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Human Terrain: Mustard Seed's Probing Work on Iraq Conflict Leaves Lots to Think On

By Chad Garrison Wed., Sep. 3 2014 at 6:00 AM
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John Lamb

Mustard Seed traverses *The Human Terrain*.

With combat troops lingering in Afghanistan through the end of 2016 and renewed U.S. airstrikes in Iraq, it may be decades before we can fully explore the cultural toll taken by our bloody adventures in the Middle East.

Americans may be tired of war, but that hasn't stopped a slew of early playwrights from trying to understand it, mining these conflicts to deliver a host of dramatically rich if commercially risky works to a war-weary public. Now comes *The Human Terrain*, a remarkably potent exploration of shared humanity and the limits of cultural understanding by Jennifer Blackmer, now having its world premiere at Mustard Seed Theatre.

In many ways *The Human Terrain* is live theater at its best. Although the play does a lot of heavy lifting to convince us of its moral complexity, it's the sort of theatrical experience whose deeply flawed protagonist demands you take a side — her questions and conflicts, perspectives and assumptions clanging about in conversations long after the final curtain call.

As the play opens, Mabry, dressed in desert fatigues and a taupe T-shirt, has recently arrived bound and hooded at an undisclosed detention center where she stands accused of treason. The play uses an effective flashback structure, and as her interrogator, known only as Kate, questions her, we learn that Mabry is not a soldier at all, but rather a cultural anthropologist on contract with the army's Human Terrain System, a proof-of-concept initiative to improve the military's cultural understanding of local populations.

Fresh out of grad school and idealistic to the point of dogmatism, Mabry quickly clashes with the military command in Fallujah, refusing to carry a gun, but eventually befriend her military escort, Detty. Unlike her military colleagues, which the play portrays as culturally out of touch, Mabry is sensitive to Iraqis' personal struggles. As a researcher, she is expected to gain the locals' trust, exploring the so-called human terrain through personal interviews. But Mabry quickly loses sight of her professional obligations as she endeavors to understand her subjects by identifying with them emotionally. Sometimes the approach works, as when she — going *way* beyond her duties as an anthropologist — convinces soldiers not to shoot as she talks down a would-be suicide bomber. But the anthropologist's emotionalism ultimately leads her astray when she befriends an Iraqi woman named Adiliah.



John Lamb

The Human Terrain.

Desperate to understand the Iraqi woman's mysteries, Mabry flouts her role as an anthropological observer, putting down her notebook and trying to convince the veiled Adiliah that the hijab is a form of male oppression. Where Mabry really runs into trouble, though, is when — frantic to retain Adiliah's trust — she keeps secret information that ultimately results in the death of one of her colleagues.

Directed by Lori Adams, *The Human Terrain* asks a lot of its female lead. Melissa Gerth, who gives a nuanced, powerful performance as Mabry, switching fluidly between interrogation and flashback scenes, is onstage for the entire performance. Her transitions



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are aided in no small part by John C. Stark's effective set design, which features a generalized desert background and an interrogation room that moves thrillingly up- and downstage depending on the scene. (That said, the set does move a lot, leading to some awkward transitions as Gerth moves from one scene to the other, speaking lines as she walks back into the interrogation room to sit down, etc.)

As Captain Alford — arguably the show's most fully formed government or military role — B. Weller performs with a marvelous blend of steely resolve and forthright humility. Similarly, Wendy Greenwood is impressive as Adiliah, willing to accept the inexplicable and marveling at "the American need to say something."

Although the other characters in the play are somewhat two dimensional, the rest of the cast handles them admirably, with particularly fine work from Dawn Campbell as government interrogator, Kate, and Taylor Campbell as Mabry's soldier-friend, Detty. As the invective-spewing grunt Harrison, John Clark is an effective foil for Mabry, and newcomer Antonio Mosley is integral to one of the show's most dramatic scenes as Kemal, the Arabic-speaking would-be suicide bomber.

Ultimately, the choices faced by Mabry aren't nearly so complicated as the work presents them to be. Nevertheless, her flawed generosity and naivety raise many questions about how we retain our humanity in times of war and the limits of human sympathy. Like its protagonist, *Human Terrain* is by no means a perfect work, and in some respects the play tries to do too much, featuring an abstract (and visually beautiful) ending that feels tacked-on — overemphasizing the play's half-formed notions about the mystery of the veil.

But like the rest of the play, this too will give you something to hash over for days to come.

The Human Terrain

Through September 14 at Fontbonne University Fine Arts Theatre, 6800 Wydown Boulevard. Tickets are \$25 to \$30. Call 314-719-8060 or click [here](#).

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