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Theatre News Around St. Louis

"Human Terrain" At Mustard Seed Shows The "Human" Vs. "Humane" Aspects Of War



<https://stagedoorstl.files.wordpress.com/2014/09/human-wendy.jpeg>
Wendy Greenwood and Melissa Gerth in Mustard Seed's "Human Terrain."

The Human Terrain System is an actual U.S. Army program designed to "improve the military's ability to understand the highly complex local socio-cultural environment in the areas where they are deployed." Easier said than done. It also aims to assist the U.S. government in understanding foreign countries prior to engagements in said region. The powerful play at Mustard Seed Theatre, "Human Terrain," shows how the concerned people hired to carry out the program often are the only people with the humanity to truly understand those cultures.

Playwright Jennifer Blackmer has fictionalized such an encounter set in Fallujah, Iraq during a campaign set in 2007 and 2008. As the play opens, a scientist with a large aeronautics corporation is being questioned as to her actions as an HTS specialist during her time in Iraq. Knowing the language and having an understanding about a much of the culture and beliefs of the area, we flashback to her time there where she has befriended an Iraqi woman. The question comes down to whether she allowed this woman, Adiliah, certain information about imminent dangers to her and her

community. In a terse and colorful manner, her interactions with the U.S. military and her friendship with this woman are explored during her time there and the big question of when does military action trump humane response and vice-versa.

Melissa Gerth is emotionally powerful as the scientist, Mabry. Her mix of compassion for the people she thinks she understands and her loyalty to her country becomes a volatile combination. As the interrogator, Kate, Dawn Campbell treads a thin line. She is tough-as-nails but we can see an occasional slight crack in her methodology. A remarkable performance by Wendy Greenwood as Adiliah transforms this play into a stark reality. She is nothing short of incredible in manner and language as she tightropes on the edge of friendship and suspicion.



(<https://stagedoorstl.files.wordpress.com/2014/09/human-boy.jpeg>)

Melissa Gerth and Antonio Mosley in "Human Terrain" at Mustard Seed Theatre.

B. Weller also shines as a ramrod Army captain who begrudgingly accepts Mabry as a "civilian" counterpart to his command in Fallujah. He also is a stern taskmaster who occasionally displays a weakness for the human terrain program. John Clark and Taylor Campbell turn in nice work as soldiers who show both the compassion and mistrust of Mabry and what she is trying to accomplish. Rounding out the cast is a strong performance from Antonio Mosley as a young Iraqi who plays an integral part as the plot unfolds.

Director Lori Adams has brought a great deal of strength to the script with her compassion for the characters and striking a chord by showing the difference between the Human Terrain System and the humanity being implored by Mabry and probably others of her kind in these war torn countries. She is ably assisted with a great set design by John Stark and equally effective lighting design by Michael Sullivan. Making it a true family affair, Jane Sullivan brings a stark reality with her costumes and Zoe Sullivan has designed a powerful sound design.

Artistic Director Deanna Jent and the cast and crew of "Human Terrain" can be proud of this- their season opener. It bodes well for a season that continues with a replay of last year's Circle Award winning a cappella musical, "All Is Calm" in November and two more plays in 2015. Call Mustard Seed Theatre at 314-719-8060 or online at mustardseedtheatre.com for tickets or more information. "Human Terrain" plays through September 14th.

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