

Theater review

Betrayed: An American liberal looks at the disaster he helped bring about in Iraq

By Richard Adams
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Written by George Packer, directed by Andre Verderame. Presented by The Whitmore Eclectic at The Lyric Theatre, Los Angeles. October 13, 2011—November 13.

Betrayal presupposes trust. And one of the many hard truths alleged by *Betrayed* is that no trust is more misplaced than that of those who choose to assist an imperial invader. Theirs is the reward of all collaborators: to be equally despised by both occupiers and “natives.” Such is the fate of the three Iraqi translators featured in this play by George Packer, based on his March 2007 *New Yorker* story of the same name.

Packer was one of the most vocal of the countless American liberal journalists who justified and encouraged the 2003 neo-colonial invasion of Iraq in the name of democratic and human rights. If he later took a critical look at post-war Iraq, he was studying a country that had suffered horribly from the consequences of the policies and actions he advocated and for which he shared responsibility. Not everyone has amnesia.

Laith (Peter Sabri), a Kurdish Sunni, Adnan (Pasha Bocarie), a nominal Shia, and Intisar (Aliah Whitmore), a secular woman, are composites drawn from Iraqis whom Packer interviewed about their experience of working with and for the Americans. All three are secular and mainly self-educated. Adnan learned English by surreptitiously listening to the BBC and Voice of America, and reading Colin Wilson’s book, *The Outsider*. Intisar’s English was polished by university courses in English Literature and poring over the novels of Emily Brontë. Laith claims to have learned his American vernacular from the lyrics of heavy metal’s Metallica.

The character of Laith is the closest to his original: a Kurdish Sunni named Firas (one of the very few Iraqis who allowed Packer to use his real name) who initially worked as an Army translator before moving into a position in the Green Zone. Adnan is more of a composite, who, under the Baathists, scraped by as a street vendor selling books and cigarettes in a local bazaar. Intisar is presumably a fictional construct, a willfully modern woman furious at the barriers to her life aspirations raised by deep sexism and strictly enforced Islamic custom. Intisar’s whimsical yet potent dream is to finally be able to ride a bicycle unharassed and unmolested through her own city.

The brilliant acting of Sabri, Pasha Bocarie and Aliah Whitmore imbues these characters with such humanity, bleak fatalistic humor and day-to-day courage that our hearts break for them. Their tragedy is that, in their hopes for a better, richer, fuller life, they put their trust in the American invaders, genuinely believing that the arrival of American troops and diplomats would transform the police state in which they long suffocated into something new, safer and free. The shame is the way in which the Americans so cavalierly dismiss their concerns for personal safety, fail to appreciate their talents and insight, subject them to constant suspicion, treat them all as potential terrorists or spies, and, in the end,

abandon them to the vicious sectarians who rule their neighborhoods.

(The brutal fate of the translators is simply further proof that the invasion never had anything to do with freeing anyone from a dictatorship, but with the control and seizure of Iraq’s oil reserves. What Packer and his co-apologists provided was the liberal, humane veneer necessary to help lull US public opinion to sleep.)

In the world of this play, and presumably in the world of the ongoing American Occupation, the characters’ disillusionment feels inevitable. Their growing resentment unsettles American audiences because it reminds the latter that the cruelty, indifference, destruction and depredations done to Iraq and all Iraqis was done—and is still being done—in their name. Privileged by hindsight, we want to warn them to steer clear.

Preserving some shred of dignity for the American presence is the gradual transformation of Prescott (Andrew Patton) from slogan-spouting USAID newbie, blithely eager to bring all those good old “American values” to a freshly liberated people, into an angry, disillusioned champion of these discarded collaborators. We witness his gradual education about real life in the Red Zone—i.e., everything outside the Green Zone, otherwise known as Baghdad—and his mounting fury at his superiors.

When we first meet Adnan and Laith, they are holed up in the near-abandoned Palestine Hotel, marked men, scrambling to make contact with anyone outside Iraq who can help them escape before they’re killed. The remainder of the play shows us how they got there. Laith first connects with the Americans when he stumbles onto a military checkpoint at which a body-armored Soldier (Robert Fabiani) is trying to hold back a press of frantic Iraqi women waving papers containing urgent requests for action or answers from someone, anyone in power behind the barricades. The Soldier’s pathetic demands that the women speak English—punctuated with swings of his assault rifle—threaten to turn violent until Laith intervenes, using his heavy-metal flavored language skills.

The institutional paranoia of the U.S. Occupation is embodied by RSO (Dustin Seavey), the Regional Security Officer, clearly a Blackwater contractor who sees every Iraqi as a likely enemy. Armed with thigh-slung sidearm and a lie detector, dressed in ominous black, guided solely by protocol, ruthlessly and heartlessly applied, RSO is inquisitor, judge, and potential executioner.

Intisar at first defies the custom enforcers of her once-fashionable and “Westernized” neighborhood by refusing to don the hijab but eventually, for self-protection, begins covering. The moment in which we see her pull the black cloth up over her head is filled with such pain and such compromise of her core that we loathe both the narrow-minded fundamentalists who insist on this submission and the parochially stupid

Occupiers who've forced her to this pass. Despite the threats against her life, she continues to sneak to work in the Green Zone until that final day when, either through disillusion with the Americans or rebellion against her countrymen, she leaves her veil behind.

The news of Intisar's murder comes like a blow to the plexus. Only Adnan, risking his life, is willing to go to the morgue to identify and retrieve her body from a warehouse piled with decomposing corpses. Intisar's family is far too scared to do it themselves.

The Ambassador (Craig Braun who shares the role with Tim Dezarn) is a thinly veiled John Negroponte, who became Ambassador after the Coalition Authority, ruled by the viceroy Brennan, completed the charade of returning Iraqi sovereignty to handpicked former exiles. The role is a portrait of a career diplomat who knows that the way to the top means keeping his superiors happy and avoiding getting entangled in the messy weeds of day-to-day occupation. Pontius Pilate-like, he washes his hands of responsibility over the refusal to issue special security badges to the translators so they don't have to wait in line at the Green Zone checkpoints, watched by spotters who add the translators' names to their death lists. As Laith puts it: "Sometimes, I feel like we're standing in line for a ticket, waiting to die."

The Ambassador's refusal to hear Prescott's pleas on behalf of the left-behind translators reveals the underlying truth of why the United States cannot disengage from its Iraqi conquest: to admit that the Iraqi men and women who worked for the Americans aren't safe in their own country means that the United States failed. Rather than admit failure, the Occupation grinds on and on even as its helpmates get ground to dust by the juggernaut of sectarian violence.

The acting in this play is uniformly sterling—as compelling as any I've ever seen. Not so the physical production. Edited video clips of war-torn Baghdad are inherently interesting and valuable as historical markers, but they're projected on a pair of isolated elevated screens with little effort to integrate them into the fabric of the play. First we watch the video, then we watch the scenes; another clip, a few more scenes, another clip. This lack of organic staging is reinforced by barely functional sets—the USAID office, the Ambassador's "throne," a hotel room, a cramped folding table at which the translators work. Powerful scenes end up being crammed into unnecessarily restricted playing areas, imposing a postage-stamp sensibility on a relatively big stage. Likewise, the lighting is merely sufficient to illuminate the action.

As powerfully written as this play is, the shame of American complicity in the suffering of these translators that pervades Packer's script must be placed in the context of his own role in ginning up the invasion of Iraq. Bill Keller, who recently resigned as executive editor of the *New York Times*, included Packer in what Keller dubbed the "I Can't Believe I'm a Hawk" club of liberal opinion-makers. Other members included the *Times*'s own Thomas Friedman, along with the disreputable and discredited Andrew Sullivan and Christopher Hitchens.

Prominent in the Packer archives is his long March 3, 2003, article in the *New York Times Magazine*. At a time when the war drums were being thumped hard by the Bush administration and on the pages of the daily *New York Times* (remember Judith Miller's "stories"?), most Americans were desperate for any guidance in what to think about the administration's mounting call to arms. Packer's essay provided what amounted to a primer on Iraqi aspirations. His article, "Dreaming of Democracy," offered a sympathetic portrait of the Iraqis in exile who participated in the State Department-sponsored Future of Iraq Project.

These included, among others, Ahmed Chalabi and Kanan Makiya, better known by the pseudonym Samir al-Kalil, the author of *Republic of Fear*, a study of the Hussein regime. In 2003, Makiya was a professor at Brandeis; his work on *Republic of Fear* had transformed him from being a self-described "Trotskyist" and advocate for Palestinian rights into an aspirational pro-imperialist liberal, sanguine if not eager for an

intervention by the United States. Packer sympathized. In his March 3 essay, he wrote:

"The Arab world is hopelessly sunk in corruption and popular discontent. Misrule and a culture of victimhood have left Arabs economically stagnant and prone to seeing their problems in delusional terms. The United States has contributed to the pathology by cynically shoring up dictatorships; Sept. 11 was one result. Both the Arab world and official American attitudes toward it need to be jolted out of their rut. **An invasion of Iraq would provide the necessary shock, and a democratic Iraq would become an example of change for the rest of the region.** [my emphasis] Political Islam would lose its hold on the imagination of young Arabs as they watched a more successful model rise up in their midst. The Middle East's center of political, economic and cultural gravity would shift from the region's theocracies and autocracies to its new, oil-rich democracy. And finally, the deadlock in which Israel and Palestine are trapped would end as Palestinians, realizing that their Arab backers were now tending their own democratic gardens, would accept compromise. By this way of thinking, the road to Damascus, Tehran, Riyadh and Jerusalem goes through Baghdad."

Two weeks later, Shock and Awe commenced.

I have not yet read Packer's latest book, *The Blood of Liberals*, a personal and familial memoir in which he examines the frustrated liberal ideals embraced by his father, grandfather, and himself. I cannot therefore assess how this play fits in with his own private reckoning with what he saw, what he reported, and what he once advocated. While his recent real-world efforts on behalf of those Iraqis who once worked with the Americans is laudatory, part of me can't help but consider this play and his recent work as penance for encouraging a catastrophic criminally initiated war. The millions of dead and maimed are a horrible price to pay for Americans and Arabs to be "jolted out of their rut," as Packer once hoped.

Betrayed, and plays like it, remind us that imperialist adventures are just another face of international capital's predations. It would be unfortunate if war fatigue keeps audiences away from such strong, vital theatre.

Kudos to the Whitmore Eclectic for bringing this powerful work to Los Angeles and investing it with such passion and heart.

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