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Patriot Acts

In Conflict gives a voice to Iraq veterans.

by J. Cooper Robb



In the potent new drama *In Conflict*, a young marine sergeant (the intense Sam Paul) talks about an incident in his hometown shortly after his return from Iraq.

“They put signs with pictures of me on every telephone pole, inviting people to the party. And then these kids from a very liberal school ripped all of them off. It’s cool if they didn’t believe in the war, but it takes their credibility away. To me, that’s not protesting. That’s hate, and I am out there risking my life. They should have respect for that. Maybe not for what I’m doing, or why we are over there, but respect for the fact that I am a person, just like they are.”

Adapted by Douglas Wager (who also directs) from Yvonne Latty’s book of the same name, *In Conflict* (currently having its world premiere at Temple Theaters) is a searing new drama about the American men and women who find themselves fighting an increasingly unpopular war.

Structured as a series of monologues, the play introduces us to 19 veterans, including Bucks County congressman Patrick Murphy. Many are no older than the show’s student performers, and the young actors’ natural portrayals are compelling and poignant.

With a mix of race, gender and sexual orientation, the veterans offer diverse perspectives on both life in Iraq and their experiences upon returning to the U.S.

Some see their time in Iraq as well-spent, a chance to serve their country in a just and important cause. For others (especially those with posttraumatic stress disorder), Iraq is a nightmare that never ends.

Wager's powerful adaptation neither condemns nor condones the occupation of Iraq, but the idea that there's something particularly troubling about this war comes through clearly.

"I don't regret anything I've done in the services until this last war," says longtime reservist Lisa Haynes (the disarming Danielle Pinnock).

"It's friggin' insane!" Dave Bischel (the astounding young actor Stan Sinyakov) states emphatically, a statement echoed by other soldiers who tell of decapitated babies and helicopters brimming with blood.

Initially eager—or at least willing—to fight in Iraq, many of the veterans express outrage at an administration they feel no longer supports them either in Iraq or at home.

"I was a bullet catcher," says one of the soldiers, and time and again we hear stories of units lacking adequate body armor and equipment. Even more disturbing is the indifference shown to the veterans who return home only to find VA hospitals shuttered and medical claims routinely denied. "I expected to come back the hero, not the zero," says serviceman Herold Noel (the superb Damon Williams), a sentiment echoed by several others.

A powerful drama that leaves you deeply shaken and also strangely proud, *Conflict* concludes with images of the real-life soldiers projected on two screens. The audience's applause is as much for them as for the talented cast that gives life to their words of pride, sacrifice and sorrow.

In Conflict

Through Oct. 13. \$20. Randall Theater, 2020 N. 13th St. 800.298.4200.

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