

# THE NEW YORKER

THE THEATRE

## SPOKESPEOPLE

*Off Broadway takes on war, gender, and race.*

by Hilton Als

JULY 7, 2008



Raffo, Lamm, and Sisto in “Palace of the End.” Photograph by Steve Pyke.

One hesitates to call the Canadian playwright Judith Thompson’s “Palace of the End” (an Epic Theatre Ensemble production, at Playwrights Horizons) a lyrical work, given its subject. Political pundits might be alienated by the idea of a hard-news story like the devastation in Iraq being treated in a poetic, “feminine” manner. But such is the power of Thompson’s real, if uneven, talent that even the chest-thumping newshounds who see the show may find themselves recalling that the earliest reports of man’s inhumanity to man took the form of poems, recited beside a crashing sea.

Still, it’s the sound of desert sand scraping against the throat—and the mind—that one hears in Thompson’s three monologues about lives laid waste by the wars in Iraq. The three actors are seated near one another on a small, sparse stage, each with his or her own distinct props and lighting. Lynndie (Teri Lamm)—who is based on the American soldier Lynndie England—is the first character we hear from. Dressed in fatigues, and speaking directly to the audience, she is a young, poorly educated, pregnant ex-Army officer who served in Iraq in 2003 and participated in the atrocities at the Abu Ghraib prison, which were recorded in a series of photographs that still haunt most Americans. Thompson’s Lynndie, however, has no real moral compunctions about what she has done to people who share neither her ethnicity nor her values. To her, the only remedy for “otherness” is to stamp it out. Lamm doesn’t play Lynndie as a hysteric with no mind of her own. Rather, she is as reasonable as any moderately personable young woman you might strike up a conversation with on a long-distance bus trip and forget about as soon as the journey is over. And that’s what makes her the worst kind of scary: her brand of evil is insidious, almost unrecognizable, and before you know it she has slimed your soul with her ideology of hate.

Indeed, you could say that “Palace of the End” is a play about ideologies gone awry—or about using ideology as a shield against the horror of truth. As the lights go down on Lynndie, they come up on Dr. David Kelly (the incredible

Rocco Sisto), a character based on the microbiologist and former United Nations weapons inspector who blew the whistle on Britain's trumped-up dossier on weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, before dying mysteriously—most likely by his own hand. Thompson's Kelly feels as if he had betrayed a kind of cosmic Hippocratic oath. Nothing he does can reverse the torture, mayhem, and grief in Iraq, and the disaster there digs into his heart like barbed wire. Unlike Lynn, he has never had the clinical detachment necessary to tolerate the pain of others.

"Palace of the End" is nicely directed by Daniella Topol, who works in an unobtrusive style that is as eerily flat as the light that shines on the play's characters. Topol leaves the poetic touches to Thompson, whose rhythmic language reaches its full flowering in the beautiful closing monologue, delivered by Nehrjas Al Saffarh (the immensely gifted Heather Raffo), a middle-class Iraqi woman who was tortured, along with her sons, under Saddam Hussein, and then died when her house was bombed by the United States, in the Gulf War. In Thompson's version of her life, Al Saffarh's belief in the power and wisdom of God is what sees her through the awful events that change her family forever. Dressed in a wraparound dress, occasionally flirting with the audience, Raffo plays Al Saffarh as a woman who has been defined by her economic and social class. What makes her a romantic—an ideologue—is her firm conviction that things will get better, somehow, somewhere.

As show-business survivors go, few are as graceful or as funny as the drag artist and singer Joey Arias. Despite the many pounds of transfiguring makeup, the multitude of wigs, and the numerous pairs of black stilettos and stockings he has acquired over time, Arias has managed to remain himself ever since he began performing—with the late German vocalist Klaus Nomi—in the late seventies. Arias first came to national attention in 1979, when he sang backup for David Bowie on "Saturday Night Live." It was the first time that many viewers had seen a male star of Bowie's calibre in a skirt, let alone in the presence of someone as outré, yet dignified, as Arias. And that's what has remained consistent throughout Arias's various incarnations. Whether he is "channelling," as he calls it, Billie Holiday or simply being his own diva—generally dressed in some version of Thierry Mugler bondage gear—Arias always maintains a certain natural dignity. He's a clown, but, like all great clowns, he takes his technique seriously enough not only to control the joke but to make himself the proud brunt of it.

For the past thirty years, Arias has performed in New York, mostly at small downtown venues, such as the now defunct Bar D'oro, where he sang in the style of Billie Holiday. Attired in a form-fitting gown, with satin gloves and dangling earrings, Arias resembled Holiday, as she appeared on the cover of her last album, "Lady in Satin," and he drew his fans' attention both to Holiday's abstract phrasing and to her queenly masochism. Strolling through the audience, Arias had a hauteur that was of a piece with his desire to be loved. To Holiday's high, hornlike tone he added the hard-won self-knowledge of an out gay man.

He brings that same self-awareness—an unbitchy irony—to his fast and fascinating new show, "Arias with a Twist" (at HERE), conceived with the master puppeteer Basil Twist. Onstage, Arias first appears strapped to a wheel. He's singing Led Zeppelin's "Kashmir," and it's unlike any version of the song you've heard before, because Arias and Twist place it in a new context: Arias has been abducted by aliens, who admire his bustier-clad, high-heeled form. The aliens are wide-eyed, ghostly puppets, who spin Arias on the wheel—or "probe table"—and pump him for information about life on earth, as he claims to be a virgin and pleads with them not to "pop my cherry." Soon, Arias is released into a kind of psychedelic rain forest, where he eats mushrooms, talks to the audience about his sex life, and performs a ballad titled "Jungle of Eden," before reverting to what he has always been: a chanteuse whose sidesplits and potty mouth may keep him out of the Rainbow Room but will forever win him a place in our straight and queer hearts.

☞ "Too Much Light Makes the Baby Go Blind" (at the Kraine), an attempt to stage thirty plays in sixty minutes, is performed two nights a week by a group of some half-dozen actors who call themselves the New York NeoFuturists. ("T.M.L.M.T.B.G.B." originated in Chicago, in 1988, and since then has continued in various forms both there and here.) The nod to the Italian Futurists and to Dada is intentional. Upon entering the theatre, you are given a name tag—with a random word on it—and within minutes you are treated to a surrealistic onslaught of playacting, the emphasis on "play." Each of the performers gives all that he or she has to the show, and to the individual plays, none of which exceed five minutes. How do they choose which plays to perform? They don't. The audience calls out its selections from the program. On the evening that I was there, the most satisfying pieces were "One Woman Show," by Sarah Levy, in which the adorable Cara Francis illustrated a series of one-liners about twenty-something women, using nearly every part of her body and a lot of rueful anxiety; and "Wheat from Chaff," by Joey Rizzolo, in which Kevin R.

Free, a young black actor, confronted the audience with evidence of its racism. Not everyone in the house made it through the show. The New York Neo-Futurists say that their work is not about creating illusions in the theatre. What they do create is an entertaining forum for discussing the issues—race, sexuality, privilege—that always get New Yorkers steaming, especially in the summer heat. ♦

To get more of *The New Yorker's* signature mix of politics, culture and the arts: **Subscribe Now**