

Two Into War

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The Independent

Paul Taylor

The Five Best Plays in London

This extraordinarily moving double bill asks searching questions about the ethics of war: In Fraser Grace's Gifts of War, Rachel Aspinwall gives an uncannily riveting performance, as a refugee from the Trojan conflict who intends to add the spice of stealthy revenge to the post-war party celebrations. The Retreating World, by Naomi Wallace, shows us life now and in the last decade through the eyes of an Iraqi pigeon-fancier. It's a privilege to attend such a theatrically excellent and morally bracing event.

Evening Standard

Fiona Mountford

Timely takes on how war damages ordinary lives

One of the few benefits of being a small, unfunded theatre, says Paul Higgins, artistic director of the ever-improving Latchmere, is the ability to respond quickly to current events. And thus, in Battersea, we come across what no major theatre in London has, as yet, seen fit to provide – the opportunity to reflect for an hour-and-a-half while the war machine rolls inexorably onwards around us.

What's on offer in this intimate space are two monologues, two still, small voices to set nations. The pieces are unconnected except in one vital respect: they both deal with the aftermath of war and the destruction of ordinary lives that conflict entails.

Fraser Grace's Gifts of War initially appears to be a humorous take on the aftermath of the siege of Troy, as the wives of the Greek heroes assemble in Athens and await the return of their victorious menfolk. This Homeric legend filtered through the Gucci lens of Footballers' Wives, and our impeccably groomed narrator, standing in a luxurious bathroom, sets the scene straightaway: "Penelope – yes, Penny! – says, 'Cocktail, anyone?'"

This is all phenomenally enjoyable stuff in Paul Bourne's spot-on production and Rachel Aspinwall has a ball with her role, spitting out the catty comments with relish. Gradually and chillingly, however, we realise that her graphic accounts of the fall of Troy couldn't possibly have been gleaned second hand. Absolutely compelling theatre.

The Retreating World, Naomi Wallace's look at the fallout from the Gulf War, thus has an extremely hard act to follow. It acquits itself honourably, not least because it underlines what becomes the first casualty of every conflict: accurate, meaningful accounting. "Five thousand children die a month because of this blockade. I will count to 5,000 and then you'll see how many it is – one, two, three..." says the former Iraqi conscript who is now having to sell his cherished doves and pigeons in exchange for food and medicine for his family.

War, the Latchmere reminds us so appositely, isn't just about tanks in a desert. It's about little people with no UN vote to barter, and that's the most terrifying fact of them all.

The Guardian,

Lyn Gardner

In the Retreating World, award-winning playwright Naomi Wallace goes to the heart of the matter once again. Far away from the glare of nightly news reports, she takes us to an Iraq we can only imagine: Ali, a pigeon fancier from Baghdad has come to give his first public talk in many years on his favourite hobby. But burdened with stories of a life and country devastated by years of sanctions and war, his attention turns to the ghosts who accompany his every step. At times horrific, at times hilarious, The Retreating World serves as a modern anthem for doomed youth. It is Naomi Wallace at her best, showing "what the playwright can achieve that the journalist cannot"