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Temple students bring the Iraq war home in new play



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Her legs are gone, blown off when insurgents in Iraq threw a rocket-propelled grenade inside the helicopter she was traveling in.

The female Iraq War vet's right arm was also severely damaged in the explosion, but most of it remains intact.

Still, she sits in the wheelchair and manages to smile, a real smile.

"I am so grateful to be alive," says Tammy Duckworth, played by actress Suyeon Kim, early on in the Temple University production of "In Conflict."

"I should be dead."

Duckworth wasn't dead. Neither were thousands of other veterans who returned from Iraq, some struggling to pick up right where they left off, before the war.

Former *Daily News* reporter Yvonne Latty tracked down Duckworth and others around the country for face-to-face interviews, taping their accounts of serving in Iraq and returning home. She spoke with mothers, fathers, sons, daughters, both straight and gay, representing the diverse ethnic and religious swath that is the United States of America.

The resulting 25 interviews make up Latty's 2006 book "In Conflict: Iraq Veterans Speak Out on Duty, Loss and the Fight to Stay Alive." Now, Doug Wager, artistic director of Temple University's theater, has written and directed it as a play.

The production, which opens tonight and runs through next Saturday at the Randall Theater, focuses on 14 vets played by 11 Temple student actors. "In Conflict," they say, has not only transformed their acting, but also expanded their insulated college lives.

Amanda Holston says she and her fellow actors now pay more attention to the war in Iraq.

"One of the hardest things in this process was to look at my own life," said Holston, 20, who portrays Kelly Dougherty, a vet who co-founded Iraq Veterans Against the War. "I felt extremely guilty to know that if this project had not come along, I would not have educated myself to what was going on in Iraq."

These days, "I pick up a newspaper every day and watch CNN every day," said the Bel Air, Md., junior, who like most of her cast members, is a theater major. "I have this need to know what's happening over there."

Sophomore Danielle Pinnock, of Teaneck, N.J., says she used to look at the war in a political way, but not anymore. "I don't like [President] Bush, but it's not even about him," said Pinnock, who at 19, is the youngest member of the cast. "It's not about being pro-war or anti-war. It's about being pro-troops."

"In Conflict" has made her "very aware of my surroundings, especially the news," Pinnock said. "That has changed me a lot."

Junior Stan Sinyakov, 21, said he's "far more aware of the war . . . It's a lot more personal now."

Ethan Haymes, who portrays two veterans, including U.S. Rep. Patrick Murphy, D-8th, said he previously ignored the war. "In Conflict" changed that.

"I had put it on the back burner like many other people," said the 22-year-old senior. The play "brought up the question, 'what is my duty as an actor and as an American?'"

Writer Wager wanted more than the book's abridged interviews for "In Conflict's" material - Latty provided him with her original audio tapes.

"The goal of this was to find a way to teach the actors how to embody the interview material primarily from the audio source with the written source actually being the kind of backup," said Wager.

The actors studied the cadences of their respective vets' voices and, even transcribed their words onto paper. The ensemble also danced to the interviews, and sang to them.

The resulting monologs includes many more "ums" and "ahs" and "likes," recreating the way the vets actually spoke.

Wager also put author Latty in the play. He videotaped her recalling the conversations she had with the vets, and this interview is shown on two flat-screen TVs flanking the stage.

"Yvonne, as a character, introduces the material and a few of the vets," Wager said. Her inclusion, besides Iraq war photos taken by *Daily News* photographer Jim MacMillan that are featured in the play, "works to provide a documentary landscape in an artistic way," Wager said.

The play provides the full context for Latty's interviews. "The words are only one piece," Wager said. "By turning ['In Conflict'] into theater, the audience will not just meet the words, they'll meet the people." *

Randall Theater, 13th Street between Norris and Diamond, 7:30 tonight through Oct. 13, except for Sundays. All performances are 7:30 p.m. except Friday (8 p.m.) and Saturday (2 and 8 p.m.), \$20 general admission, 800-298-4200, www.liacourascenter.com.