

# Not taken from life

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*Pugilist Specialist*, by Adriano Shaplin, production by The Riot Group, at The Culture Project, New York City, November 3-28, and The Magic Theater, San Francisco, December 1-18

The Riot Group is a small acting company that has worked together since 1997 writing and performing its own pieces. Based in the US, the group is better known in Britain and Scotland, where it has been performing—particularly at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe—since 1998. All its plays are written by Adriano Shaplin, who also acts, with parts specifically written for the other members of the company.

The latest piece, *Pugilist Specialist*, played at the Edinburgh festival in 2003, where it received several awards, then opened in London, followed by a five-month tour of the UK and Ireland. In November and December it has been playing to audiences in New York City and San Francisco.

Unfortunately, despite the group's sincerity and contrary to the claims of a wide range of critics, the play is weak and self-conscious.

*Pugilist Specialist* treats a group of US marines preparing for a mission to assassinate a Middle Eastern leader, referred to only as "Big 'Stache" or "The Bearded Lady." Three of the marines are specialists: explosives expert Lt. Emma Stein, communications specialist Lt. Studdard and sniper Lt. Travis Freud. Their commanding officer, the only one who seems to have knowledge of the entire operation, is Col. Johns. The mission will prove fatal, and is perhaps intended to prove fatal, to certain members of the team.

The Riot Group describes itself as having "brought uncompromised intensity to the world of contemporary theater. Tightly-knit and fiercely committed, the ensemble have produced a string of original productions which combine absurd comedy and powerful political satire with a unique, confrontational acting style."

'Uncompromising intensity' and 'fierce commitment' are desirable qualities, but in and of themselves they hardly settle the matter. They need to be associated with equally compelling and important *purposes*. In the end, while *Pugilist Specialist* conveys a rather strained intensity, it seems all too uncommitted.

The piece consists of dialogue rapidly rattled off by the characters, as they sit or arrange themselves in different combinations around a pair of wooden benches. Virtually the only movement in the piece comes when the four march around

in military fashion between scenes.

This rapid-fire dialogue is largely unmemorable, however, as it concerns almost exclusively the characters' own narrow preoccupations and delusions, as well as the contrived tensions the playwright creates among the assassination team members.

Indeed, the sexual tension between Stein, who seems to be recovering from a recent stint as a whistleblower that ended her up in the pages of the *New York Times*, and Freud (played by Shaplin), the amoral marksman, rather inappropriately and tediously dominates much of the piece. She opens the play by arriving first for a mission briefing and declaring, "Punctuality is my feminism." Freud later tells her, "You're a lovely thing in nice, tight fatigues." She responds, "Thanks. Nice to meet you. Don't let my tits be your horizon. The desert is for that."

This snippet will perhaps give some sense of the overly clever and less than illuminating character of the play's language. It constantly strives for a cool, cynical, aphoristic profundity—using heavy and ironic doses of 'military-speak'—and just as constantly falls short.

One can cite other examples. Col. Johns describes the mission as "a PR [public relations] dream wrapped in a logistical nightmare." When he is introduced to the others as a "sniper," Freud comments, "I prefer 'hopeless romantic.'" One of the characters remarks, "There is no such thing as progress. Only the passion, and the lack thereof." The present volunteer army is "a bunch of incentive-dependent video-game junkies with permanent erections." Or, "Longevity is the botched nose job of humanity." Col. Johns again, inexplicably: "Deconstructionists make the best historians." Unhappily, the characters cannot seem to help themselves from speaking in irritating epigrams.

Even the better lines—Stein complains at one point, "I like standard, well-organized, government sanctioned murders. I'm not a goddam cold-war spy"; Freud: "Marines don't murder. They shape the enemy"; the colonel, of the Middle Eastern populations: "They either love us or they love to hate us. Either way, we're spreading love"—fall on relatively unreceptive ears because the piece as a whole does not appear designed to educate or move the audience, but rather to bowl it over. Shaplin, as playwright and actor, is simply too pleased with himself.

Some of this is mere youthfulness. The Riot Group only originated at Sarah Lawrence College in 1997, in a rebellion

apparently against the official approach of the drama department at the school. Perhaps too much has been made of them too soon. At a time when the theater in particular is starved of originality and energy, critics and audiences are all too ready to interpret signs of talent as something far greater. This does the artists in question no service.

There is no reason to impute bad motives to the company. Did Shaplin set out originally to create a work that would enlighten audiences about the impending US invasion of Iraq, the explosive situation in the Middle East or the morale and conditions in the American armed forces? Perhaps, but along the way he seems to have encountered too many ideological and artistic stumbling-blocks. A sort of post-modern flippancy and coldness animates the piece.

In interviews Shaplin puts forward contradictory views. He seems genuinely concerned by the state of American life, explaining to Philip Fisher of the *British Theatre Guide* that “we are a political company and I am a political writer.” He continues, “Democracy should be based on reason, not emotion—theatre should be based on this. It is right that 9/11 is regarded as a tragedy but everybody still had to go to work the next day. It is just a fact and its real meaning will never see daylight.”

To James Panton of *culturewars.org*, he expressed anxiety about attacks on intellectual freedom and expression: “There aren’t a lot of places where people can come together in rooms anymore. Wherever there are a group of people protesting something or celebrating something, you can guarantee that there will also be a law there to give the police the right to come and break things up.” And further: “The idea of critical dialogue is a truly radical thing, because we’re living in a culture that is continually trying to suppress dialogue and induce passivity.”

And then one encounters this type of somewhat muddled thinking (from an interview on *nytheatre.com*): “All my plays are about language; particularly the ways in which people do violence with language, or the ways in which language is a preface to violence. *Pugilist Specialist*, I suppose, is about how a war begins as a story. War begins as a way of talking about other people in a manner which strips them of their humanity while simultaneously imagining ourselves and our nation as just and true. Staging a war isn’t much different than writing a play. A successful war needs characters, a theme, a back-story, some special effects, some memorable lines. It needs to be clear about who is a villain and who is a hero. It is a story, albeit with very serious consequences for those people cast in the role of the villain.”

Or this: “The reason [Bush] is in power and Saddam isn’t is because he has the bigger budget, the bigger military, and all the historical metaphors on his side. He has the better story, that’s all.”

Some of the processes Shaplin describes, the manner in which propaganda strips other peoples of their humanity, for example,

and renders a given population vulnerable to war hysteria, are real and need to be exposed. It is unclear, however, how *Pugilist Specialist* contributes to such an exposure. While it pokes rather obvious fun at military-bureaucratic parlance and thinking—“In the event that this document is misinterpreted, or becomes the subject of misinterpretation, you will be expected to toilet this particular document. Alternately, if our actions are celebrated, you will prepare excerpts for distribution”—the play fails to demystify current social and historical realities.

The piece is not intended to treat the war in Iraq, but the presentation of this war; not the military, but the manner in which the military perceives itself. These are concerns, but far prettier ones. And when presented as central issues, they only create a new layer of confusion. Organizing a war is not like “writing a play”; Bush is not in power because the “historical metaphors are on his side.” This is simply sophomoric.

Too much in the play is at second-hand, refracted through the self-conscious and, ultimately, politically timid approach of the company. It seems beneath the group to consider, even for an instant, *why* the assassination of a Middle Eastern leader—or a full-scale invasion, for that matter—might be contemplated. Or to express horror at such an operation. And that is disturbing.

One also, incidentally, learns next to nothing about the real state of affairs in the US military. This is a marine unit, one feels certain, that exists solely inside the playwright’s head.

Shaplin rejects agitprop. That’s all to the good. But drama comes from life. We thought we had emerged from a period in which “paintings were about paintings” and “novels were about novels.” Apparently not entirely. The playwright senses that momentous events are taking place, but he remains in the grip of an approach that blocks a truthful and artistically satisfying coming to grips with our reality.



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