

## War drama 'Human Terrain' opens Mustard Seed season



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Mustard Seed Theatre opens its eighth season with a world première — and a challenge.

“Human Terrain,” by Jennifer Blackmer, practically compels members of the audience to ask themselves what they would do if they were in the very difficult position of the heroine, an anthropologist named Mabry Hoffmann (Melissa Gerth).

Most of us never will be anywhere close, which in a way moots the question. But thanks to Gerth’s tightly drawn performance and Lori Adams’ thoughtful direction, it’s an intriguing one nevertheless.

The play takes place a few years ago, when a program called Human Terrain really did embed social scientists with American troops to explore local culture and communities. Mabry — who could have taken an academic job at home and remained with her little boy — has signed on and has been sent to Iraq.

She is not military, but she’s part of a unit, reporting to Captain Alford (B. Weller). A decent man, he tries to maintain a delicate balance, respecting Mabry’s role while protecting her from danger. But balance may not be possible.

Mabry certainly respects Alford. She also comes to feel affection for Private Detty (Taylor Campbell), the young, good-hearted soldier assigned to accompany her around Fallujah, and for Adiliah (Wendy Greenwood), an English-speaking local woman who has a small son, too.

But when we first meet Mabry, she is being interrogated by a lawyer (Dawn Campbell) from the Department of Justice. She faces the possibility of a serious crime: treason. How did she get there? Blackmer’s story, told mainly in flashback, reveals the process — but could be a lot clearer in terms of motives.

It’s not hard to see why, apart from loyalty to her country, Mabry would feel loyal to Alford and Detty as well.

Weller and Campbell deliver straightforward performances of honorable men, doing their best in a difficult situation. Furthermore, the cultural kinship that certainly affects the audience’s

perception of them would presumably establish ties with Mabry, an American too.

Her loyalty to Adiliah is trickier — as it cannot be, if we are to understand why she feels torn. But the women barely know each other. Is motherhood really that strong a tie?

No doubt Mabry would be as fascinated to hear Adiliah's explanation of why she wears a veil, as we are. But this metaphor — which Blackmer seats at the heart of the drama — doesn't quite do the trick. Blackmer doesn't imbue the veil with the resonance that metaphor demands; ultimately, it reflects nothing beyond Adiliah's personal convictions.

That muddles both Mabry's choices and the play's puzzling conclusion. Up until that moment, however, the play has addressed serious issues with serious intent, crisp writing and genuine conflict. It plays out on a versatile set designed by John Stark, with pieces that move in and out of the foreground, like Mabry's memories. Lighting designer Michael Sullivan depicts both quiet scenes and flashy ones effectively. {&rule}'**Human Terrain**'

**When** • Through Sept. 14

**Where** • Fontbonne University Fine Arts Theatre, 6800 Wydown Boulevard

**How much** • \$25-\$30

**More info** • 314-719-8060; mustardseedtheatre.com

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