural NGO, the International Association of Theatre Critics, affiliated to UNESCO, and from this moderate podium, we had what could be described as a navel-high view of international politics, witnessing the gut reactions and the winds of change that blew statesmen in and out of office. We never mixed with them socially. It would have been unprofessional to do so. It was as if we were always in our places in the stalls, scribbling away and trying to make sense of the plots that were taking place on the stage above.

It was surprisingly easy to do so. Political life rarely imitates art, but it has an infinite capacity to absorb theatrical clichés. Who could fail to guess that Blair's six-week long ride into the sunset of his prime-ministerial career might end with a visit to the Pope and from Governor Schwarzenegger, in that order? Or, to take an earlier example, that the massacre of whole herds of cows, tens of thousands of them, in a foot-and-mouth epidemic, would reach a final photo-call with a calf, doe-eyed, a family pet, saved from the slaughter by soft-hearted and publicity-conscious government agents?

Improvisation? Not much of it. Most political leaders have the unfortunate habit of trying to live up to their original conclusions – or promises – so that even the events of 9/11 were employed to implement the Neo-Cons' agenda by invading Iraq and Afghanistan. Rather like inferior jazz musicians, who use the apparent freedom of jazz to repeat old riffs, so politicians, when confronted by the unexpected, try to

regain control of events by reacting as predictably as possible.

This may not be their fault. In a democracy, they have to behave in a conventional way to retain the support of their electors. All successful politicians reflect the climate of opinion, the *zeitgeist*, that brought them to power. They are the expressions of culture – and sometimes even its victims – which is why it is helpful to have theatre critics, sitting in the stalls to comment upon how well or ill they perform. The supreme skill that distinguishes the mature critic from the rest of mankind, is to have seen it all before – to know why stories are constructed in this way, why characters conform to type and why we are expected to think as we do. This book might be described as a critical review of the drama of our times, but this particular play can never be repeated. It simply unfolds.

This is where the analogy with the theatre breaks down, for there are no intervals in international politics, no comfort breaks to relieve yourself, although the happenings on stage may prompt you to do so very publicly, no ice-creams or gin-and-tonics, and you can only leave the theatre once, never to return. All one can hope to do is to offer a description, an analysis and a temporary record – as I do now.

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