

# Iraq: the dirty story

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*The Sand Storm, written by Sean Huze, directed by David Fofi, produced by Sandstorm Productions, Operation Truth, and Elephant Stageworks at the Elephant Asylum in Hollywood, California, from March 17 through May 14, 2005*

At 60 minutes, *The Sand Storm* is a short play, but one with a long reach and deep aftershocks. Written by Sean Huze, a former U.S. Marine and decorated veteran of “Operation Iraqi Freedom,” the play is a series of 10 monologues, stories told by recently returned veterans of the war in Iraq.

This play in this production hauls you into a place where young American men and women are doing the hard, dirty, violent work of the American Imperium. It takes you—not *into* war—but into its immediate post-traumatic aftermath: that place where evil, chaos, confusion, adrenalin, night sweats, claustrophobic nightmares, and glimmers of human goodness play like palpable and sometimes seductive sirens on our psyches. It’s pitched in that narrow window between the event (where the images and emotions are still raw and undigested) and history (where the past is reduced to comfortably polished tales and postcards from the edge of the abyss). These monologues are memories in progress. Each story has its own individual twist of irony or half-glimpsed insight, but the overall drama of the play is that of not knowing if the percolating memories that consume these 10 young men will ultimately breed psychosis, numbness, denial, homicide, the oblivions of addictions, or radical salvation and private peace.

These are stories that the major media and their blog-head cousins will not tell because they cannot. These are stories that the “embeds,” with visions of post-war book deals dancing in their heads, cannot tell because they have been professionally, corporately, and institutionally co-opted. These stories break the silence. They’re not pretty; if fact, most are brutal anecdotes of impulsive stress and adrenalin-induced violence. They offer no uplifting moral lessons or sentimental spins on the fraternity of war. They are, in short, episodes of obscenity.

The stories told by these 10 young soldiers put faces on the civilian casualties and the damage inflicted not just on the people of Iraq but on our cousins, lovers, friends, neighbors, and fellow citizens. They breathe life into corpses and suck the breath from survivors. These stories hurt. They should. They should bruise our souls and break our hearts. They should make us want to pluck from harm’s way and barbaric temptation these and the tens of thousands of fellow citizens like them currently serving in one of the United States’ many war zones and outposts. That they do is this play’s triumph and the achievement of the actors and their director.

The setting, designed by Joel Daavid, is a deceptively simple assemblage of blasted window frames with scraps of letters and broadsides plastered to distressed walls. I’ve seen much of Daavid’s work, and he’s once again constructed a genius set from detritus, a few sheets of plywood, and some kind of wallpaper goop. Dominating the upstage wall is a crude collage of dust-weathered letters that provides a screen on which slides, taken by Huze and others during their time in Iraq, are projected. These are not images that you’ll ever see on the evening news or on the pages of our major dailies. We see the charred remains of Iraqi civilians and soldiers, some dismembered, some toppled in

degrading heaps like so much refuse.

The only time we see anything remotely resembling the more Spielberg-friendly images of “guys at war” is a final group “snapshot” posed by the actors for their curtain call, with the only non-Marine—a Navy paramedic—standing a few steps to the side, almost but not quite part of the platoon. That final, self-consciously staged image, coming as it does after a harrowing hour of painfully private self-revelation, offers a slyly subversive comment on all brothers-in-arms clichés while hinting at a shared bond among these young men of having been witnesses to horror and events that verge on atrocity.

The play opens with a single Marine, a young Latino (Marco Villalvazo), still in desert fatigues, silently roaming the stage with the other-worldly grace of a dancer. At first he seems lost, or, once we notice the seeping head wound, addled by his injuries. He seems to be searching for something—a way out, perhaps, or a place to hide. Suddenly, the rest of the cast marches onto the stage in tight drill order, each in turn stating his name, rank, and operational assignment. Once dismissed, they return, one by one, to tell a single story.

The first is that of a claustrophobic corporal (played with humor by Max Williams) who risks breaking the seal on his MOPP (rubberized bio-chemical-hazard) suit for a taste of “fresh” desert air. On days when the outside temperature can reach a hundred-plus, trapped in a vehicle whose engine radiates like a stoked furnace, temperatures inside the airtight suit push sauna levels. He reminds us that bottled water—often in such short supply that it is rationed at life-threatening rates—is “room temperature,” meaning that it’s disgustingly hot. This is disarmingly simple storytelling—a report on what is felt, the sheer physical discomforts of a face-mask filling with sweat, feet pickling in secretions, all the while coping with mind-scrambling fear that at any moment one could be blown to pieces, blasted by invisible toxins, infected by biological agents, or simply collapse from dehydration or heat stroke. This first story situates us in a soldier’s world.

In “Doc’s” story (told with heart-breaking humanity by Robert Brewer), a Navy paramedic finds himself dealing with a dying Iraqi man whose entire family has just been blown to pieces by American artillery. Doc expects a tirade of abuse and unbridled hatred; instead, the man, in his dying breath, thanks America for saving his people from Saddam. In a masterful stroke of understatement, Doc tells us that “he just lost it.” He simply cannot wrap his mind around this man’s gratitude to those who’ve just obliterated his world, mutilating all those he loved. Doc clutches the man’s hand, futilely repeating how profoundly sorry he is. Returning home, all Doc wants to do is forget. But, of course, he can’t.

The stories tumble out, one after another, each in a different voice, each revealing its own distinctive trauma:

The scrawny PFC (in a brilliantly bitter-comic turn by Jeremy Glazer) who comes across a severed foot and obsessively tries to find the body from which it came.

The corporal (played with a disturbing blend of sweetness and violence by Frank Merino) who, after a night vigil under a star-filled sky sharing sweet memories of wives and children with a comrade, witnesses his friend’s incineration in the next morning’s combat and then revels in

ferocious, unapologetic revenge.

The hyper-responsible 2nd Lieutenant (played with intelligence and dignity by Keith Ewell) whose training has not prepared him for the chaotic fury of an ambush and its even more furious retaliation.

The sergeant (played by Gentry Sanz-Agero) whose visceral account of an assault on a city comes as close as any tale can to putting us in a front-line soldier's boots.

The sergeant (played on alternate nights by Torrance Jordan and Tim Starks) whose lack of sleep and crazed frustration as he mans a checkpoint ends in the frenzied stomping of an equally frenzied Iraqi.

The sergeant (played with brutal intensity by Tom Vick) who, in one of the most electrifying of the stories, deliberately eats his cold "brunch" while watching a fatally wounded enemy combatant beg the sergeant to put him out of his misery.

The staff sergeant (played with authority by Matthew Rimmer) whose long-delayed pleasure of savoring a photo of his young son is shattered by friendly fire.

Finally, in the most bittersweet tale of all, a sergeant (played by Sean Huze) describes the simple human bond that grows between his men and the community attached to a grain mill for whom the sergeant's unit is providing protection. His tale tosses a lifeline to the troubled consciences of the soldiers; for this brief moment, the Americans are truly doing something good and kind and productive. He captures the touching hospitality of the families and paints an enduring portrait of a little girl who kisses a picture of the sergeant's son, then flashes him a peace sign as the unit moves on to Tikrit, leaving these people to whatever fate this war will deal them as the Marines press on to their own unknowns.

The Voiceless Marine, who's spent the entire play haunting the stage, finally reveals the meaning of his presence in an honor-salute by the platoon as he drifts upstage, past them, toward an image of a veteran's graveyard, a sprawling field of anonymous white crosses, Stars of David, and Half Crescents.

Director David Fofi has accomplished something quite extraordinary by insisting that these stories be told simply and with near reluctance, as if the events and emotions being described were just ordinary everyday occurrences. Each scene is underplayed in ways that make each distinct from the others, thereby heightening the sense that these are very individual voices. The tales begin in off-handed ways, but then it's as if the narratives take on a life of their own once the initial hurdle of silence is surmounted. There is no indulging of melodramatic emotion; in lesser hands, these stories could go embarrassingly over the top. The disparity between matter-of-fact description and extreme events drives the dramatic tension into the stratosphere with no need for emotional pyrotechnics. The intimacy of the performance space gives the telling of these tales enough theatrical juice and intensity to rivet a mid-sized Broadway house. While the play itself is short, the experience feels more than full; the understatement of the playing also gives us the sense that there are so many more stories like these out there just waiting to be told.

I've now seen this play three times and had subsequent conversations with the writer, director, the actors, producers, designer, and fellow audience members. My first encounter with the material was at a special benefit preview for Operation Truth, a veterans' organization dedicated to getting the stories of the men and women who actually fight America's wars out into the public discourse. OpTruth's more expansive brief is to aid combat veterans in their recovery and re-assimilation into civil society after their tours of duty.

There was a post-play conversation with Sean Huze, Paul Rieckhoff (founder and front man for Operation Truth), and Tom Vick (the Desert Storm vet who plays the "revenge is a dish best eaten as cold as a ready-to-eat meal" sergeant).

Mr. Huze has tapped into some kind of percolating rage that reveals itself in the writing and that he makes explicit in public forums and

interviews. He signed up for the Marines at the Hollywood Recruiting Station at LaBrea and Sunset before the toxic dust from the Twin Towers had even settled. He now admits of naivete, an uncomplicated "country boy" love of home and country, an impulse to protect and defend. In hindsight, he's pissed off. At the politicians who hijacked that patriotism; at the Democrats who cowered behind their handlers and opinion pollsters and willfully refused to risk asking hard questions at a very hard time. He's especially angry at the major media, who got so caught up in the production values of their reporting, their faux-objectivity and ratings-addictions that they never dug deep enough, widely enough, or questioned the spin of the demagogues that made us all a little dizzy. That the current ruling elite of the United States used such outpourings of love of country for as-yet-unexplained ends is enough—or should be enough—to send citizens into a rage.

That night and on other occasions, Mr. Huze has stated that so long as we ignore the truths these soldiers bring back from the front, we allow ourselves to be used.

Mr. Huze asserts that to now have the debate we should have had in '01/'02 is criminally academic. By the time some 19-year-old kid with demons on his brain and images of charred dismembered bodies (like the ones seen in this show) lurking in his dreams comes home it's too late.

Yet, there was something disturbing in that evening's post-play discussion. All three participants said that they didn't have an ideology, that their work in both the production of this play and with Operation Truth wasn't ideological. All they had was the truth of their experiences: empirical data, like scar tissue. The audience that night seemed relieved to hear this. Many even applauded. Others, including me, did not. I was troubled by the statement and the response. The neo-cons who devised this current Mesopotamian war have an ideology (and on the very day of the performance, Paul Wolfowitz, one of its architects, had just been tapped by George W. Bush to run the World Bank).

While a play like *The Sand Storm*, or any powerful work of art, probably should not wear its ideological stripes on its sleeves, it is disingenuous to claim that it lacks underlying political, social, and ethical values. Even the most navel-gazing orgy of artistic narcissism rests on a value system, even if it is one that nihilistically disavows itself of any interest in the life struggles of others.

Huze, Reickhoff, and Vick are careful, especially in their public statements and interviews, to disassociate themselves from overtly partisan labels. In part, this may arise from well-grounded suspicions of having their statements hijacked by the professional political establishment and professional pundits. Huze came under fire from right-wing elements in the military after an angry anti-war, anti-Bush letter of his (the wrong version apparently) appeared in a volume of soldiers' letters published by Michael Moore.

Writing and presenting this play have only exacerbated that hostility from certain self-styled "patriots." All three stop short of calling this war what it is—a colonial, imperialist war, a war of plunder. By side-stepping deeper critiques of America's militarism and its rationale for expansion in Iraq and the greater region, including Central Asia, their rage lacks bite and, ironically, lands them in the very same blame-game arena that characterizes the nightly talk-show slug fests that pass as informational programming.

The very idea of ideology has become polluted for deeply passionate artists and men like Mr. Huze. That his aversion to the term is shared by so many suggests that the term has come to signify a rigidity of mind, an inflexibility, an unwillingness to listen to others, as if the ideologue will refuse to let facts mess up a nicely and neatly conceived version of reality. While I can understand the *Sand Storm* and OpTruth folks' retreat from claiming an ideology, I decry it as well.

Without "ideology" we leave ourselves open to manipulation. These men should have no hesitation whatsoever in giving a principled

articulation of their aspirations as human beings, members of a community, and citizens of the United States and the world. They retreat to the more comfortable assertion that it's not the job of the soldier to ask why, but the responsibility of the citizen, a job that needs doing before the soldier is given his or her orders. Others die when citizens shirk this duty. But they too are citizens and the citizen-soldier is especially privileged to question the economic and political system that continues to put them, their brothers and sisters, and entire populations in harm's way.

The fact remains, however, that as artists these men have, through their art (if not through their public appearances and statements), offered a powerful corrective to the "romance" of "the good war." These are 10 stories, well told, honest, painful, on occasion bleakly funny, and obscene in the way carnage is obscene. These are the stories of survivors of combat, young men who do not wear their wounds or medals or unit citations on their sleeves or use a bully pulpit to bully the world or taunt it with Texas come-ons like "Bring it on!"

Yet, in a time of pervasive double-speak, we need clear-eyed reason to sort through the confetti with which the wonks and hawks and well-meaning doves fill the forum. Sometimes, the air seems so thick with this chaff it's hard to breathe. Mr. Huze's play comes like a breath of fresh, biting air—like the lifting of a MOPP mask in hundred-plus heat. We need to be able to articulate our values clearly and cleanly so that when the craziness comes roaring at us we can make sense of what we think is happening, why it is happening, and what we should do next. Ideology gives perspective. Granted, sometimes totally skewed perspective, but at least it offers a starting point. Perspectives shift as you move along the highway. Ideology and the language used to articulate it can change too as it adjusts to historical conditions. And that too is an underlying message of this important play.



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