

Book of the Month III

The Waiting Room

By Brian Brivati

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Reviewed by Tawfiq Al-Ghussein



The Waiting Room is a formidable work of historical imagination and moral reckoning, treating the stage as judgement, not illustration. Beginning with the King David Hotel bombing of 22 July 1946, Brian Brivati builds not a conventional historical drama but a sustained inquiry into political violence, genocide, memory, and the narratives through which states conceal the cost of their actions.

The conceit is audacious. Benjamin, Levi, and Borowski serve as reluctant “train conductors” in a bureaucratic afterlife, processing “difficult cases” that resist clean categories. Marked by catastrophe, they sort those who came after, and none escapes the consequences. Named for a railway waiting room rather than purgatory, the play captures its own method in miniature: administrative euphemism colonises even the language of the dead. Their exchanges are exacting and alive, their rigour never diminished by the comedy of Walter’s endless hunger.

Its greatest achievement is the refusal of moral simplification, exposing how the boundaries between victim, perpetrator, witness, and bystander blur, without letting that instability harden into an alibi for power. Borowski’s insistence that names resist murder, and that mass killing therefore begins with categories, numbers, identity cards, and tattoos, is dramatised most devastatingly when comparative witnesses of Armenian, Ukrainian, Chinese, Rwandan, Bosnian, Cambodian, and Kurdish nationality recite the labels imposed on them before speaking their names. Every category fits neatly in its box; every name is relegated to the margin.

The structure carries the argument as powerfully as the dialogue: the movement from the King David Hotel to the Nakba, occupation, and present-day Gaza is neither

mechanical nor merely rhetorical. Brivati’s governing metaphor is the railway: tracks laid through people’s lives that later governments inherit and, choosing not to change direction, simply extend. Through files, warnings, classifications, and the vocabulary of security, the play shows how violence becomes durable precisely when it acquires the language of legality and procedure, and how each system bequeaths its instruments to the next. Its insistence that history is made through choices, not inevitabilities, gives the play urgency and moral weight.

Its theatrical imagery is load-bearing, not decorative: the clock fixed at 12:37; the milk churns that pass from bombs to luggage, water containers, land files, and reconstruction models; the drawer that sticks and conceals Nabil’s wedding cloth; the key that Salma keeps because “rust was more honest than policy”; and the waiting room that becomes a flat, hotel, house, camp, checkpoint, and Gaza. When Mira writes “HERE” across a reconstruction map that has turned her family’s kitchen into a restricted sector, the argument about bloodless administration built upon blood is delivered in a single gesture.

His engagement with genocide studies and the ethics of witnessing is assured; the scholarship never smothers the drama. Ideas arrive through character, image, silence, and conflict, not exposition. The result is intellectually serious without being academic, uncompromising without being schematic, and humane without a trace of sentimentality.

The Waiting Room is precisely what political theatre should be. It disturbs complacency, challenges inherited narratives, and compels an audience to confront the continuity between memory and power. This is not a play to be read in private; it demands performance, because its questions belong in a shared public space where history can no longer remain sealed inside archives, commemorations, and official myth.

Brian Brivati was appointed in January 2025 to lead the organisation’s work advocating for peace with justice and equality for Palestinians and Israelis. An historian specialising in the modern British Labour Party and genocide studies he developed the first University level course

in Comparative Genocide in the UK. He was co-chair of the UK Parliamentary group for the Recognition of Kurdish Genocide. He combines academic expertise with extensive experience in public policy and human rights. He has undertaken capacity building fieldwork across the Middle East, Africa, Ukraine and the South Caucasus, leading capacity-building initiatives and supporting civil society development. He is the author/editor of 16 non fiction books.

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