The Long Way Home: Sydney Theatre Company signs up with the Australian military

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Produced by the Sydney Theatre Company, directed by Stephen Rayne, script by Daniel Keene

The Long Way Home is a collection of dramatic vignettes performed by 12 Australian soldiers and based on their experiences, mainly in the US-led imperialist interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the impact of post-traumatic stress disorder and other war wounds on their lives.

Local media and drama critics have effusively praised the joint Sydney Theatre Company (STC)-Australian Defence Force production, hailing it as an "honest," "sensitive" and "compelling" work that "shines light on soldiers' darkness."

These claims are false to the core. *The Long Way Home* is a crude and artistically mendacious work that whitewashes the Australian military and covers up the real reasons for the "soldiers' darkness." The two-hour show refuses to make any connection between their psychological state and the political aims and criminal character of the imperialist military operations in which they were involved.

No reference is made to the brutal and dehumanising nature of their military training or the role of Australian commando units, whose "work" in Afghanistan and elsewhere has consisted of targeted assassinations, night raids, torture and other war crimes.

This is no surprise. Everything about *The Long Way Home*, from the deathly silence over the lawless character of the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, the selection of the soldiers appearing in the production, through to the show's corporate sponsors—Lockheed Martin, Boeing, Thales Australia and other defence contractors—has the military's finger-prints all over it. Thales' latest bomb-resistant hummer vehicle is advertised on the back of the show's program.

The Long Way Home was initiated in 2012 by the now retired Australian Defence Force (ADF) chief General D. J. Hurley after he attended a London performance of *The Two Worlds of Charlie F*, which starred wounded British soldiers. Hurley was appointed ADF chief in 2011, after more than three decades as a senior army officer, including as commander of Australian military operations in Somalia and East Timor.

After watching the London show Hurley decided a similar production should be staged in Australia. His initiative came in the context of soldiers' families raising concerns about escalating numbers of their loved ones suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, alcoholism, serious drug abuse and suicidal tendencies. Mental illness is now the leading cause of disability for Australian soldiers.

The ADF contacted the STC's artistic director Andrew Upton, who immediately agreed, and Stephen Rayne, the creator and director of the London show, was hired. Daniel Keene, an Australian playwright, was brought in to develop a script after a five-week workshop with the soldiers, most of whom served in Afghanistan—some with more than two tours of duty—while others served in East Timor, Iraq and the Solomon Islands.

The STC's program notes fail to explain how the soldiers were selected, but the cast includes Brigadier Wayne Goodman. Goodman served in Iraq and Afghanistan and was later appointed head of the Australian Command and Staff College, the military's highest training college. He was then promoted to Chief of Staff at Joint Operations Command.

In 2012 WikiLeaks published emails between Goodman and George Meredith, head of Stratfor, the privately-owned American geopolitical intelligence agency. Goodman invited Meredith to speak to students at the military college about the US-Australia alliance, "our shared interest in the region, US expectations of AS [Australia] and … your views on our new Defence white paper."

According to the program, Goodman suffered brain trauma in a sporting accident. Whether he is the military high command's minder in the production is not clear, but whatever the case, he seems strangely out of place.

The Long Way Home proceeds via a series of short scenes, about 30 in all, with snatches from the frontline, hospital recovery rooms, enlistment interviews, conflicts with spouses back in Australia and memories of childhood war games. The latter scenes are aimed at implying that the decision to become a soldier was some sort of natural progression.

Heavily armed and camouflaged soldiers—in silhouette or semi-darkness—appear with mind-numbing regularity and move robot-like across the stage, apparently haunting the returned soldiers. Video interviews, stroboscopic lights, heavy-metal rock music and unrelenting foul-mouthed language are all used to try and give the production a sense of rawness. It is unconvincing and unenlightening.

The frontline military scenes are centred in Afghanistan, where 20,000 Australian soldiers have served since 2001, in Australia's

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longest ever military engagement. Why Canberra joined Washington's bogus "war on terror" and its catastrophic impact on the lives of millions of ordinary people in Afghanistan and elsewhere is simply not addressed at all.

There is a brief reference to what is described as a mistaken bombing of an Afghan family and recurring dreams of a soldier traumatised by the death of a young boy shot during a Taliban attack, but not the slightest indication of the extent of the military carnage unleashed against Afghanistan by the occupying forces over the past 13 years.

At one point during the play, one of the soldiers declares, "If someone invaded Penrith [in western Sydney], I'd fight them" while another says he does not understand why "the people we came to help" are so hostile. These issues also remain unexamined. How could they be raised, after all, without canvassing some uncomfortable political truths?

The unprovoked military assault and occupation of Afghanistan had nothing to do with "helping the people" but was launched in order to establish US hegemony over the strategically vital, energy-rich Central Asian region as part of US imperialism's efforts to offset its historic decline through military force.

The Long Way Home is silent about the fact that Australian Special Forces Task Group members shot five unarmed children in a raid on an Afghan village in 2009, along with other subsequent murders of defenceless civilians. It also fails to mention the fact that Australian troops posted racist anti-Afghan videos and messages on Facebook. Nor is Iraq mentioned, a ploy that manages to sidestep any embarrassing issues associated with US and Australian government lies about "weapons of mass destruction," which were used to justify the invasion, social devastation and deaths of hundreds of thousands of innocent men, women and children in that country.

The production has a recurring hospital bed scene, in which an unconscious soldier mumbles what appear to be disjoined phrases, but are, in fact, the opening lines from Homer's *Odyssey*. These phrases are then projected onto the video screen at the rear of the stage. It seems that this device is supposed to provide the essential link between the various vignettes—that these soldiers have been on a long and difficult journey back to normal civilian life. But unlike Homer's *Odyssey*, which charted an epic event, Australian soldiers have been involved in war crimes.

The scenes of soldiers and their wives arguing are repetitive and unconvincing. Not one of the wives even asks what her husband actually did in Afghanistan. While millions of ordinary people, in Australia and around the world, opposed the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, the audience is never presented with a single dissenting voice.

The dramatic portrayals of the soldiers' drinking bouts, insomnia and recurring nightmares are superficial—once again, they reveal certain symptoms but not their cause. The obvious question is never raised: How could anyone be normal after being de-humanised, turned into an unquestioning, trained killer and sent to occupy a country where the population is hostile to one's presence and where "green-on-blue" attacks by Afghan army trainees are a constant and ever-present threat?

The Long Way Home tries to inject light relief with a couple of comedic moments, which are clearly meant to appeal to the lower ranks. These involve seminars with a foul-mouthed Lieutenant Neville Stiffy—a stupid parody of a senior military officer—who explains the so-called "yes" and "no" parts of a soldier's brain.

In another presentation he explains how the pristine "clear water" ideas from the military high command are corrupted and distorted as they move down to the lower ranks. These scenes only serve to underline the deliberately cultivated atmosphere of ignorance and backwardness that dominates military life.

The Long Way Home ends with the previously bed-ridden soldier walking to the front of the stage and fully reciting the opening lines of Homer's *Odyssey*. Behind him a video screen displays the Australian flag and the soldiers form a guard of honour, with their heads bowed to the "eternal soldier." The screen projects the image of an aircraft transport vehicle, and the stage fades to black. Those attending the premiere in Sydney included top military brass, then Governor-General Quentin Bryce and her successor Sir Peter Cosgrove, and other senior political figures. They all rose in unison in a standing ovation.

The Long Way Home is a crude and unedifying artistic effort. It is an indication of the sort of material being prepared as part of Australia's World War I centenary events, a four-year jingoistic affair initiated by the former Gillard Labor government and ghoulishly described by current Prime Minister Tony Abbott as a "people's celebration."

The STC-ADF production is the first of these memorial events to be staged over the next four years. They will include films, television and radio shows, a Gallipoli symphony and Anzac requiem, and other cultural spectaculars. Backed by over $600 million in government and corporate funding, their aim is to glorify Australian militarism in an effort to extinguish the deep-seated popular opposition to war—particularly among youth—in preparation for a new round of military blood-letting.

That the STC has joined this chauvinist jamboree reveals much about the rightward trajectory of those running the drama company. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, many Australian dramatists and actors were involved in productions that forthrightly denounced the US war in Vietnam and Australian involvement in it.

Four decades on, the "creative minds" at the STC are not just keeping their mouths shut about the real purpose and consequences of Australia's military interventions. They have slavishly—and shamefully—signed up as supporters.

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