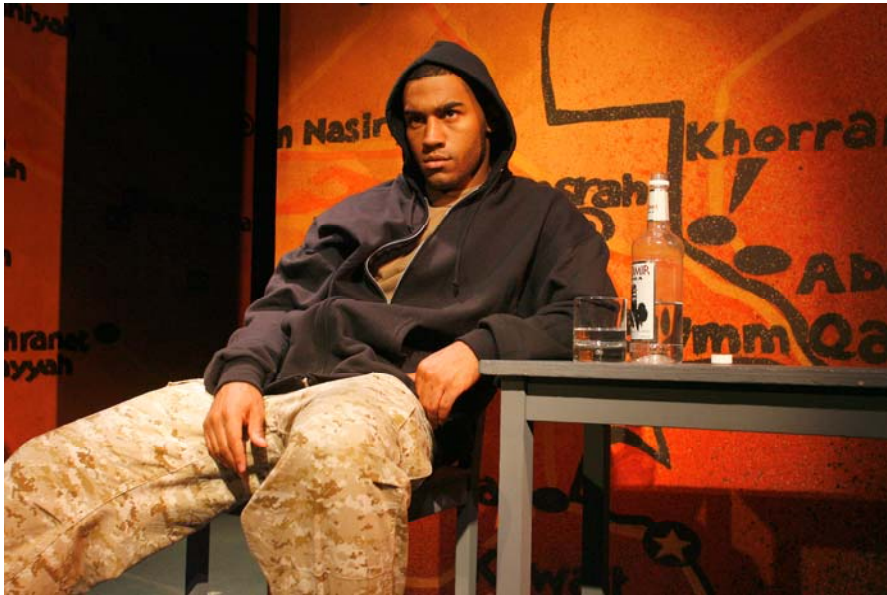


Temple thespians take Manhattan



by Howard Shapiro, Inquirer Theater Critic

NEW YORK - It plays on a more crowded stage than in Philadelphia, and to a somewhat larger audience, and it introduces a new character amid tweaks here and there in its staging. But alterations aside, Temple University's *In Conflict*, which examines the war in Iraq through the eyes of American soldiers, opened Off-Broadway last night with its raw power intact.

And it opened with the 11-member cast that has been on a fast track ever since Temple Theaters gave the play its world premiere last October. Since then, a few of the actors have graduated; the rest are seniors in Temple's theater department. They've made this play - taken from former Philadelphia Daily News reporter Yvonne Latty's book of interviews with returning soldiers - their own.

In Conflict has a rich provenance, and a charmed life in its year of performances - a trajectory that makes a rewarding point: Audiences still respond to well-considered, serious theater that doesn't hold tough issues at arm's length.

After its opening at Temple, the play was next seen at New Haven's venerable Long Wharf Theatre. Over the summer the cast - seven men and four women - raised money to take it (with Temple's help) to Edinburgh, Scotland, for the mother of all Fringe

festivals, where it won a prized new-play award. Earlier this month it returned to Temple's intimate Randall Theatre for a run at the Live Arts Festival/Philly Fringe.

Now a production group called Culture Project, which stages plays at the West Village's Barrow Street Theatre, has brought *In Conflict* to New York, turning it from a university production to a professional one by paying the cast.

Some of the actors are getting credit at Temple for what may be the internship of an actor's lifetime. "They're just devoted to this project," says Scott Braun, the marketing director for Temple Theaters. "It's pretty much their lives right now."

The play wouldn't be as compelling if its adaptation weren't so tightly knit by Douglas C. Wager, Temple's artistic director, or if it had a cast that demanded anything less from itself. The short monologues of 16 Iraq-war veterans are woven with a theatricality as stark as it is moving - a construction that doesn't allow the audience to respond to the sentiment of any particular soldier.

At a preview Tuesday, some in the audience began to applaud a particular soldier's comments, or a single actor's performance, but they couldn't get more than two or three claps in. Like a convoy, *In Conflict* rolled right over them, backed by Andrew Laine's set of movable panels that sometimes carry an image of Uncle Sam and sometimes serve as a map of Iraq.

Latty, who now teaches journalism at New York University, began collecting her interviews because, with restricted news access, "you never saw the soldiers . . . and I wanted to know what was going on with the people that I believed were going to tell the truth - and that's the soldiers, because they are the ones who are actually there." She tells us this on two flat-screen TVs that flank the stage and identify each soldier portrayed. A triumph of Latty's book, and Wager's script, is its political sweep. The soldier who realizes he has killed, or the medic who volunteers for Iraq because she can heal, the gung-ho GI who sees honor in America's involvement, and the one who does his best despite his insistence that a lie brought him there - they represent a cross-section of people and political leanings.

And many complain about the same things: a Veterans Administration that they say puts hurdles in the way of their healing, and an administration and Congress that have not given them the basic equipment to do battle.

There's a lot of anger in *In Conflict*, a lot of moral questioning, both optimism and despair - and it's all real, in the words of people who went, mostly eagerly, to serve the United States.

And on stage, there's a lot of talent. Here are the names of the 11 actors who portray these soldiers with a respect and honesty that make you believe they're responding directly to you: Tim Chambers, Stan Demidoff, Ethan Haymes, Amanda Holston, Suyeon Kim, Sean Lally, Joy Notoma, Sam Paul, Danielle Pinnock, Tom Rader and Damon Williams.

You'll be hearing from them.

In Conflict

At the Barrow Street Theatre, 27 Barrow St. at Seventh Avenue, New York. Beginning Oct. 7 it plays in rotation, every other week, with *The Atheist*. Tickets: \$35. Information: 212-352-3101 or www.cultureproject.org.