



# Julianne Schultz **on** **Terrorism**

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**A**

century ago T.S. Eliot conjured a timid man, J. Alfred Prufrock, who measured out his dreary life with coffee spoons in a city enveloped by yellow fog. These days it is possible to imagine Mr Prufrock's grandson instead counting news items in a world suffocating under a blanket of fearful stories; stories about war, bombs, invasion, terrorism, murder, recession, storms, fires, floods, pestilence and starvation stirred like teaspoons of sugar into endless cups of coffee. If Prufrock's indecisiveness crippled him and stripped his life of meaning, those of his grandson's generation run the risk of being paralysed by information overload.

Yet a dramatic event, laden with symbolic meaning, occasionally cuts through even the most media-saturated brain to demand more than a moment's fleeting reflection. An item on the ABC news one morning in 1986 provided such pause for thought: overnight, a pregnant young woman had been arrested at Heathrow Airport after a search of her hand luggage revealed enough explosives to destroy the plane. The reporter explained the woman was unaware of the device, which had been put in her bag by her fiancé, and that she was helping authorities with their inquiries. The conclusion was unavoidable: the man she was planning to marry had been prepared to kill not only several hundred unknown people on the plane, but his lover and their unborn child as well.

News of such murderous behaviour had been a staple for a decade, what scholars now call the 20th century's "third wave of terrorism" - Baader-Meinhof, Red Brigades, the IRA and other ideological insurgents. They favoured "propaganda by deed" and hoped to cause people "to tremble", as the Latin origin of terrorism suggests. In 1986 there were eight significant terrorist attacks in Paris, and others in Jerusalem, Stockholm, Athens, Berlin, Colombo, Iraq, Spain, Pakistan and Puerto Rico. Eighty people, including the Swedish prime minister, Olof Palme, died and more than 6000 were seriously injured.

The news item that sunny April morning stayed with me; it was so personal. I was happily pregnant at the time, had been near enough to IRA attacks in London to see the splinters of glass in the footpaths and taste the fear those unprovoked assaults unleashed. Now a person about my age, boarding a plane in an airport I knew well, was confronting unimaginable betrayal - evil with a human face. The age-old definition of terrorism, an act designed to kill one but intimidate many, made new sense.



It takes time before reality can be reduced to its symbolic essence and it was many years before the story of the woman at the airport germinated to form the kernel of my libretto for my brother Andrew Schultz's opera *Going into Shadows*, which explores the extremes of betrayal and belief in a world made mad by both. As the opera came to life on stage in London in mid-2001 it was clear that something about this simple story had lingered in the collective imagination and was robust enough to provide a narrative short-cut to opera's heightened emotion. But why terrorism, countless reporters asked as we embarked on the publicity circuit.

Wasn't that a thing of the past, as even official US reports declared at the time? After the second performance in Brisbane, no one asked that question again. Instead, the question became: Does life imitate art, or can art make sense of life's madness?

About 10.30 on the night of September 11 the audience spilled out of the Opera Theatre on Brisbane's South Bank into the chilly evening air. It had been an exhilarating performance – the music had passed the hum test and the skilful interweaving of Yeats's classic denunciation, "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold / Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world," and a Latin mass provided a lingering, redemptive moment. It soon morphed into the surreal.

With the refrain, "too many bombs and too many killings, in the name of who knows what" still echoing in their heads, many members of the audience and cast turned to television for their evening coffee spoon of news when they got home.

What they saw took their breath away, as they watched the unimaginable spectacle of planes flown as missiles demolish the Twin Towers with an eerie operatic soundtrack still in their heads. The next day the singers, who had spent weeks imagining themselves into the roles of terrorist and victims of terror, were offered counselling to help them get through the final performances.

The perverted drama conjured in the caves of Afghanistan was more emotionally engaging than theatre. Life and art were poisonously intertwined and reality was trumps. It is only now that artists are beginning to provide extra layers of meaning to the surreal events of that September morning, and subsequent attacks in Madrid, Bali and London. And only now that audiences are willing to explore these depths. Most of the movies that tackle the subject are still trapped in the literal; even novelists as accomplished as Don DeLillo and Ian McEwan have found it hard to transcend events designed as much for their symbolic value as their murderous intent. As the wife of a survivor in DeLillo's *Falling Man* declares, "People I know, they read poetry to ease the shock and pain, give them a kind of space, something beautiful in language

to bring comfort or composure. I don't read poems. I read newspapers. I put my head in the pages and get angry and crazy."

Until 2001, for most Australians terrorism was something that happened a long way away to people unlike us, people with long-standing grievances, burdened by betrayal and ideology who believed ends could justify any means, considered fear an acceptable political tool and were contemptuous of the value of life.

We know more now after almost a decade of the fourth wave of terrorism,





brand Islamic fundamentalist, when the murderous reality hit close to home. The world at the end of the Cold War seems like a distant, innocent age, but history tells us that even the brutality of life in the age of “terror and anti-terror” will also pass. The pain and grief for those who lost loved ones to terrorism will never disappear, but artists will eventually transform the lessons of this era into something of enduring value – which may provide some comfort.

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