

November 16, 2004

THEATER REVIEW | 'A HEARTBEAT TO BAGHDAD'

The Thrill of Killing and Building

By JASON ZINOMAN

For some weary liberals, the prospect of four more years of angry documentaries and shrill Bush-bashing books must seem almost as dreadful as the policies of the administration.

They can take heart: Michael Moore and Al Franken aren't the only politically engaged artists on the left. Since Sept. 11, the refreshingly thoughtful work of the tiny Flea Theater in TriBeCa has helped liberals make sense of what they read in the daily newspapers.

The Flea's artistic director, Jim Simpson, staged Anne Nelson's rumination "The Guys," the first major play produced about the terrorist attacks, and A..R. Gurney's "Mrs. Farnsworth," the most sober anti-Bush drama last season.

With Glyn O'Malley's "Heartbeat to Baghdad," Mr. Simpson again proves a point that is easy to forget in a polarized climate: political art does not need to be polemical to make an impression.

Inspired by firsthand accounts of returning soldiers from the 101st Airborne Division and their families, this poignant if poorly constructed play presents a sympathetic, warts-and-all portrait of the men and women of the American military.

Mr. O'Malley has a wealth of great stories — soldiers building schools, dating Iraqis and getting high on the thrill of killing — but he doesn't seem to know what to do with them.

Marred by an excess of narratives, the play badly needs an editor to organize the monologues, imagined scenes and spoken letters into something more cohesive.

Playing a sane and curious antiwar social worker, Gloria Reuben, a former star of the television series "E.R." who was named one of People magazine's Most Beautiful People in 1996, is a stand-in for the audience. She has a calming effect on the occasionally histrionic drama, even if her dialogue can seem a little touchy-feely: "I'm not military," she says, "but I do know about feelings."

Unlike the elegantly made docudrama "Guantánamo: Honor Bound to Defend Freedom," in which every word is a verbatim quote, what is real and what is invented is not always clear. And the lingering question of authenticity dilutes some of the play's power.

Still, Mr. Simpson's crisp production, which has a drummer who adds a backbeat, will not fail to move audiences with its gripping tales of flawed and courageous military personnel stuck in extraordinarily difficult situations. And whatever its faults, mounting a play about Iraq without a heavy-handed political agenda seems like an accomplishment.

"A Heartbeat to Baghdad" is at the Flea Theater, 41 White Street, Lower Manhattan, through Nov. 23.

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