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Chamber Theatre

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Abstract
A child of a defendant is called to his defence. As the child begins to murmur his evidence the judge orders him to speak up. The child looks across at the defendant, his father, the man who is meant to be his protector. But now the father, speaking through words of his defence barrister, accuses the child. The child looks to see if he is saying the right script to exculpate his father, and thereby betrays his innocence to the theatre of the courtroom. The jury, the judge, the defence barrister see this exchange and at this point the case is proved and a truth is decided upon. In a trial such as this, where allegations of a sexual nature are made, the story is played in intimate, yet clinical detail, in front of a room full of strangers.

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The jury, the judge, the defence barrister see this exchange and at this point the case is proved and a truth is decided upon.

In a trial such as this, where allegations of a sexual nature are made, the story is played in intimate, yet clinical detail, in front of a room full of strangers. The child may be physically present, sitting in the courtroom or present via video link. Where the child is seen through the link the jury see him in isolation, and his evidence is assessed via the drama of television. However, when a child is seated in the courtroom the jury assess his vulnerability, his size, his body language when giving evidence. In the latter scenario, the court often reacts by being a gentle listener, a coaxing advocate in order to encourage the story to be told and challenged fairly.

The people who decide which version of the story has been proved to be true are the jurors sitting in rows, in their box, as an audience. They have no active part to play until they are sent to the jurors' room. There is no discussion between the players in the trial and the jury as

to how they will come to their decision. Yet, once they decide on one version, the other version that's been presented can no longer be 'true'.

In cases where a person has said they have been assaulted sexually, the interplay of the various testimonies embody the theatricality of the trial process. The jury sits in close proximity to the characters in the well of the court, an audience plucked from their everyday lives to deliberate upon another person's fate. The public in the gallery are a second, silent audience, with no role to play save for their presence.

The judge presides over the storytelling, sitting on 'the Bench', highest in the room, ensuring that the narrative is told correctly and yet creatively, the arbiter of what evidence is admitted and what will be heard by the players who are present. Each part of the story is admitted episodically through each witness who enters, says their part, and leaves. The jury is asked to suspend their deliberation until the narrative is finished, to listen, seemingly without judgement about which plot is the more plausible. When no further evidence is to be called there is an epilogue, and the judge looks down to the jurors, as if the courtroom was a traditional storytelling arena, and summarises the case.

The often horrific and clinical forensic storytelling of the trial is moderated by the judge's summing up. The final chapter of the plot is told and both audiences are directed as to where the obvious conclusion lies.

Almost lost in the courtroom is the defendant, sitting in the dock at the back of the courtroom as the barristers question each witness, address the judge and look to the jury. The accused sits looking at the back of his barrister, alone and removed from his own story; his story is told by his barrister, interpreted not in his own words, but in a form that is taken from them. As in the long history of storytelling, in a criminal trial the words and scenarios are passed down to orators more confident and adept at knowing what is interesting, and relevant, to their audience . The barrister performs to persuade the jury, their address a form of a soliloquy, addressing them directly. The person who accuses, the complainant, the victim, trapped in the witness box facing the jury, becomes a character in her own story until the jury delivers

its verdict on what happened to her.

Where the person alleging assault is disbelieved at the end of the trial, her fate is to be abandoned with her own story, in perpetuity. Her story remains the accused's story, now neither fact, nor fiction. The public expression of her experience is now put away to be forgotten.

Sexual crimes that we see dramatised on television and film as violent, romantic or practical, are here told to the jury in minute, cold, clinical detail. Images shown in the courtroom as evidence are necessarily presented without any enquiry as to whether it is acceptable or traumatic to the juror. These sexual stories are often more appalling when expressed in the prosaic quasi-neutral language of the Court. The jury sit not in the dark, hidden, but in the stark light of the courtroom, for all to see and assess their reaction. The barristers toy with their comfort or discomfort to win them over. The performance of the final speeches made by the prosecution and defence barrister relays a story within a story, where the speech decides who has 'won'. It is this competition between the rhetoricians at the end that acknowledges the drama of the trial.