

Play of the week

Grenfell

System Failure – Scenes From the Inquiry
Richard Norton-Taylor
with Nicholas Kent
Running at the Marylebone Theatre until 26 March

The fire at the Grenfell tower block in west London in June 2017, which caused the death of 72 people, was Britain's worst onshore fire disaster in more than a century. The cost of replacing the widely used but flammable cladding that accelerated the fire is expected to run to several billion pounds. The disaster also led to an extensive two-part public inquiry that is expected to report at the end of this year. Richard Norton-Taylor has already written one play about the first part of the public hearing, and has now produced a sequel about the second part with Nicholas Kent (who also directs the show).

The play is written as verbatim theatre, a style of drama that uses real-life dialogue, in this case from the witnesses and officials involved in the inquiry. This may seem like taking the easy route, but Norton-Taylor has picked telling moments from the reams of text and evidence available. The main focus of the play is on the failure of wider systems and procedures, from the rules that delayed the evacuation of the building until it was too late, to the bureaucracy and buck-passing that delayed proper regulation until it was too late.

Indeed, one of the big themes that comes across is the unwillingness of many



The actors really bring this piece of verbatim theatre to life

©Grenfell System Failure/Friscam Kenton

“The result is a moving and powerful piece of drama that raises uncomfortable questions about business ethics”

of the key players to take responsibility, even in the disaster's aftermath. The manager of an insulation firm insists that his company didn't have a problem with its culture, for example, despite being confronted with messages where his staff joke about the danger of their products. Similarly, a pair of civil servants are at a loss to explain how they sat on information for nearly 15 years on the dangers of a key component. Eric Pickles can barely bring himself to acknowledge that he was secretary of state during this period. In the end, it's left to junior minister Nick Hurd to admit that he's ashamed of what happened.

One reason the play is so effective is that the actors really bring their characters to life while remaining true to the

realism created as a result of using actual words from the inquiry. Standout performances include Ron Cook as the inquiry's lead counsel, Howard Crossley as Eric Pickles, and David Michaels as both firefighter Andy Roe and minister Nick Hurd. Hisam Choucair's (Shahzad Ali) disgust at the incompetence and lack of compassion of officials is the moral centre of the play. He lost several of his relatives that night.

The construction and the staging may seem unusual, but the result is a moving and powerful piece of drama that raises uncomfortable questions about business ethics, the way that we're governed and our tendency to try to pass the buck.

Reviewed by
Matthew Partridge

In Defence of Capitalism

Debunking the Myths

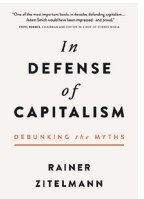
Rainer Zitelmann
Republic Book Publishers, £25

The past 15 years have been tough for defenders of capitalism. The global financial crisis was followed by a slow recovery and a decade of

stagnant wages. Then Covid hit, producing a cost-of-living crisis. Surveys suggest that even Americans have started to fall out of love with free markets. Younger generations are increasingly willing to consider, or say that they are considering, alternative economic systems. Rainer Zitelmann argues that most critiques of capitalism are either wrong or miss the point.

Zitelmann sets out to debunk what he thinks are the ten main myths about capitalism, ranging from its supposed role in creating hunger and poverty, to the argument that it leads to wars and fascism. The rest of the book looks at the results of a survey that he commissioned into popular attitudes to capitalism in 21 countries, ranging from the US to South Korea and Brazil.

Zitelmann makes a convincing case that the problems associated with capitalism have been exaggerated, and that critics ignore the progress that has been achieved by free enterprise and the flaws in the alternatives. That, though, does of course still leave much room for political manoeuvre, as Zitelmann implicitly acknowledges when he puts social-democratic Denmark alongside small-state Switzerland in a list of the most economically free countries in the world.



Book in the news... a thoughtful memoir from a committed Europhile

Homelands

A Personal History of Europe
Timothy Garton Ash
Bodley Head, £22



The journalist and historian Timothy Garton Ash has over the past 40 years both watched from the stands and played on the pitch in the arena of European change", says Boyd Tonkin in the Financial Times. In his

youth, he reported on the events that would later lead to the fall of the Soviet empire. Later, he became a respected "VIP Pundit", his opinions being sought after by world leaders and the business elite. However, recent events, from Brexit to the

Russian invasion of Ukraine, have not been kind to the view of liberal internationalists that they "knew which way history was going". In *Homelands*, Garton Ash "casts a panoramic eye" over the history of Europe.

His "insightful" book is "part historical account and part memoir", says Kim Bielenberg in the Irish Independent. It picks up the story of the continent in 1945, when great parts of it were in ruins, and takes us through the "decades of relative peace and prosperity" right up to the war in Ukraine. His account is leavened with conversations with individuals whose lives were affected by some of the most tumultuous events of the past eight decades. These range from strikers in the Gdańsk shipyard in Poland and survivors of the massacre at Srebrenica in Bosnia to

political leaders such as Margaret Thatcher, Helmut Kohl and Vladimir Putin.

Garton Ash may be a "fervent Europhile", but he is "unsparing" about Europe's failures, says Dominic Sandbrook in *The Sunday Times*. It proved unable, for example, to stop nationalist demagogues tearing Yugoslavia apart, and its reckless rush to adopt the euro and the imposition of punitive austerity on Greece in the 2010s were unforced errors. He also recognises the overall EU project's "democratic deficit", agreeing with Jacques Delors that it has not escaped the "benign despotism" of its origins as an "elitist project". Yet Garton Ash's "thoughtful, honest, open, self-deprecating" book makes a good case that, although far from perfect, Europe is "a better place today than at any point in his lifetime".