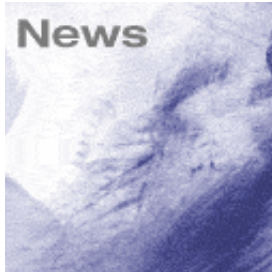


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Anti-war cry of a peace mom

Charlotte Higgins, arts correspondent

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[The Guardian](#)

There was no plush bar, no glitterati babble over bubbly. The audience gathered in a drab school foyer in central London. Like many theatre first nights, there was a guest list ("Katharine Hamnett plus 2, Jeremy Corbyn plus 5, military families plus 25"), but no lavish hospitality.

Filing into the chilly school hall, with its rows of austere polypropylene chairs and a pair of flaccid white balloons hanging glumly from a rafter, one was reminded of Linda in Nancy Mitford's *The Pursuit of Love*: "The worst of being a Communist is that the parties you may go to are awfully funny and touching, but not very gay, and they're always in such gloomy places."

This was, however, an Event: the world premiere of *Peace Mom*, a new play by Dario Fo, the 79-year-old Nobel laureate, based on the writings of Cindy Sheehan. Her touching and personal protest after the death of her son Casey, a US soldier in Iraq, has galvanised anti-war sentiment, and last week she brought her campaign to Britain.

Fo, with Franca Rame, his wife and collaborator, flew over for the performance, staged by Stop the War and directed by Michael Kustow. Why had he been attracted to the Sheehan story? "One of the things that grabbed me is that that there is an epic quality to the letters that Sheehan wrote to George Bush, and especially Barbara Bush," he said. "There is a rhythm and tempo in her prose which recalls the great epic writers of Greece. When she writes: 'I am the mother of a son killed in Iraq; you are the mother of the man who killed him,' it is almost hendecasyllabic [the classical poetic metre]."

"She has a gift of candour and directness and epic simplicity - Cindy may not know it but she is a born writer."

The play is a monologue, a tapestry of Sheehan's letters to Bush and Fo's invention. The actor Frances de la Tour performs with script in hand - this was billed as work-in-

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progress. Fo has been sending additions and revisions until the eleventh hour.

De la Tour's rich contralto rings out; a contrast with Sheehan's fluting, soft soprano. Sheehan sits in the audience next to Fo and Rame. Her usual beatific smile remains intact. But when de la Tour delivers the line: "About a month after his death I said to myself: I've had enough of crying for my own son, now I'm going to cry for all mothers," her tears fall.

In the row in front, vigorous anti-war campaigner Jeremy Corbyn, MP for Islington north, rests his eyes. The play is funny and touching; but not very gay.

Afterwards, Sheehan and de la Tour entwine hands. "Frances did an amazing job of conveying my feeling of anger and betrayal, especially when she said what I wrote to Barbara Bush," says Sheehan. "Casey was honourable and brave and sweet and he was murdered by the Bush family."

Kustow hopes that when de la Tour goes to Broadway in the spring to act in Alan Bennett's *The History Boys* they can stage the play in New York, and he would like to produce it on TV.

Many strange things have happened to Sheehan since her son was killed on April 4 2004, but surely few can match the surprise that she received a few days ago when she learned that a Nobel-prizewinning playwright had written a monologue based on her letters to George Bush, that she was to watch it in a school hall in London, and that it would be performed by one of the English-speaking world's great actors. "My whole life is surreal and bizarre," she said. "I hope the play can be used as an anti-war tool, to put a human face on this war, to show Casey had a life, was a person."

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