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In soldiers' shoes



DAVID M WARREN / Inquirer Staff Photographer
Amanda Holston, a Temple junior from Bel Air, Md., who portrays the leader of an antiwar group, says "In Conflict" has changed her outlook on the war: "I'm certainly not going to be apathetic. . . . You get a glimpse of what it actually is and you can't stay the same."

Temple theater students, acting out the recollections of U.S. troops in Iraq, learn some uncomfortable truths

By Stephan Salisbury, *Inquirer Culture Writer*

They are, for the most part, in their early 20s, and by turns passionate, impulsive, idealistic, serious, funny, inquisitive.

What could distinguish these Temple University theater students - humping from class to class, hanging out, diving into bull sessions - from their doubles hunkered down in Baghdad, staring down a blasted Fallujah street, gulping a Coke on a shadeless day?

The answer could be as brief as a gunshot, as long as a memoir, as cryptic as fate. But beginning with tonight's opening, at 7:30 at Temple's Randall Theater, these 11 students will crawl inside the skins of actual Iraq war veterans in a difficult effort to convey on stage the real deal of death and life in the desert.

They will bring the voices of war home.

The play, *In Conflict*, is a world premiere adapted from former Daily News reporter Yvonne Latty's book of the same name, a collection of interviews with Iraq veterans. Directed by Temple's resident artistic director, Douglas C. Wager, *In Conflict* runs through Oct. 13.

"When the war started happening, I was living in Virginia, which is a very military area, and I heard about it constantly. And after a while you hear about it less, and then it's just this thing that's still going on," recalled senior Ethan Haymes, 22. "But one thing that I really admired about both of my characters is that they were both men of action - Army Capt. Jon Soltz and Patrick Murphy, who's now a congressman. Doing this is different from bringing a normal script to the stage because we have a duty to these people, and I feel that it's part of our calling as college students to say what they say, to have their story heard. There are certain things, and you're reminded about this more and more as you try and think about the war and solutions; there are certain things we just don't know because we haven't been there."

None of the students has been a soldier. None has been on a battlefield. But they have entered the war and these voices of the war by literally listening to the raw audio tapes from Latty's interviews. They absorb the disjointed cadences of adrenaline-laced action, the broken sentences of rationalization, the terseness and lassitude of disappointment.



DAVID M WARREN / Inquirer Staff Photographer
Douglas C. Wager, Temple resident artistic director, at dress rehearsal directing "In Conflict."

One of the characters portrayed by Damon Williams, 20, is Herold Noel, a vet who came home to not a little hostility and mammoth indifference. He quickly found himself homeless and fending off devouring memories.

"He was on patrol," Williams said, trying to wrap his own mind around the story. "There was a tank that was flipped over. It was in a ditch. . . . A crowd of onlookers was surrounding them. They were just onlookers, but it's a civilian war, you don't know if one of them has a bomb or anything. Everybody's telling them to back up. Back up. Back up. Back up. And this one lady started walking toward them very slow. So they don't know. And she was holding something in her arms. They don't know what it is. Could be a bomb. Could be anything. Tell her to back up. She's not listening.

"So Herold ends up firing and shoots the lady in the head. And what was in her hands falls, rolls, and ends up being a baby. And while the baby is on the ground, Herold is stuck. He's just shot this woman who was holding a baby thinking that it was something that it wasn't. Goes to pick up the baby. Another convoy rolls over the baby. Multiple times. And that's something that he describes, he still has nightmares about it every day."

What do you do with such an experience? Where can you put it?

"People constantly say the soldiers are doing horrible things," said Stan Sinyakov, 21, a senior. "You go to war, it's a different life and it's a different lifestyle. There's a very fine big red line between society, civilians, the laws and the rules you abide by, and what happens in war. You will kill when you go to war. You will shoot someone. You are trained for these things. . . . Then you come back to society and there's no room for you. You're too different now. They come back and it's like, 'Well we don't kill here. We don't blow things up. Are you crazy?' It's like, 'I'm sorry. I was trained that way. My mind works like that.' And that's why nobody wants to talk about that stuff, who they killed."

For the students, entering the cloaked worlds of these veterans has worked a transformation on their own lives. They pay attention to the news. They read the newspapers. They have become linked to the larger political universe.



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Damon Williams, a Temple senior, portrays Herold Noel, a vet who has to live with a particularly tragic war experience.

"That was something I struggled with a lot at the beginning of this process," said junior Amanda Holston, 20, who portrays Kelly Dougherty, leader of the Philadelphia-based Iraq Veterans Against the War. "I had a lot, and still hold a lot, of guilt that I didn't look into pursuing all of the facts about the war and really educating myself about what's happening over there and really caring about it. Until now. Until I had to do it. I'm sure all of us feel that. And now that I recognize it, I'm trying to make up for lost time. I'm really trying to know everything I can and keep up to date. It's changed my viewpoint and life in that way. Because I'm certainly not going to be apathetic about the war after this. You get a glimpse of what it actually is and you can't stay the same."

Senior Sam Paul, 21, said the critical part of the performance lay in letting the voices of each individual soldier breathe, no matter what the content of the story told.

"You draw your own conclusions," he said. "We're not saying the war's bad. We're not saying the war's good."

Sean Lally, 20, a junior, broke in: "It's about the truth."

Performances at Randall Theater, 2020 N. 13th St., are tonight at 7:30, tomorrow at 8, Saturday at 2 and 8, Monday through Oct. 11 at 7:30; Oct. 12 at 8, and Oct. 13 at 2 and 8. Tickets are \$20; \$15 for seniors, students and Temple employees, and free for Temple students with GAF. To purchase tickets, call 1-800-298-4200, or visit www.liacourascenter.com online.

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