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by **Chris Gibson** September 4 <http://www.broadwayworld.com/st-louis/article/BWW-Reviews-Mustard-Seed-Theatres-Powerful-Production-of-THE-HUMAN-TERRAIN-20140904>



The Human Terrain System is a military initiative designed to utilize the research capabilities of individuals in areas where there are conflicts in order to forge a better understanding of the population of a region by gathering sociocultural information. For example, the intrepid protagonist of playwright Jennifer Blackmer's work, *The Human Terrain*, is a civilian anthropologist who's been shipped to Fallujah, Iraq (circa 2007-2008). It's her job to attempt to figure out, through intelligence data drawn from contacts, the issues that are driving the local people to commit acts of aggression directed at each other and the military presence that resides there. But, doing so requires her to gain the trust of individuals while also remaining loyal to her country. It's a fine line and a slippery slope to tread, and this powerful and effective production by Mustard Seed Theatre reveals the moral and ethical dilemmas faced by participants in this program.

Melissa Gerth is exceptional as Mabry, the anthropologist, who takes on the mission, but finds herself having to compromise at every turn. When the play begins she's being interrogated about her role in the death of a US soldier (the likable and engaging Taylor Campbell as Detty) during a suicide bombing attack. A steely woman named Kate, well played by Dawn Campbell, is interviewing Mabry to see if her acts could be considered treasonous in nature. Gerth relates her experience abroad, beginning with her initial meeting with Captain Alford (the always reliable B. Weller), and her subsequent encounters with the veiled and educated Adiliah (a warm and concerned performance by [Wendy Greenwood](#)). Along the way she actually diffuses a volatile situation with a potential young bomber named Kemal (nice work by Antonio Mosley), and deals with the deep seated anger and prejudices displayed by soldiers, exemplified by Harrison (an effective [John Clark](#)).

Director [Lori Adams](#) does superlative work here in drawing out realistic performances, and for maintaining a constant state of tension that really drives this compelling piece of theatre. She's aided in her efforts by the brilliant mobile scenic design of [John Stark](#), character-fitting costumes (Jane Sullivan), dramatic lighting (Michael Sullivan), believable props (Meg Brinkley), solid sound design (Zoe Sullivan) and natural

appearing combat movements (Shaun Sheley). Adams and the cast also benefits from the assistance of Laila Abdo and Ahmed Al-Dulaimi, who act as language and cultural advisors.

Mustard Seed Theatre's premiere of *The Human Terrain* is smartly conceived and executed, and it absolutely demands your time and attendance (playing now through September 14, 2014). This involving drama will make you think and, maybe rethink, how our government should approach future conflicts (and current ones) in an effort to quell terrorists activities and tribal outbreaks.

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