

Arts Theatre

Balloons in Fallujah



Snipers, civilians and a circus clown were among those who witnessed the horrors of the 2004 siege.

Jonathan Holmes explains how his play lets their voices be heard

In a stifling boardroom in east London, a high-ranking British soldier, who bears a strong resemblance to the actor Sam Neill, is not happy. He expresses his unhappiness impeccably, without a hint of anger. Its subject is the conduct of the siege of Fallujah several months previously, in which excessive force had been used by US troops. The city had been almost destroyed and a difficult situation brought to the brink of civil war.

The soldier – let us call him General Sam – has arrived, by helicopter and on condition of anonymity, to explain his views to a group of conflict-resolution specialists; I'm there as a fly on the wall. He makes the scale of the US "cock-up" perfectly clear. He is equally clear on what would have been the preferable option, which comes down to talking to people instead of bombing them. This, apparently, was not an option entertained by the American high command, one of whom referred to the enemy in Fallujah as "Satan".

This audience with General Sam in the summer of 2005 was the first of many conversations I had with those involved in the sieges of Fallujah. I'd begun harvesting eyewitness accounts while travelling to war zones across the globe, making a film about those who risk their lives practising conflict resolution. In the process, I had heard of some of the extraordinary people helping in Fallujah.

Their accounts did not often contradict one another, regardless of whether the speaker was an American sniper or the relative of one of his victims. The facts were not in question; they were simply unknown outside Iraq. On many occasions, the testimonies I gathered were the result of several people talking passionately to one another in one room; the theatricality

of these situations was gripping. The focus was so intense, and the expression so economical. From that first encounter in a claustrophobic boardroom, I began to think of the result of this work as a play.

Jo Wilding, another interviewee, is now a barrister. Three years ago, she travelled on her own to Fallujah as an independent activist, both to act as a witness and to assist in the delivery of medical supplies. While in the city, she was kidnapped by local militia, later to be released. The ambulance she was travelling in was shot at, and she was able to report firsthand the atrocities committed by the occupying forces. After being ejected from the country by the Americans, she collected herself and returned, this time with a circus, Circus2Iraq, in which she performed as a clown – a logical action for an astonishing woman whose first response to being kidnapped was to distract the kidnapper by making balloon animals. As with General Sam, the straight-talking Baghdad vicar who had accompanied him and the courageous, chain-smoking Iraqi aid workers, here was a personality whose magnetism and bravery matched her heroic actions.

It became clear that not only the story of Fallujah needed to be told, but also the stories of the people doing the telling. I wanted the accounts of witnesses to some of the most serious crimes committed during an atrocious war to be heard by audiences unaware, in the main, of those crimes. It seemed that only live performance could fully capture the simple symmetry of this dynamic. Horror has become a formula; I wanted to restore a sense of immediacy. I turned the testimonies I had gathered verbatim into a play, following a Canadian journalist called Sasha as she listened to eyewitnesses to the siege. I called the play *Fallujah*.

'The theatricality of these situations was gripping' ... installation art by set designers Lucy and Jorge Orta, which will accompany Holmes's play

Now, in a sunlit rehearsal room on Brick Lane, actors Harriet Walter (as Sasha), Imogen Stubbs (Jo) and the rest of the cast are bringing *Fallujah* to life. The play's journey here has been longer than we'd expected and full of detours. At one stage, we were set for a West End opening; at another we thought we'd never find a venue. A year ago, I was seriously considering selling the flat I'd just spent 10 years saving up to buy; weeks later, generous individuals were sending in cheques. I received support from unexpected quarters – from playwright Michael Kustow, producer Peter Brook, the actors Fiona Shaw and Joanna Lumley, the *Young Vic* and the ICA. In stark contrast, other, less renowned theatre producers never returned my calls and the Arts Council rejected the project twice, firstly for being under-funded and secondly for – you guessed it – having attracted too much funding.

Less than a mile from the stuffy room in which my first interview with General Sam took place, the words of doctors, soldiers, aid workers, clerics and civilians who were simply caught in the crossfire are to be heard. After two years of preparation, it is the impressions of their eccentric splinters of humanity that linger with me: Jo, playing with her handkerchief while waiting for an ambulance; Rana, an Iraqi civilian, laughing as she said that "if I get one person out, even if I lose my life I won't lose anything because I've already saved the life of one person".

And General Sam, back in the boardroom, cool in the midsummer heat, finishing his calculated dissection of American error. What, someone asks him, should we be doing now? Sam leans back. "We should be listening," he says, "and paying attention" ●

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Fallujah opens at the Old Truman Brewery, London, tonight. Box office: 0870 162 0295; www.fallujah.co.uk