

# 'Human Terrain' Is Taut, Tense Territory: Theater Review

by Mark Bretz | Posted: Tuesday, September 2, 2014 10:17 am

**Story:** Mabry Hoffman has a Ph.D. in anthropology but no job to pay the bills to support her son and herself. Thus, she's interested when she hears about a project operated by the United States Army called The Human Terrain, a proof-of-concept initiative established in 2006 to "improve the military's ability to understand the highly complex local, socio-cultural environment in the areas where (it is) deployed."



humanterrain5.jpg

She signs on for the assignment, and is sent to Fallujah, Iraq. Although a civilian, she is informed by the outpost's commander, Captain Alford, that she reports to him as does everyone else there. Mingling with the residents of the region in order to learn more about them and their customs, she befriends a woman named Adiliah, utilizing the common bond of their children to begin a relationship that slowly turns into friendship.

When Adiliah appears to save Mabry from a bombing in a town square, Alford believes that Mabry may be withholding crucial information about the 'enemy' and warns her about the treasonable offense. Playing a game of verbal tug-of-war with her superiors, Mabry finds herself being questioned in an undisclosed interrogation center by a government official named Kate, who warns about her perilous situation. Will Mabry betray her friendship to Adiliah in order to save herself?

**Highlights:** Mustard Seed Theatre begins its ninth season, and the unofficial 'start' of the local 2014-15 theater year, with a thought-provoking, handsomely crafted world premiere drama by Midwestern playwright Jennifer Blackmer. Artistic director Deanna Jent has committed this season to three world premieres and a reprise of last year's box-office and award-winning smash, *All Is Calm*.

Blackmer's two-act work is a taut, tense treatise that looks at the conflict that results when a civilian thrust into a combat situation must decide where her loyalties truly lie. Can her 'gray' world fit into a black and white war zone that can quickly desensitize human emotions or elevate them to their highest level?

**Other Info:** Blackmer says that she based her work of fiction on the real-life Human Terrain System established by the U.S. Army in 2006. She is an accomplished playwright as evidenced by this strong and

sobering drama, although some minor characters such as the bigoted soldier Harrison could be better sketched beyond caricature.

She establishes, though, three central relationships that form the core of her pensive study, all involving anthropologist Mabry. At the heart of the drama is Mabry's bond with the veiled Iraqi woman Adiliah, who has a surprising background of her own.

There's also the feisty but basically respectful banter between Mabry and Captain Alford, as well as Mabry's friendship with a likable young soldier named Detty, who is assigned to protect her as she ventures out among the residents, with the omnipresent potential of danger.

Director Lori Adams, who helmed Jent's affecting drama about autism, *Falling*, both for its world premiere and its Off-Broadway debut, is adept at bringing clarity to potentially muddled situations. Backed by some superior technical work, including Michael Sullivan's wide-ranging and pinpoint lighting that heightens crucial scenes, Adams coaxes some convincingly powerful performances from her cast.

After a slow start in the drama's first scene (the play moves back and forth from the present in an interrogation room to about a year earlier when the events occur), Melissa Gerth recovers to provide a vital and vibrant interpretation of Mabry that serves as the backbone of the piece. She conveys the woman's initial awkwardness in the strange land of the military with her easy banter with Adiliah that forges their friendship, all in convincing style.

Wendy Greenwood is a marvel as the mysterious Adiliah, a woman of keen intelligence who also has strong bonds with her native land and customs. Blackmer's clever script keeps an audience guessing about Adiliah's motives throughout.

B Weller is a commanding presence as Captain Alford, a military lifer who traded his desk job at the Pentagon after 9-11 for the combat zone. He's a man who takes pride in the safety of his troops, someone who can reveal compassion beneath his gruff exterior, depending upon what's required.

Taylor Campbell brings a down-home friendliness to Detty, a Midwestern lad who brings no grudges or prejudices to his job, and one who takes satisfaction in helping a resident build a fence despite a language barrier.

Dawn Campbell is the calm and cool interrogator, who reveals little to Mabry as she works to extract key information about what Mabry knew and when. Antonio Mosley is effective as a young Iraqi who appears terrified to encounter American troops, ostensibly as he searches for badly needed water. John Clark has the thankless task of portraying the one-dimensional Harrison.

Kudos to Blackmer for the lengthy Arabic (or dialect) segments of the script that can leave an audience purposely in the dark, with a debt of gratitude to language and cultural advisors Laila Abdo and Ahmed Al-Dulaimi, and to Shaun Sheley for the intense moments of combat movement. Meg Brinkley provides important props, Zoe Sullivan adds effective sound design, Jane Sullivan creates the convincing costumes and John Stark adds a set design that is built around a movable centerpiece that can be an interrogation office or removed for village scenes.

*Human Terrain* sets the bar high for Mustard Seed's new season with an accomplished flair for pondering what is right and what is decent.

**Play:** *Human Terrain*

**Company:** Mustard Seed Theatre

**Venue:** Fontbonne Fine Arts Theatre, Big Bend at Wydown

**Dates:** September 4, 5, 6, 7, 11, 12, 13, 14

**Tickets:** \$25-\$30 (or Pay with a Can/Pay What You Can on Thursdays); contact [www.mustardseedtheatre.com](http://www.mustardseedtheatre.com)

**Rating:** A 4.5 on a scale of 1-to-5.

*Photos courtesy of John Lamb*