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Tony Blair To Be Held To Account Onstage

By ALAN RIDING

The Tricycle Theater in an unfashionable district of North London has just 240 seats but when it comes to tackling political issues it has found a way of being noticed: It gathers the real words of real people caught in real events and dramatizes them in what it calls verbatim plays.

The result is not quite real life, but it often throws light on the politics of the day, and it can make for gripping theater.

"Guantánamo: 'Honor Bound to Defend Freedom,'" the Tricycle's exploration of the legal limbo of prisoners in Guantánamo through the words of both officials and detainees and their families, did particularly well in 2004, transferring first to the West End, then to New York. Its stagings of official inquiries into assorted scandals have also been seen on television in Britain.

Now the Tricycle is assuming a still more activist role by instituting its own inquiry, this time into whether Prime Minister Tony Blair violated international law in 2003 when he joined Britain to the United States in invading Iraq without the explicit authorization of the United Nations Security Council.

The resulting play, scheduled to run from April 19 through May 19, has still to be put together, but it already has a flamboyant name: "Called to Account: The Indictment of Anthony Charles Lynton Blair for the Crime of Aggression Against Iraq -- A Hearing." The production's timing is not accidental: May 2 will be the 10th anniversary of Mr. Blair's election and, soon afterward, he is widely expected to leave 10 Downing Street. Speculation about his political afterlife has also inspired a satirical play, "The Trial of Tony Blair," which will be broadcast on television in Britain on Jan. 15.

The Tricycle's purpose, though, is not to put the British prime minister on trial. Rather, more like an American grand jury, "Called to Account" will examine whether there is sufficient evidence to indict him on the charge of aggression.

"We are not starting from the premise that Blair is guilty, but from the premise that the whole thing needs to be aired," Nicolas Kent, the Tricycle's artistic director, said in a telephone interview from London. "There is very strong anger in this country that the democratic process was circumvented. Since the Iraq issue has not been aired in Parliament, why not in the theater?"

This debate has, in a sense, already begun offstage. Over the next month, behind closed doors, two leading British barristers -- Philippe Sands for the prosecution and Julian Knowles for the defense -- will cross-examine about 20 international experts who are well placed to argue the pros and cons of the case against the British prime minister.

(As it happens, these cross-examinations are taking place in the Matrix Chambers, a London law practice that includes Mr. Sands and Mr. Knowles -- and also Cherie Booth, Mr. Blair's lawyer wife -- among its 55 members. Mr. Kent said that Ms. Booth was informed of the play on Friday, the same day they held the first hearing in the very building where she works.)

Between 20 and 30 hours of recordings will then be turned into a two-hour drama by Richard Norton-Taylor, a journalist at The Guardian who has put together other verbatim plays presented at the Tricycle. Only then will the names of the witnesses be disclosed.

"The present idea is that the audience will vote, but we're not 100 percent certain we will go down that path," said Mr. Kent, who will direct "Called to Account," with 15 or so actors using the names and words of key witnesses. "We may ask people to vote twice, before and after the play."

A typical Tricycle audience would almost certainly vote to indict Mr. Blair, but Mr. Kent said he hopes for serious examination of three areas: the legality of the Iraqi invasion in the eyes of the United Nations; evidence that Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction; and the advice given to Mr. Blair by his attorney general that an invasion would be legal.

The two barristers handling the cross-examinations offer some guarantee of serious debate.

Mr. Sands, a law professor at London University, took part in the creation of the new International Criminal Court and was involved in efforts to prosecute the former Chilean dictator Gen. Augusto Pinochet, and the former Liberian strongman Charles Taylor. Mr. Knowles, in turn, helped to defend General Pinochet against extradition from Britain and is a defense lawyer in the first war crimes trial of British soldiers in Iraq.

"The way this is being done is of course implausible," Mr. Sands said in a telephone interview. "There is no judge, Julian and I are colleagues, and we work out a sensible line of questions. But we're both going hammer and tongs to make sure our side wins. And the quality of the witnesses is very high."

That said, there is no certainty whether Mr. Blair could, even in theory, be indicted for aggression. The crime of aggression was created at the Nuremberg trials of Nazi war criminals and was defined by the United Nations in 1974, albeit as a crime committed by states, not individuals. On the other hand, while Britain's Parliament has not legislated against international aggression, some experts believe the crime could nonetheless be prosecuted under common law.

The idea that political leaders should not enjoy impunity for their acts is gaining strength around the world. And, if nothing else, "Called to Account" could spoil Mr. Blair's retirement party. "This is not just art in action," Mr. Sands said. "In the British context, it would have major political implications."