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THEATER REVIEW | 'IN CONFLICT'



Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

A scene from "In Conflict," a play adapted from Yvonne Latty's 2006 book of interviews with veterans of the war in Iraq.

Voices of Inexperience, Relating War's Horrors

By [BEN BRANTLEY](#)

It's possible that no cast on or off Broadway these days shares fewer professional stage credits than the young ensemble of "In Conflict," a sober and very affecting docudrama about veterans of the war in Iraq. Many of the performers in the show, which opened Wednesday night in a Culture Project presentation at the Barrow Street Theater, are still students at [Temple University](#), where this production was first staged last year.

Yet inexperience, in this instance, is an asset, part of a strangely harmonious matching of performers and the characters they embody. The men and women

portrayed in “In Conflict,” adapted by Douglas C. Wager from Yvonne Latty’s 2006 book of interviews, describe themselves as woefully unprepared for the war that awaited them. As a Vietnam veteran, having served in Iraq under officers who were younger than he, marvels, “You had a whole command structure that had never been in conflict before.”

It’s this double layer of rawness — untried actors trying to make sense of the feelings of untried soldiers suddenly tested in ways that strain sanity — that gives “In Conflict” its particular biting poignancy. Under Mr. Wager’s direction, the performers seem painfully in touch with the confused emotions they have been asked to give voice to, unprotected by the lacquered walls of well-honed technique. And the transcribed interviews of Ms. Latty’s book (its full title is “In Conflict: Iraq War Veterans Speak Out on Duty, Loss, and the Fight to Stay Alive”) acquire a specifically theatrical tension and immediacy.

As a fully integrated work “In Conflict” lacks the cohesiveness and imaginative brio of “Black Watch,” the National Theater of Scotland’s portrait of a Scottish regiment in Iraq, seen last season at St. Ann’s Warehouse in Brooklyn, where it is scheduled to return next month. The use of videotaped interviews with Ms. Latty to provide context and continuity, for instance, creates an artistic imbalance. (That she isn’t portrayed by an actress seems to give Ms. Latty, as a character, an unfair advantage over those she interviewed.) And cinematic montage-style transition scenes are never quite as fluid as they need to be. Yet there’s a reason that “In Conflict” won a Fringe First Award at the [Edinburgh Festival Fringe](#) this year.

Whenever a performer takes the stage to deliver a monologue, you feel inescapably invested in what is said. The tight bond between actors and characters here enfolds the audience too. The suggestion — and it is not necessarily a comfortable one — is that we’re all in this together.

Not that most of the people Ms. Latty interviewed would say they feel a similar connectedness with their fellow Americans. The characters range wide in their reasons for joining the Army, from escaping poverty to an earnest love of country, and in how they see the role of the United States in Iraq.

But they seem to share an overwhelming loneliness, a sense that they can never explain what happened to them in Iraq to anyone who wasn't there with them.

Herold Noel, a 25-year-old Army private, interviewed at his home in the South Bronx, says angrily of the people he sees around him, "Walkin', drinkin' their lattes every morning and goin' to work, they don't give a damn." Played by the excellent Damon Williams as a vodka-gulping ghost who haunts the remains of his own life, Mr. Noel has the most harrowing of many harrowing descriptions in the play of scenes of war.

This one, in which an Iraqi baby is run over by military trucks, acquires the repetitive, stuttering poetry of a brutally unrelenting film loop. The death of the baby was caused — grotesquely — by its being suspected of being a bomb in its mother's arms. This inability to read an unspoken language that would distinguish friends from enemies echoes through "In Conflict." So do memories of venturing into alien territory inadequately armed or protected, literally as well as psychologically.

Though Mr. Noel left Iraq in possession of all his body parts, he describes himself as an amputee. "My amputation is up here," he says, pointing to his head. "Can't nobody give me a prosthetic mind." Others who speak have lost limbs, hands, feet. "I miss my body," says Tammy Duckworth (Suyeon Kim), a double-leg amputee interviewed at the [Walter Reed Army Medical Center](#), with devastating simplicity.

On the surface the mournful, self-medicating Mr. Noel and the determinedly upbeat Ms. Duckworth are temperamental and spiritual opposites. Yet they are linked by a crippling ambivalence about what they experienced in war, about both what they took from it and what it took from them.

The show is well named. All the people here — even the hard-smiling doctor (nicely played by Joy Notoma) who speaks of her tour of duty as "the most rewarding thing I have ever, ever done" — are in conflict, even those who insist they are not.

The most enthusiastic supporters of the war suddenly pause in pain, as if pierced by a memory that contradicts them, while those now vocally opposed to the

American presence in Iraq surprise themselves with abrupt declarations of patriotism. No one speaks glibly. Everyone stammers at some point or falls into silence. The war that these veterans knew is built on and steeped in confusion. The young cast of "In Conflict" finds the aching eloquence in reactions that defy rational articulation.

IN CONFLICT

Adapted by Douglas C. Wager, based on the book by Yvonne Latty; directed by Mr. Wager; stage manager, James McCaffrey; sets by Andrew Laine; lighting by J. Dominic Chacon; sound by Christopher Cappello and Paul Winnick; costumes by Marian Cooper; video design by Warren Bass. A [Temple University](#) production, Roberta Sloan, executive producer, presented by the Culture Project, Allan Buchman, artistic director. At the Barrow Street Theater, 27 Barrow Street, at Seventh Avenue, West Village; (212) 352-3101. Through Nov. 16. Running time: 1 hour 30 minutes.

WITH: Tim Chambers (John Ball Jr./Darrell Anderson), Ethan Haymes (Jon Soltz), Amanda Holston (Kelly Dougherty), Suyeon Kim (Tammy Duckworth), Sean Lally (Ivan Medina/Robert Acosta), Joy Notoma (Tracy Ringo), Sam Paul (Sam White/Julius Tulley), Danielle Pinnock (Lisa Haynes), Tom Rader (Matthew Miller/Ty Simmons), Stan Demidoff (Alex Presman) and Damon Williams (Herold Noel/Jamel Daniels).