

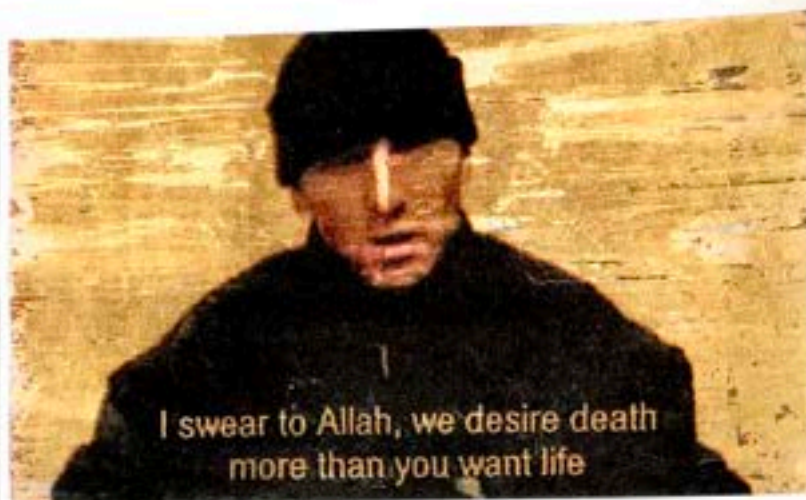
THE SUNDAY REVIEW



**'I swear to Allah, we desire death
more than you want life'**

**The Moscow theatre siege, as seen
by the war artist John Keane**

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Theatre of hate

It started as a night of song and dance, but ended in a siege that left 129 dead. New work by the war artist John Keane captures the full horror of the Dubrovka disaster, says Robin Muir



The evening of 23 October 2002, in Moscow at least, was wet and dismal. Despite this, the Dubrovka Theatre, housed in a former ball-bearing factory in the heart of the city, was playing below capacity, but still to an audience of more than 800. Previously, when the musical *Nord Ost* had been an even hotter ticket, the theatre's management would cram in extra numbers wherever it could, packing the aisles and the back of the auditorium, and all but blocking the exits. Several months later, this was still a respectable number, proving that the show - the most expensive staged in Russia - had not yet lost its lustre. As a tourist, if you couldn't get to the Bolshoi, or preferred something lighter, this was the show you saw, the one that everyone was still talking about.

Nord Ost was as escapist a musical as any could be. It portrayed, for the most part, the banality of military life in Stalinist Russia and Soviet expansionist policy in the Arctic Circle. It appealed not just to those who might have lived through it, but to a high proportion

of foreign visitors, too. John Keane, who has made a series of paintings of the events that unfolded after the interval that evening, owns a copy of the soundtrack and says it is "catchy enough". Video-recordings show a fair amount of fast-paced, boot-slapping choreography, as if the bulk of the Russian armed forces was then comprised of tireless Tartars and vivacious Cossacks. A few patrons, perhaps over-susceptible to the show's nostalgic charms, left at the interval as the first half ended on something of a tragic note (redemption, at the North Pole, was to come in Act II). On this occasion, they were the luckiest members of the audience, for at around 9pm, during a rousing martial chorus, *Nord Ost* was interrupted by a group of contemporary figures wielding modern weapons.

At first, it was unclear if this was part of the show, a clever coup de théâtre to bring the story into modern times. When shots rang out, when the actors began to trip over themselves to leave the stage and when a figure later identified as Movsar Barayev began to speak,





the audience realised that real life had intervened in a most brutal and uncompromising way. "We have come to Russia's capital city to stop the war or die here for Allah. We will perish here taking hundreds of unbelievers with us," he announced.

Barayev was the 25-year-old scion of a notorious Chechen separatist family (the now-dead warlord Arbi Barayev, a ruthless hostage-taker, was an uncle). The war was the Chechen war, which had been allowed to slip from the public mind. What Chechens called the "dirty war", Russian newspapers called the "forgotten war". And now a "suicide squad" of 22 men and 19 women had come to the heart of Russia, barely two miles from the Kremlin itself, to remind them of it.

This was the start of 57-hour ordeal 129 would not survive. What happened next was captured on film, for, as was management custom, each performance of *Nord-Ost* was recorded by the in-house video camera. Moreover, inside the theatre the terrorists themselves took their own footage. And, at one point, a television

news team was allowed in and, at the dénouement of this real-life drama, the Russian authorities filmed their own forensic documentary.

From all this real-time imagery, and from Dan Reed's acclaimed film *Terror In Moscow* (2003), Keane has made vivid episodic paintings – all the more urgent for their reliance on the narrative played out for, and dispassionately captured by, these various cameras. "My interest in it chiefly stems from the appalling fact of real life taking over from what one might think of as refuge from it. The distortion of art and life," he says.

Barayev told the audience that the exits were booby trapped and that they were hostages. Several of his female colleagues were strapped with explosives and they paced the aisles, as Keane puts it, "where usherettes might sell ice-cream". These were the infamous Black Widows, whose husbands and sons had died during the war and who, in the words of one, "might as well die here as in Chechnya".

To the now captive audience, who had plenty of time to make the connection, their burgas resembled balaclavas, which, along with lightweight Kalashnikovs, are prerequisites of contemporary terrorism. The plastic explosives, packed with ball-bearings (apt for the building's former incarnation), would be successively detonated if the theatre was stormed and, should only one explode, it would nonetheless ignite the others.

"I swear to Allah," said Barayev calmly, "we desire death more than you desire life." One survivor recalls that the other audience members near him started to shake so hard that soon the entire row was rocking. Some of the hostages were allowed to make mobile phone calls. "They'll blow us up straight away," said one caller. "Our only chance of getting out of here alive is for our government to decide right now to withdraw its forces from Chechnya and let it be known, and then to begin negotiations." Others were less self-possessed. "I'm feeling a bit shaky," apologised one who had managed to get through to a local radio station. "Don't =

The art of war, clockwise from far left: terrorist leader Movsar Barayev in a television interview filmed during the siege, in 'Iconography No 4'; hostages cower in their seats in 'Audience (1)'; and one of the executed Black Widow terrorists in 'Ten Small Paintings from Dubrovka Theatre Siege No 12'



The terrorists told the hostages that no one would leave alive: 'We came here to die and you will die with us'

open fire on them. There are a lot of explosives. I am very scared..." Two pregnant women, some children and several Muslims were released, as well as one actress and *Nord Ost*'s producer.

The theatre was quickly surrounded by the FSB, Russia's security police, and a crowd of relatives and onlookers, who would have known the Kremlin never capitulates to such demands. The terrorists also knew this and convinced the hostages that no one would leave alive, stating chillingly: "We came here to die and you will die with us." Of all the hostage takers, though, Barayev knew this best, for his presence in Moscow was an embarrassment. The Kremlin had claimed to have killed him in Chechnya barely 10 days previously.

As the night of Wednesday turned into the morning of Thursday, several incidents turned the situation from extraordinary to bizarre. Keane has portrayed the inevitable repercussions of one, based on filmed evidence. At around 1.30am a young girl made her way across the theatre car park, apparently unhindered,

towards the auditorium. Once inside, she berated first the audience for their timidity and then, turning to Barayev, called him "a clown". How she broke through the police ranks remains unexplained. The terrorists suspected she was a spy, so she was taken through a side door and shot. Keane's painting (above) shows her body being dragged by two white-coated doctors back through the corridor she had so easily breached.

This first victim of the 57-hour siege had been a shop assistant at a nearby perfume counter, aged 26, who felt she might help. Later came the second. A man burst through the cordon into the theatre claiming he was there to collect his son. No one answered his calls, so he too was shot as a spy. Next, someone panicked and a hostage was unintentionally but fatally wounded.

Thursday became Friday. A Sunday Times journalist had discovered Barayev's mobile phone number and was allowed in to conduct an interview. How was it

going, he asked the terrorist leader. "Excellent! Never better." Another added: "This is a dream come true for us." Meanwhile, conditions in the auditorium had deteriorated. The orchestra pit was now a makeshift latrine for the several hundred hostages – men on the left, women on the right – and the relentless theatre lights made many increasingly hysterical. The more observant hostages would have noticed that the Black Widows, positioned around the audience, abstained from food and drink as if preparing for the inevitable. Occasionally they wiped tears from their eyes. "They were afraid to die too," recalled one former hostage. "I wondered who would shed more tears, us or them!" One Black Widow stunned *Nord Ost*'s co-writer, also a hostage, by admitting how much she had enjoyed the show. It transpired later they had chosen his musical over another potential target, *42nd Street*.

The Kremlin continued to remain silent, crowds stood in vigil and it started to rain. Eventually, after the terrorists threatened to begin executing hostages at midnight on Friday, a high-ranking Russian officer, General Karantsev, made contact. He said he would meet the terrorists for face-to-face talks. But he never did – it was not intended that he should. Instead, at the 57th hour, at 3.30am on Saturday, 26 October, the Spetsnaz (Russian special forces), attacked. Several hostages recalled a hissing sound and a strong, bitter smell. A mist of gas started to fall inside the auditorium. It was a strong anaesthetic, which rendered everyone, hostages and Black Widows alike, unconscious almost on contact, certainly within seconds. The male terrorists, positioned above, began to shoot from the windows. An assault team went in. >

Female combatants, from top: doctors drag away the body of a shop worker, shot when she broke into the theatre to berate both the hostages and terrorists in 'Ten Small Paintings from Dubrovka Theatre Siege No 3 (The Death of Olga Romanova)'; a terrorist is interviewed during the siege in 'Our Women, Children and Old Folk are Dying'





Explosive imagery, clockwise from far left: a family snapshot of one of the terrorists becomes the basis of 'Iconography No 6'; one of the terrorists after being shot by soldiers in 'I Remember Those Girls' Faces so Well'; a victim's mother (left) speaking about her experiences in 'Then He Said To Me "Mum I Really Don't Want To Die"'; and, below, John Keane

'I hate the Chechens so much,' says one hostage, 'I hate their children. I don't know if that'll ever go away'

They found Barayev fully conscious in an anteroom and killed him there along with his deputies. Footage shows him face up on a pile of broken glass and debris. The incapacitated Chechen women were summarily executed, shot were they had slumped. None had been able, or perhaps willing, to detonate her bombs.

Attempts were made to rouse the sleeping hostages and to evacuate the theatre. And then the horror really began. There was not enough antidote for everyone and too few doctors to administer what there was. Further, there appeared to be only several stretchers and unconscious hostages were brought out, their heads lolling, by soldiers inexperienced in paramedic care. One hundred and twenty-nine hostages died as a result of the gas. Many suffocated, choking on vomit or swallowing their tongues. Others died more slowly, face up in the rain outside, twitching now and again, or entangled one upon the other, on the floors of the boxes meant to take them to safety. It took just minutes to turn what had been the triumphant resolution

of a hopeless situation into a disaster played out in front of the world's news cameras. One western journalist said the entrance to the theatre was "a scene from hell"; another "a vision from Dante's *Inferno*".

It is over 15 years since John Keane was appointed the official artist of the first Gulf War and, for the most part, his subject is conflict and the possibility of resolution. "Much of what I do, and making the paintings that I do," he says, "involves me in the use of violence for political ends, the justification and the morality of it." The Gulf aside, his work has included Nicaragua, Guatemala, Northern Ireland, Gaza and the West Bank.

Keane's depiction of Chechen terrorism spares us none of the horror. "I was interested particularly in the filmed footage. It alludes to the bubble of immunity in which we live, conveniently removed from what reality is for a lot of people, and how easily that bubble can be burst in extraordinary circumstances. The TV or video screen is the surface of that bubble, in the sense of you looking through it towards life on the other side. And suddenly it's punctured by events that we feel we have little or nothing to do with. The whole issue of hostage-taking in Russia, there seems scant regard for human life." Keane also has plans for an opera about the siege and it is tempting to see the survivor's subtitled testimony as raw material for the libretto.

The human rights observer Anna Neistat, who has contributed a foreword to Keane's catalogue, says, "The hostage-takers appeared as a terrifyingly efficient and ruthless enemy, ready to kill and to die. The sense of vulnerability was overwhelming, as throughout Russia people felt themselves transformed from distant observers to potential victims." And victims, moreover,

not just of terrorists from neglected war zones, but of their immediate and uncommunicative government. It is estimated that over three-quarters of the survivors of the siege are suffering ill-effects from the gas, and 40 more died within one year of their exposure. There has been no official apology, nor any compensation for the victims. In the months that followed the siege, treatment proved mostly ineffective as the Kremlin refused to give any information on the gas deployed. German chemists identified the anaesthetic halothane in urine samples. In the US, doctors speculated on the presence of a hallucinogen, BZ, and a paralyzing nerve agent. Much later, the Kremlin acknowledged that the gas contained a synthetic opiate related to fentanyl.

The co-writer of *Nord Ost*, a survivor, recalled seeing documentaries as a child about the concentration camps of the Second World War and wondered how thousands could be led to death by only handfuls of captors. "It wasn't until I became a hostage," he said, "that I understood the psychology. People's spirits were broken." Another, whose husband and daughter died, said, "I hate the Chechens so much. I hate their children. I don't know if that will ever go away."

On 10 November, barely two weeks after the siege, *Nord Ost* re-opened. Eight seats in the orchestra pit remained empty, commemorating the eight musicians who died. In all, 17 further members of staff died. The government pledged funds to restore the damaged theatre. At the same time, it emphasised it would on no account hold peace talks with Chechnya's president.

Fifty-Seven Hours in the House of Culture by John Keane is being shown from 31 March to 29 April at Flowers East, 82 Kingsland Road, London E2

