

Fallujah: Sympathy alone is not enough

By Paul Bond
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Fallujah, written and directed by Jonathan Holmes, at The Old Truman Brewery, Brick Lane, London E1, until June 2, 2007

The city of Fallujah has been a focus of popular opposition to the US-led invasion and occupation of Iraq. Shortly after they occupied the city in 2003, US forces opened fire on a peaceful demonstration against their presence, killing at least 13 civilians and wounding 100 more. A centre of guerrilla attacks against the occupying forces, Fallujah was subject to repeated raids throughout 2003. Despite widespread arrests, resistance continued to grow within the city.

In March 2004, four American contractors were killed by local people shouting, “Down with the occupation” and “Down with America.” The contractors, ostensibly civilians, were working for Blackwater Security. Film of the event showed a US Department of Defence ID card among the wreckage, suggesting that the men may have had an intelligence role. Using this attack as its pretext, the US army launched a full-scale siege and invasion of the city in November 2004. The punitive onslaught killed civilians and destroyed the city’s infrastructure. Citizens returning a year later found a city 70 percent bombed out, lacking water or medical supplies. Residents referred to Fallujah as “a big prison.”

It is this period that writer/director Jonathan Holmes has sought to portray in *Fallujah*. He deserves credit for this. A serious artistic engagement with such pressing political matters is overdue. It is significant, too, that the work has attracted performers of the calibre of Imogen Stubbs, Harriet Walter and Dominic Jephcott. As such, I went to see the play wanting it to work rather better than it in fact did.

Fallujah is certainly ambitious. Seven actors perform in promenade style (without a specific stage area, but through a space they share with the audience) around an art installation by Lucy and Jorge Orta. Intercut with the live scenes are filmed interviews with three other characters, and the whole is set to a score by composer Nitin Sawhney.

Each of the three component parts of the play (script, installation, music) is also intended to stand alone. The installation—an ambulance, hospital equipment, body bags, and rows of standing figures, stencilled with slogans such as “1st Victim—Truth,” “Force is Weapon of Weak,” and “Force de la Raison—Raison de la Force”—works better as stage set than as an independent artwork. Sawhney’s score, too, often sinks into the bland, hackneyed or cute (“Star Spangled Banner” arranged for toy piano).

The script is what Holmes calls a “testimony play”—made from the edited testimonies of participants on the ground. Holmes has taken the words of many participants (British and American soldiers, politicians, humanitarian aid workers and journalists, as well as Iraqi fighters, civilians and medics) and edited them into dramatic vignettes.

The play begins with an interview on *Al Jazeera* by Condoleezza Rice (Chipo Chung) prior to the invasion. We then follow three broad plotlines through the bombardment and occupation to the return of the city’s population in 2005. Sasha (Walter) and Rana (Shereen Martineau) are attempting to establish the facts of what is going on from military sources, while Jo (Stubbs), an aid worker, is attempting to alleviate conditions on the ground.

The dramatic documenting of real voices has its strengths. The play is able to demonstrate the reality of occupation—the deliberate targeting of civilians, the way in which the occupying forces prevented civilians from leaving the city during the operation, the manner in which the US forces saw the action against Fallujah as collective punishment. Thanks to some fine performances, we get to see the impact of this devastation on the observers. Walter’s nausea at the horrors of the hospital and Stubbs’s helplessness in the face of military bureaucracy are both powerfully conveyed. This has earned the play some hostile reviews for its supposed “anti-Americanism” and “bias” from right-wing sources—which should be taken as a compliment.

Important as all this may be, however, the piece has its faults.

First, artistically it never quite gets beyond description and “docu-drama.” Promenade performance should bring the audience into the heart of the action. Here, the writing and direction allow this all too infrequently. When the invasion of the city begins, we experience the bombardment through a lengthy sequence of sound effects, played in the dark to footage of the bombings. It is less powerful than the footage alone, as if dramatic representation and imagination have broken down.

Occasionally, there are flashes of the form’s potential. An Iraqi gunman (Christopher Simpson), his face masked, slowly and menacingly clears a path through the audience at gunpoint. He is unhurried but evidently dangerous. It is an impressive moment, and all too rare. The audience is never engaged as participants in the way that the genre requires. Holmes seems most comfortable directing scenes outside of the promenade style—press conferences on raised stages, for example.

These failings are forgivable in themselves, but they are rooted in more substantial problems. Holmes appears torn between his desire for us to share the experience and his desire to show us his political understanding of events. But it is a lack of this understanding that ultimately weakens and undermines *Fallujah*.

Holmes is Associate Artist of the pacifist organisation Peace Direct, and took part in their 2005 seminar on “Learning from Fallujah.” Peace Direct talk of identifying and learning the lessons of Fallujah, but this does not mean addressing the underlying political and economic reasons for the invasion of Iraq. Indeed, Chris Townsend, Holmes’s colleague at Royal Holloway, University of London, writes in the programme that “prolonged meditation” on the illegal invasion of Iraq “is not, at this point and maybe never, going to be of much help to us.”

The Peace Direct document, “Learning from Fallujah: Lessons Identified 2003-2005,” takes the US invasion as an *accomplished fact*. The lessons it draws, the “unused options” it identifies that would allow for a more peaceful outcome, all follow directly from accepting the legitimacy of the regime established under the occupation.

This refusal to question *that which must be questioned above all else* also hampers Holmes’ ability to represent events in Fallujah. Relying on eyewitness testimony alone cannot substitute for a degree of historical and political insight and makes for a limited drama. For all the testimony we hear during the play about the treatment of

ordinary Iraqis by the occupying forces, for example, he seems to see the resistance as mostly the fault of mismanagement of the occupation by US forces and it goes largely unexplored.

“The world we live in,” Holmes writes in the programme, “elevates science and ‘rationality’ above art.” Science, though, “must inevitably suffer from doubts as to the reach of its truthfulness.... Ethical and aesthetic truths suffer no such limitations.” This standpoint is a long way from reality. We are hardly in a political climate that values either art or science. A serious approach to either will entail a vigorous defence of both from the prevailing ethos encouraged by the bourgeoisie and its media, not a counterposing of art as “victim” to a falsely elevated science.

Holmes’s casual dismissal of the extent of science’s “truthfulness” is matched by his uncritical assertion of the unlimited truthfulness of the ethical and the aesthetic. But this means that he never questions the liberal-pacifist “ethics” he subscribes to, or how this affects his aesthetic and artistic vision—including, for example, his selection and use of eyewitness testimony. Such an uncritical approach does not lend itself to serious art, particularly when one is seeking to give expression to such complex issues as an imperialist occupation and the resistance that this has inspired.

Fallujah has value in its representation of the horrors of the invasion, but Holmes’s piece holds out as the de facto alternative those (represented by Stubbs, above all) who are involved in “conflict resolution” and doing humanitarian work on the ground. This is, frankly, not good enough, particularly when a drama sets out to make a political statement as this one does. It leaves the observer’s own conceptions unchallenged, particularly given that those who will see this play will be mostly those already opposed to the war and occupation.

Chris Townsend writes in the programme, “One of the great failings of artists’ critiques of the Iraq war has been a lack of analysis.” Unfortunately, that is also largely the case here.

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