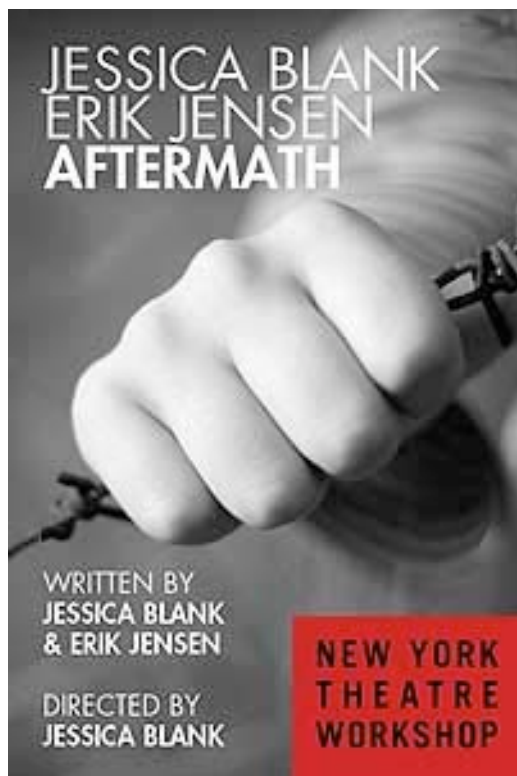




WORKS ON TOUR / 2011-2012



JESSICA BLANK & ERIK JENSEN **AFTERMATH**

The New York Theatre Workshop Production

Written by Jessica Blank & Erik Jensen

Directed by Jessica Blank

Presented in Association with Amnesty International

Produced in Association with ArKtype / Thomas O. Kriegsmann

March 20, 2003. A date that the ordinary people of Iraq will never forget. A day that changed their lives forever. In June 2008, the award-winning creators of *THE EXONERATED* were commissioned by New York Theatre Workshop to travel to Jordan to find out firsthand what happened to the Iraqi civilians as a result of the events that began on that fateful day. They interviewed some 35 people—a cross-section of lives interrupted—who fled the chaos and violence that befell Iraqi society for the relative safety of Jordan. Following the visit to Amman, Jessica and Erik crafted their conversations with the Iraqis and turned them into an unforgettable theatrical event.

WORLD PREMIERE - September '09

New York Theatre Workshop, New York, NY

Upcoming 2010 Tour Dates:

July 8-17 LIFT Festival / Old Vic, London, UK
July 19-25 Galway Arts Festival, Galway, Ireland
October 4-6 MAC Creteil, France

October 7-9 Le Manège, Maubeuge, France
October 21-24 Amsterdam Schouwburg, Holland
October 25-31 ArtsEmerson, Boston, MA

CREATIVE TEAM:

PRODUCTION

Scenic Design - Richard Hoover
Costume Design - Gabriel Berry
Lighting Design - David Lander
Sound Design, Original Music - David Robbins

CAST (Subject to Change)

| | |
|---------------------------------|-----------------------|
| SHAHID Fajer Al-Kaisi | ASAD Daoud Heidami |
| YASSAR Amir Arison | RAFIQ Laith Nakli |
| BASIMA Leila Buck | FOUAD Omar Koury |
| FADILAH Maha Chehlaoui | NAIMAH Rasha Zamamiri |
| ABDUL-ALIYY Demosthenes Chrysan | |

PRODUCING PARTNERS:

This production was developed in part during a residency with the Theatre Department at Dartmouth College, in collaboration with Dartmouth's Hopkins Center for the Arts. *AFTERMATH* was made possible by the generous support of The MAP Fund, a program of Creative Capital supported by the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation and the Rockefeller Foundation. Special thanks is due to the Ford Foundation for their continued support of this production.

Bios

Jessica Blank & Erik Jensen are writers, actors, and directors. Together, they are authors of *THE EXONERATED*, a play based on interviews they conducted with over 40 wrongfully convicted death row inmates across the United States. In 2002, Erik and Jessica co-directed *The Exonerated* at the Actors' Gang Theater. That production was nominated for five Ovation Awards and 3 NAACP Awards; it won the Ovation for Best World Premiere Play. Bob Balaban's New York (Culture Project) and London (Riverside Studios) productions of *The Exonerated* won Lucille Lortel, Outer Critics Circle, Drama Desk, Fringe First and Herald Angel Awards, and were nominated for the Hull-Warriner Award and the John Gassner Playwriting Award. *The Exonerated* has also received awards from Amnesty International, the American Bar Association, the National Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers, Death Penalty Focus, and Court TV, and was listed by the New York Times as "the number 1 play of 2002." It has been translated into Spanish, French, Italian and Japanese, and was made into an award-winning movie for Court TV adapted by Jessica and Erik and starring Susan Sarandon, Danny Glover, Brian Dennehy, Aidan Quinn and Delroy Lindo.



As an actor **Jessica Blank** has appeared on television in *Rescue Me*, HBO's *Bored to Death*, *The Bronx Is Burning*, *Law and Order: Criminal Intent*, *One Life to Live*, and *Guiding Light*; film credits include *The Namesake* (dir. Mira Nair), *The Exonerated* (dir. Bob Balaban), *You're Nobody Till Somebody Kills You* (exec. prod. Spike Lee), and the indies *On the Road With Judas* (Sundance 2007) and *Undermind*. She has acted in theaters throughout New York City, at the Sundance Film Lab, and internationally at the Dublin Theater Festival. Her play *Liberty City* (co-written with April Yvette Thompson) ran Off-Broadway at New York Theater Workshop in 2008 (with Jessica directing) and was nominated for the Lucille Lortel, Drama Desk, and Outer Critics Circle awards. Jessica's first novel, *Almost Home*, was published by Hyperion in 2007, was optioned by Jon Bon Jovi's production company, with Jessica and Erik adapting the screenplay, and is slated to go into production in 2010. Her second novel, *Karma for Beginners*, was published by Hyperion in August 2009, and was recently nominated by the American Library Association as a 2009 Best Book for Young Adults.

Erik Jensen has co-starred in over twenty feature films, including *Black Knight* and *The Love Letter*. He recently starred in *Virtuality*, a FOX telefilm by *Battlestar Galactica* creator Ron Moore. He starred opposite John Turturro and Oliver Platt as NY Yankee Thurman Munson in the ESPN miniseries *The Bronx Is Burning*, and has appeared on television regularly on *CSI*, *Law and Order*, and *Love Monkey*, as well as *Alias* and *Century City*, among others. He co-starred in the TBS pilot *The Dark* (dir. Walter Hill), and was a member of the acting ensemble for the 2006 Sundance Filmmakers' Lab and the 2007 Sundance Theater Lab. Notable stage appearances include Arthur Kopit's *Y2K* (dir. Bob Balaban) and Terrance McNally's *Corpus Christi* at Manhattan Theater Club, *The Good Negro* at the Public Theater, and as free-speech martyr Lenny Bruce in *Schmucks* at the Wilma Theater. He is also at work on *Main Street*, an independent documentary about corporate farming's impact on small-town America. Jessica and Erik's writing has been published in several magazines and journals, including *The Believer*, *The Dramatist*, *Another Magazine*, and *Theater History Studies*. *Living Justice*, their book on the making of *The Exonerated*, was published in 2005 by Simon and Schuster. Their work has been supported by the Ford Foundation, the Soros Foundation, the New York State Council on the Arts, the MAP Fund/Creative Capital, and the New World Foundation. They are developing a play based on the writings of rock critic Lester Bangs, in conjunction with the Lester Bangs estate. They are married and live in Brooklyn with their dogs Zoey and Yoda.

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL is the world's largest human rights movement. It seeks to hold states accountable for human rights violations on the basis of its impartial research, lobbying, campaigning action and advocacy. Amnesty is thrilled to be associated with *Aftermath*, which highlights our work campaigning for a fair and effective asylum system. Amnesty has a proud history of working with musicians, directors, actors, comedians and others in the artistic community. These supporters have added their impassioned voices to millions of Amnesty members worldwide in the demand for dignity, fairness, freedom, justice and truth.

Add your voice. Join Amnesty. www.amnesty.org.uk



THOMAS O. KRIEGSMANN / ArkType is a producer and curator who founded ArkType in 2006 toward the long-term development, production and touring of internationally based performance work and curating. His past work in the U.S. includes projects with Brooklyn Academy of Music (Next Wave Festival), Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, Performance Space 122 (Fresh Terrain Festival of Performance Theater, Austin, TX), Chicago Shakespeare Theater, Hartford Stage Company (Brand:New Festival of New Works), Actors Theater of Louisville, New York Theater Workshop, Mark Taper Forum, Apollo Theater, The Culture Project and Lincoln Center. His acclaimed work as producer has been seen across Europe, Africa, East Asia, North and South America and Australia. Mr. Kriegsmann proudly began his work in the production and development of emerging ensembles and is currently represented on tours worldwide with Yael Farber & The Farber Foundry (South Africa); Peter Brook / CICT (Paris); Phantom Limb (Erik Sanko & Jessica Grindstaff, New York); Jo Strømgren Kompani (Norway); Jay Scheib (Boston, MA); CiRCA (Brisbane); Rude Mechs (Austin, TX); T.P.O. (Italy); Collectif Acrobatique du Tangier (Morocco); Circa (Australia); "Aurélia's Oratorio" directed by Victoria Thiérree-Chaplin (France), as well as programming the annual Spiegeltent season at South Street Seaport, New York City and producing the Ringling International Arts Festival in collaboration with the Baryshnikov Arts Center in Sarasota, FL. (www.arktype.org)

GABRIEL BERRY (Costume Designer) designs costumes for theater, opera and dance. Recent projects include Richard Foreman's Idiot Savant and Brandon Jacobs-Jenkins' Neighbors at the New York Public Theater, Sarah Ruhl's Passion Play for Epic Theater and Yoshiko Chuma's A-C-E ONE for New York's River to River Festival. Awards include a silver medal from the Prague Quadrennial for her contribution to Experimental Theater and an Obie for sustained excellence.

RICHARD HOOVER (Scenic Designer) Broadway: Not About Nightingales (Tony Award), After the Fall (Roundabout Theatre). Off-Broadway: Bat Boy (Union Square Theater), Embedded (Public Theater), Speaking In Tongues (Roundabout Theatre), Suburbia (Second Stage). Regional: Hamlet, Death of A Salesman, Caroline or Change (The Guthrie Theater); Diary of Anne Frank (Steppenwolf). Film & TV: Soulmen; Dead Man Walking; Payback; Mothman Prophecies; Girl, Interrupted; "Twin Peaks;" "Live From Baghdad;" "Entourage" (Pilot).

DAVID LANDER (Lighting Designer) Broadway: 33 Variations, A Man for All Seasons, I am My Own Wife, Dirty Blonde Golden Child. Off-Broadway: American Fiesta, After Ashley, Beautiful Child, Edward Albee's Occupant, Fran's Bed, Going to St. Ives, King Lear (w/Kevin Kline), Macbeth, Mimi Le Duck, Modern orthodox, The God of Hell. Regional: ACT, Berkeley Rep., Cincinnati Playhouse, Geffen Playhouse, Kirk Douglas Theatre, La Jolla Playhouse, Long Wharf Theatre, Philadelphia Theatre Co., St. Louis MUNY, The Old Globe. International: Tokyo, UK, South America, Australia and Singapore.

DAVID ROBBINS (Music & Sound Designer) Catonsville 9, Tartuffe, 1984, Embedded, The Exonerated, Mephisto, The Seagull, Carnage a Comedy, Titus Andronicus, Good Woman of Setzuan (Actors Gang Theater). Film: War Inc., King of California, Dead Man Walking, Savior, Cradle Will Rock, Bob Roberts, The Prime Gig, The Exonerated, Hopeless Pictures, Twenty Bucks, How to Kill Your Neighbor's Dog.

PRODUCTION PHOTOS
by JOAN MARCUS
from the ORIGINAL OFF-BROADWAY PRODUCTION



...Praise for AFTERMATH

"CRITICS' PICK! Utterly real..How can you turn away?"
- The New York Times

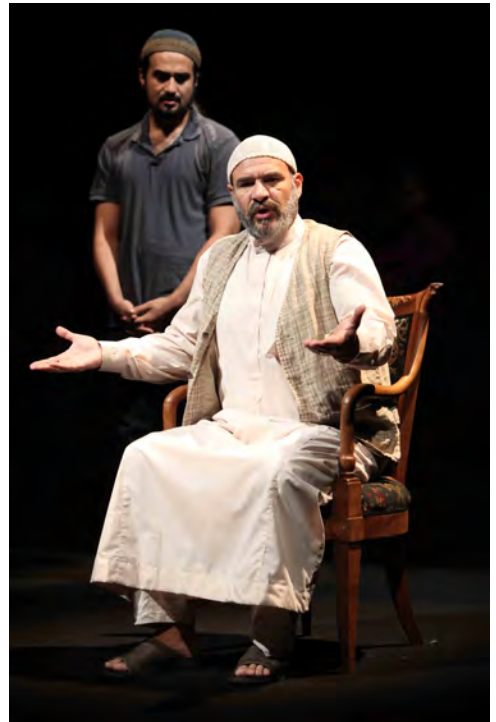
"This aura of fraught intimacy has been achieved with subtle ingenuity by Mr. Jensen and Ms Blank"
- Ben Brantley, The New York Times

" A superbly staged and beautifully acted testimonial to the innocent victims of an ugly war...This wonderful piece of agitprop theatre challenges us all."
- Marilyn Stasio,Variety

"Graceful and gripping work...The stories unfold bit-by-bit over 80 minutes and are haunting and harrowing, but there's also room for humor...The staging is fluid; the performances excellent across the board."
- John Dziemianowicz, NY Daily News

"Critics Pick! Simple is not easy, but playwrights Erik Jensen and Jessica Blank prove just how powerful it can be in their disquieting, moving, intensely human docudrama...Blanks's invisible direction knows just when to linger and when to accelerate...aided measurably by the superb company."
-Erik Haagensen, Backstage

"A docudrama of the highest order, one that personalizes and puts into perspective the staggering human cost of the last six years in Iraq...AFTERMATH is an impressive addition to journalism as theater."
-Michael Kuchwara, The Associated Press



...Praise for THE EXONERATED

"Jaw-dropping. . .an intense and deeply affecting new play."
-Ben Brantley, New York Times

"The #1 play of the year!"
-Margo Jefferson, New York Times

"Stark; riveting; cunningly orchestrated."
-John Lahr, The New Yorker

"Artful and moving. . .pays tribute to the resilience of human hearts and minds."
-Charles Isherwood, Variety

"What has been done through The Exonerated is one of the most extraordinary events I have ever seen, and it will do more to promote justice than any literary efforts I have seen."
- Former U.S. Attorney General Janet Reno

"Don't miss it! Ten great actors will rock your views of the world, justice, and the American way."
-Dr. Joy Brown, WABC Radio

Sunday, August 30, 2009

Wedded To Docudrama, And Each Other

By KATE TAYLOR

THE 2002 play "The Exonerated," based on interviews with people who were released from death row, won praise for depicting lives detailed by wrongful convictions.

In a very different way, the play's success — it ran for 18 months in New York with a rotating cast of celebrities, then toured the country and became a Court TV movie featuring Susan Sarandon and Danny Glover — also changed the lives of Jessica Blank and Erik Jensen, the two actors who wrote it. It turned the pair, seemingly overnight, into playwrights of national stature as well as experts on the death penalty, wrongful convictions and documentary theater. They wrote a book about the process (in the course of which they also fell in love and married) called "Living Justice: Love, Freedom, and the Making of 'The Exonerated.'"

For their next play they wanted something that wouldn't be too close to "The Exonerated" but also, as Mr. Jensen said recently, "something where the stakes were really high."

No problem there. Their new play, "Aftermath," which starts previews on Tuesday at New York Theater Workshop, is based on interviews with Iraqi refugees living in Jordan. Through the voices of eight people (and a translator, who is the only composite character and is based on several translators with whom the couple worked), "Aftermath" portrays the experiences of ordinary Iraqis in the six and a half years since the United States invasion. The characters range from an imam who was imprisoned in Abu Ghraib to the victim of a car bombing; they include a wealthy doctor, a couple who are both artists, and a Shiite couple who fled Iraq after being pressured to inform on their Sunni neighbors to the local militia.

The writers changed all of the names and some identifying details (like the cities where people were born) to protect those who spoke to them. Beyond that, Ms.

At right, Erik Jensen and Jessica Blank overseeing rehearsals of "Aftermath" at New York Theater Workshop. Below, Richard Dreyfuss and Sara Gilbert in the Blank-Jensen collaboration "The Exonerated."



ANGEL FRANCO/THE NEW YORK TIMES



SARA KRULWICH/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Blank said, the text of the play is about 95 percent verbatim from the interviews.

"Aftermath" began with a conversation Ms. Blank had with James Nicola, the theater's artistic director, during a 2007 summer residency at Dartmouth College, where Ms. Blank was developing another play. Over breakfast the two discussed that there had been virtually no plays about civilians' experience in the Iraq war.

She and Mr. Jensen quickly saw in this talk the subject for their next play. They considered going to Iraq but decided it was too dangerous. But with the help of the nonprofit Campaign for Innocent Victims in Conflict and a Ford Foundation grant, they went to Jordan for two weeks in June 2008 and conducted about 40 interviews with Iraqi Sunnis, Shites and Christians.

They were prepared, they said, for those

they met to be hostile or to vent about Americans, but instead the people were extremely welcoming. "I never drank so much coffee, orange juice and tea in my entire life," Mr. Jensen said. Most interviewees were cautious at first, he said, but once it was clear "that we were open to whatever opinions they had and that they didn't need to please us," they were very open.

Shortly after they returned, Ms. Blank was back at Dartmouth, working on the transcripts with a group of actors, several of whom are now in the cast. Mr. Jensen

for engaging strangers in conversation. No sooner did a photographer arrive than Mr. Jensen was drawing him out about his experience covering international conflicts. He is also somewhat irrepressible, and during the interview he interrupted Ms. Blank often, which she took calmly. In a rehearsal, although Ms. Blank is officially directing the show, Mr. Jensen jumped in often with blocking suggestions, sometimes contradicting her. (She, however, has the last word.)

The cast members are mostly of Middle Eastern descent, though only one — Fajer Al-Kaisi, who plays the translator and also serves as the dialect coach — is Iraqi. He emigrated to Canada when he was 8, but he still has family in Iraq and said the war has been "a daily reality" for him. Having listened to the tapes of some of Ms. Blank's and Mr. Jensen's interviews, he said that the material ultimately included in the play stops short of the most violent and horrific stories that were recorded.

Mr. Jensen said that while he always intended to keep his personal views out of the show, he went to Jordan believing that American soldiers should leave Iraq immediately. But he soon realized, he said, that the situation was "much, much more complex than that."

Ms. Blank said many interviewees recalled having hope after the invasion, but as terrorist and militia groups filled the power vacuum, they became disillusioned.

"People who had just spent 45 minutes talking about how much they hated Saddam and how repressive and awful it was to live under Saddam said to us, 'Now we look back on that as the good old days.'"

*Actor-playwrights create
theatrical portraits
from the words, and
ordeal, of Iraqis.*

was acting in a science-fiction pilot that was filming in Vancouver, British Columbia, but he participated via Skype.

Over the course of that and subsequent workshops Ms. Blank and Mr. Jensen narrowed the number of characters and developed the idea of the translator, to bridge between the characters and the audience.

A recent interview suggested that Ms. Blank and Mr. Jensen bring different talents to the collaboration. Ms. Blank, who looked glamorous even at almost six months pregnant — the couple are expecting their first child, a daughter — is the more patient and poised of the two. Mr. Jensen, who sports a large tattoo of Buddha, has an actor's extroversion and a gift

ONLINE: FROM THE ARCHIVE

Ben Brantley's 2002 review of "The Exonerated":

nytimes.com/theater

September 3 – September 9, 2009

Theater

Edited by David Cote
dcote@timeoutny.com



WHAT'S UP? DOC! Blank and Jensen specialize in documentary-style theater.

Iraq solid

The Exonerated's Jessica Blank and Erik Jensen document the suffering of Iraqi civilians in *Aftermath*.
By Raven Snook

Jessica Blank and Erik Jensen have more energy than a toddler hopped up on Pop Rocks. That's a good thing, considering everything they have going on. The married playwrights behind the Off Broadway hit *The Exonerated*—who have also found success as actors, directors, screenwriters and, in Blank's case, a novelist—plan to add parenthood to their list of accomplishments sometime this winter. But first, they're ushering a less literal baby into New York Theatre Workshop: *Aftermath*, a documentary play about Iraqis torn by war.

Since the fighting began in 2003, it has been explored on stage from many angles: political (*Stuff Happens*), militaristic (*Black Watch*), even feminist (*The Lonely Soldier Monologues*). But Blank noticed a troubling omission. "There's been basically no work in the contemporary theater from the Iraqi civilians' point of view," she says. "In fact, there hasn't been very much about that perspective at all in most of the media." In *Aftermath*, a half-

dozen heartrending tales—marked by shocking violence, tremendous loss, remarkable resilience and, in most cases, hope for the future—resonate as loudly, clearly and powerfully as a bomb blast.

Like *The Exonerated*, which deals with wrongfully imprisoned Death Row inmates, Blank and Jensen's new play consists solely of victims' testimony, with no conflation or fabrication—just a lot of painstaking editing. The two created their script after traveling to Jordan last summer to interview 37 civilian Iraqi refugees. With help from a handful of translators and "fixers" (locals able to connect writers with sources), they talked with a cross section of everyman, then chose six of the most evocative accounts—from a doctor, a pair of married chefs, an Imam, a young mom, a couple of artists and a pharmacist—to illustrate the impact of the war on the citizenry as a whole.

"We were prepared for people to be hostile," recalls Blank. "Here we were, a couple of Americans, asking, 'Please tell us about the most horrible things that have ever happened to you in your life!' But what we found was incredibly moving. Everyone we spoke to welcomed us completely into their homes. They understood that there's a difference between a country's governmental policy and its people."

Though the creative templates are the same, *Aftermath* differs from *The Exonerated* in at least one striking way: There won't be a rotating cast, the gimmick that allowed a diverse string of stars (such as Richard Dreyfuss and Mariska Hargitay) to appear in the earlier work during its 15-month New York run. "We felt strongly that we should cast *Aftermath* with a set group of actors that have family backgrounds in the Middle East,"

"Our country is married to that country for a really, really long time."

explains Blank, who is also directing the show. "There's an odious trend of casting people with brown skin interchangeably; not only is that racist, it overlooks the fact that there are huge cultural and gestural differences and subtleties that get glossed over." Amir Arison, who plays a mild-mannered dermatologist forced into triage, feels a great responsibility in trying to get his character right. "The material is so rich; these people have so much to say," he notes. "There's so much potency and hope and anger

they want to get across to America."

Despite the self-declared "knee-jerk liberal" sympathies of its authors, *Aftermath* does not have a leftist agenda; by its nature it is personal, not political. "Our job is to present the stories without commenting on them in any way," Jensen explains. "We're just here to be conduits. Anyone who comes to see the show, whether they're right or left, is hopefully going to leave with a lot more questions than answers." Working on the play even forced the authors to question their own long-held bring-the-troops-home-now sentiments. "I marched against the war from the start," says Jensen. "But after doing the interviews, I realize that our country is married to that country for a really, really long time."

"The infrastructure of Iraq has been completely dismantled, and we have an enormous responsibility on a purely humanitarian level," Blank adds, continuing her husband's thoughts as she often does. "There's a great impulse on the part of the American people now to say, 'Oh, the Bush administration is over. Let's close that chapter. It's done.' But for the Iraqis, it's not done. And it won't be for a long, long time."

Aftermath opens Sept 15 at New York Theatre Workshop. See Off Broadway.

THE Arts

Exiles With Harrowing Tales
From the Chaos of War-Torn Iraq



SARA KRULWICH/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Aftermath Demosthenes Chrysan in this documentary play, which opened on Tuesday at New York Theater Workshop.

living in Jordan, "Aftermath" might be said to be set in limbo. Its performers, first seen sitting rigid on benches with their backs to us, seem to exist in an eternal waiting room.

When they turn around to tell their stories, with a courtly politeness that eventually shades into a sorrowing, baffled rage, there's no doubt that it is we, the Americans in the dark, to whom they're speaking. It was our country invading theirs, in 2003, that brought them to the point that, as one puts it, "I am floating between here and nowhere."

If you have read news reports or watched television coverage of life in Iraq since the fall of Saddam Hussein, you have heard accounts similar to those described here. But "Aftermath," being

a live play, doesn't allow you the distance afforded by reading a magazine or watching a screen, when you can turn the page or change the channel. The exiles whose tales of displacement are related here may be embodied by actors, but you often feel that it's the people they are portraying who are demanding the courtesy of your attention. How can

Continued on Page 2

Iraqi Exiles
Relating
Harrowing
Tales of Loss

From First Arts Page

you turn away? This aura of fraught intimacy has been achieved with subtle ingenuity by Mr. Jensen and Ms. Blank, a husband-and-wife team whose previous collaborations include "The Exonerated," a similarly conceived docudrama about American prisoners on death row. Directed by Ms. Blank, "Aftermath" is shaped to make us feel as if we were the unseen interviewers, to whom coffee or tea is offered by our guarded but hospitable subjects. An interpreter, Shahid (Fajer Al-Kaisi), is on hand to provide context and, of course, English.

The first words spoken, by Rafiq (Laila Buck), a pharmacist, are in Arabic, which Shahid interprets. From that point, the performers speak mostly English, yet the illusion of their speaking in a foreign language is sustained, with asides both humorous and despairing between the translator and the interviewees.

At first they don't seem like terribly exciting company. They are mostly members of the middle or intellectual classes — a dermatologist, a theater director, a cook, a cleric — and they initially exude a strained, rather irritating good humor. When they talk about Iraq in the days before the Americans arrived, they present a world too harmonious to be believed, though none felt much affection for Saddam.

"A beautiful life," says Yassar (Amir Arison, in a witty portrait of a natural showoff), the dermatologist, of his years in Baghdad. "We were friends," Rafiq says of his interdenominational neighborhood in Falluja. "We didn't care the difference." But of course it's easy to turn what you once knew into Eden when everything that's followed has been hell.

The characters in "Aftermath" take turns describing how life



From left, Fajer Al-Kaisi, Rasha Zamamiri and Omar Koury in "Aftermath," a play that was developed from interviews with Iraqi refugees living in Jordan.

Aftermath

By Jessica Blank and Erik Jensen, directed by Ms. Blank; sets by Richard Hoover; costumes by Gabriel Berry; lighting by David Lander; music and sound by David Robbins. Presented by the New York Theater Workshop, James C. Nicola, artistic director. William Russo, managing director. At the New York Theater Workshop, 79 East Fourth Street, East Village; (212) 239-6200. Through Oct. 4. Running time: 1 hour 25 minutes.

WITH: Fajer Al-Kaisi (Shahid), Amir Arison (Yassar), Laila Buck (Basima), Maha Chehlaoui (Fadiah), Demosthenes Chrysan (Abdul-Allyy), Daoud Heidami (Asad), Omar Koury (Fouad), Laila Nakli (Rafiq) and Rasha Zamamiri (Naimah).

changed after the invasion, and how a delicately balanced co-existence was sent swirling into a dangerous chaos, where no one was sure who was on what side. Some of their descriptions are

memorably visceral. Basima (Laila Buck), an Iraqi Christian, on first hearing the bombs dropped on Baghdad: "You don't feel your eardrums from the sound."

Others are metaphorical, reflective. "Our humanity is drifting from their humanity in four or five different directions," Shahid says. "So far you can't reach either side."

The circumstances that led these people to leave Iraq vary. But they are all harrowing, some almost unbearably so. And you understand exactly why Basima, in a hospital after a car fire that took off most of her skin, was willing to accept her father's lies about what happened to the rest of her family.

"After a while, I stopped asking," she says, "so I could just

stay in the story he was telling me."

Rafiq, the pharmacist, describes watching the torture and murder of his nephew by a group of American soldiers, who appear to have been mercenaries. His ingratiating affability dissolves, and he suddenly erupts into a cri de coeur:

"I just want to understand. Who is the criminal? Who is the suspect? Who is the judge? Who is executing?"

Like most of the performances here, Mr. Nakli's Rafiq had initially seemed stilled, ill at ease. He becomes utterly real in rage, and you realize that the earlier woodenness of his performance is a well-chosen calculation.

The most resonantly familiar story here is that of Abdul-Allyy (Demosthenes Chrysan), an

ONLINE: IRAQI VOICES

A profile of Jessica Blank and Erik Jensen, who wrote "Aftermath":
nytimes.com/theater

iman, who was imprisoned in Abu Ghraib because the guards at his mosque carried guns (sanc-tioned, he says, by the American authorities). You can feel the involuntary shudder in the audience when the prison's name is first spoken. And the translator, as if acting on that shudder, explains that many Americans feel shame about Abu Ghraib.

The imam responds with icy fierceness: "You know, I thank these people for their feelings. There are mistakes for which

apologies are not enough."

The ensemble members — who also include Maha Chehlaoui, Daoud Heidami, Omar Koury and Rasha Zamamiri — create specific characters while also suggesting a sense of identities unmoored. Feelings of ambivalence, confusion, sadness and bewilderment assume concrete and evocative forms. But there is also a sense that much of what happened to these people defies tidy narrative.

"Translate that," Basima says abruptly to Shahid, after reluctantly telling the story of the conflagration that nearly killed her. And the directive takes on a bigger, more unsettling meaning. Can such things ever be translated in a way that would make them comprehensible?

SARA KRULWICH/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Reviews

Aftermath



SECOND DEGREE

Arison plays a displaced doctor.

★★★★★

New York Theatre Workshop (see Off Broadway). By Jessica Blank and Erik Jensen. Dir. Blank. With ensemble cast. 1hr 25mins. One intermission.

The arithmetic in *Aftermath* mostly consists of subtractions and divisions. Based on interviews with Iraqi refugees in Jordan, Jessica Blank and Erik Jensen's somber docudrama is a compendium of real-life horror stories: overcrowded hospitals, false arrest and torture, families murdered or driven from

their homes. The nine subjects of the play—including a translator, a pharmacist, an imam and a theater director—are stuck in a postwar attention-span lapse, forgotten but not gone.

The personal narratives told here are harrowing, and Blank stages them with appropriate gravity. The acting is strong—I especially admired Omar Koury and Rasha Zamamiri as a pair of cooks, and Amir Arison as a dermatologist—and the subject matter is important. Just 85 minutes long, the production often passes slowly, like a funeral

procession; it doesn't grab the audience as viscerally as Blank and Jensen's long-running *The Exonerated* did. At the nadir of the U.S. engagement in Iraq, *Aftermath* might have seemed more timely. In a way, however, the play's very belatedness is part of what makes it worthwhile. "Enjoy!" said the usher as she handed me the program, but this is not an enjoyable piece: It aims to make you uncomfortable, casting hard light on a problem that many would rather imagine was solved, without contemplating the remainders.—Adam Feldman

September 21 – September 27, 2009

Docu plays give voice to victims of war

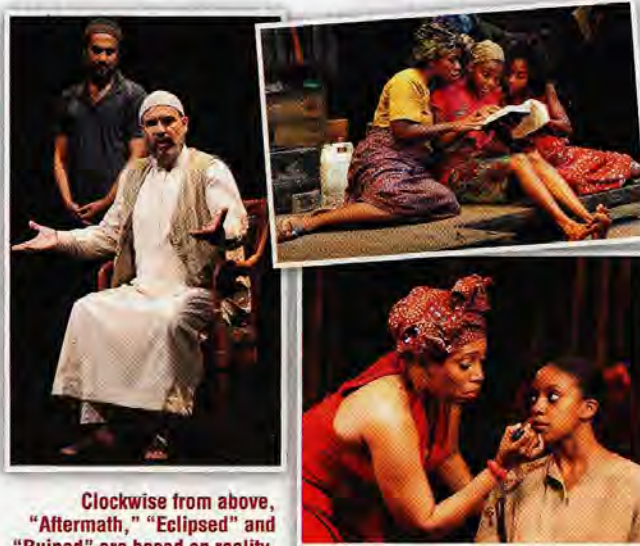
By **SAM THIELMAN**

Guerrilla playwrights, willing to sleep in their cars for fear of losing an interview, or ready to decamp for the Middle East or West Africa at the drop of a hat, are planting their flags all over the nonprofit theater map.

Documentary plays, fresh from conflict zones, are appearing all over the country, from Lynn Nottage's "Ruined," the Pulitzer Prize-winning "Mother Courage" update about Congolese victims of rape and sexual mutilation, to Danaï Gurira's Liberia-set "Eclipsed" and Jessica Blank and Eric Jensen's Iraqi exile drama "Aftermath."

Having just wrapped its Off Broadway run at Manhattan Theater Club after multiple extensions, Nottage's play is headed to Seattle's Intiman Theater (where its director, Kate Whoriskey was recently named a.d.) and to South Africa's Market Theater. Gurira will see her work play almost simultaneously at D.C.'s Woolly Mammoth (where it opened Sept. 6), Los Angeles' Kirk Douglas Theater (Sept. 20) and Yale Rep (starting Oct. 23). "Aftermath" premiered Sept. 15 to strong reviews at the New York Theater Workshop.

The writers, and sometimes directors, visited a few of the most troubled areas in the world, using information-gathering tactics familiar to most foreign news correspondents. It's frequently a lengthy and difficult process, both time- and cash-intensive, but it has the capacity to pay off



Clockwise from above, "Aftermath," "Eclipsed" and "Ruined" are based on reality.

not just in dramatic content and critical success, but also in raised awareness and donations that help the real-life subjects.

"It's never luxurious," laughs Blank, who (with husband Jensen) also created "The Exonerated," a long-running play about real-life death row inmates discovered to be innocent after years, even decades, in prison. "For 'The Exonerated' we brought our dogs along and basically lived in our car."

"Aftermath" was less fly-by-night than "The Exonerated." On the strength of the duo's previous work, New York Theater Workshop helped them arrange a grant from the Ford Foundation and gave what Blank calls "structural and institutional support." The nonprofit theater provided in-

really want to get their stories out there, and their own government is in such chaos that they're looking for help from anywhere."

Blank and Jensen had a similar experience in Jordan, where they interviewed Iraqi refugees.

"We assumed people would be quite cautious with us, maybe even hostile," Blank says. "What we found was exactly the opposite — they were extremely hospitable. After 25 years under Saddam, they really seemed to get that there was a difference between a government's policy and a nation's people."

When the writers ventured into unknown territory looking for a story, it wasn't always the one they expected to find.

"There's no such thing as a perfect victim," says Gurira, whose play tracks the progress of oppressed women in war-torn Liberia. "You can't really judge whatever these women chose to do to navigate this incredibly different terrain. Choosing to become a soldier is really a difficult thing — a woman says to herself, 'Now I'm going to choose to become a vicious fighter.' It's about the war zone."

Along with unexpected complications, though, come unexpected dividends. While dealing with a specialized nongovernmental org, Gurira found resources she hadn't looked for.

"I mentioned that I was going out of town for interviews, and the woman from the NGO said, 'Oh, our videographer's just chilling right now. Go ahead and use him.'"

With "Ruined," Whoriskey says the production's request for donations to a Congolese hospital raised \$16,000 in its final week in New York, and the play is headed to the Kennedy Center for a reading to be attended by reps from various NGOs.

Ultimately, that kind of public acknowledgement is also what the subjects want.

"Whenever we went into people's homes, they would thrust a picture at us, a review of a play they'd directed, a membership card from a club they'd belonged to," Jensen says. "These were the only things they'd been able to stuff into their pockets as they fled their homes. And now they were proof of identity; proof that they existed at all."

terns to transcribe the lengthy interview translations — Jensen says the Jordan trip resulted in 37 in-person interviews — and other amenities to which two writers out on their own wouldn't normally have access.

Also, there's a large network of orgs keen to see raised awareness for the causes that would aid the interviewees. Nottage, who once worked for Amnesty Intl., used her contacts to find those people. She received a grant from Theater Communications Group to help fund the trip, as did Gurira, who previously co-wrote and performed in "In the Continuum," about black women with HIV.

"Unfortunately, I think a lot of it is about need," says "Ruined" helmer Whoriskey, who accompanied Nottage to the Congo. "They

Off B'way Review

Aftermath

(New York Theater Workshop;
199 seats; \$65 top)

A New York Theater Workshop presentation of a play in one act by Jessica Blank and Erik Jensen. Directed by Blank. Set, Richard Hoover; costumes, Gabriel Berry; lighting, David Lander; original music and sound, David Robbins; production stage manager, Larry K. Ash. Opened Sept. 15, 2009. Reviewed Sept. 11. Running time: 1 HOUR, 25 MIN.

Shahid Fajer Al-Kaisi
Yassar Amir Arison
Basima Leila Buck
Fadilah Maha Chehlaoui
Abdul-Aliyy Demosthenes Chrysan
Asad Daoud Heidami
Fouad Omar Koury
Rafiq Laith Nakli
Naimah Rasha Zamamiri

By MARILYN STASIO

Supported by private grants and a commission from New York Theater Workshop, Jessica Blank and husband Erik Jensen went to Jordan last year to interview dozens of Iraqi refugees living in Amman. After translating and shaping the material, the scribes collaborated with NYTW on a series of readings that eventually became "Aftermath," a superbly staged and



Fajer Al-Kaisi, Rasha Zamamiri and Omar Koury play Iraqi refugees in "Aftermath."

beautifully acted testimonial to the innocent victims of an ugly war. In putting a human face on the thousands of displaced civilians who lost their homes, their families and their history in a catastrophe not of their making, this powerful piece of agitprop theater challenges us all.

Minimalist set (pairs of chairs on platform tiers) and laser-point lighting (shafts of light piercing the metaphorical darkness) follow the textbook rules for staging a documentary theater piece. Which basically boils down to taking the audience hostage.

The rest is all acting — and brilliant acting it is, to hold us mesmerized through a series of

monologues in which eight refugees recount the circumstances that uprooted them from their homeland.

Just listing the professions of the characters, who represent a cross-section of middle-class life, is enough to shake any preconceptions about the sort of people whose lives were upended by the invasion of Iraq in 2003. There's a dermatologist, married chefs, a young Christian mother, an elderly imam, a theater director and his artist wife and a pharmacist — all intelligent, articulate, perfectly ordinary people, and not a terrorist among them.

There's also a translator, a genial young man named Shahid

(Fajer Al-Kaisi) who acts as both conduit and buffer in this potentially awkward confrontation between the citizens of two nations still at war. Shahid is almost sheepish about his dual duties — encouraging the Iraqis to tell their stories while keeping their shocking testimonials from burning up the stage. In Al-Kaisi's sympathetic perf, Shahid seems to have given himself the additional chore of protecting the speakers — his countrymen, as he comes to embrace them — from further pain.

Not having a dramatic scene structure, the material is paced out in beats that deepen in tone and escalate in emotional intensity as the piece shifts incrementally from life under Saddam Hussein to life under American occupation.

In the beginning, the refugees happily recall living normal lives at peace with their neighbors. Their memories are sweet and often funny; the heartbreak comes from seeing them hold up precious photographs — and watching them remember all they've lost.

Rafiq (Laith Nakli), the pharmacist, speaks of the abundance of mosques, churches and synagogues in Fallujah. ("We had Christians, we had Shi'a, we had Sunni, we were friends, we didn't care the difference.") The cooks,

Turn to page 15

Aftermath

Continued from page 4

Fouad (Omar Koury) and Naimah (Rasha Zamamiri), show us snapshots of the house they built ("with our own hands") in Baghdad. Yassar (Amir Arison), the dermatologist, brags about the flashy cars he once owned and brandishes membership cards to his "elite" clubs.

They also share shattering memories of how the Americans they initially welcomed botched the "liberation" through sheer ignorance about the language, laws and customs of the country and its people.

Stepping out of his translator's role to testify about his own experiences at the hands of a rogue militia, Shahid speaks of the breakdown of order when the U.S. Army dismantled both the Iraqi army and its police force. Asad (Daoud Heidami), the theater director, and his wife, Fadilah (Maha Chehlaoui), recall the Al Qaeda agents who poured in from Iran and Syria during this lawless period, cutting off utilities, shutting down schools, issuing fatwas, killing people for dancing.

Everyone represented in this company lost someone in the war.

Some — like Basima (Leila Buck), the young Christian wife whose entire family was killed by a misdirected missile — can hardly bring themselves to speak of their losses. Most of them visibly struggle to keep their minds from closing and hearts from hardening to the conquering nation that brought them "shock and awe" but can't distinguish between one Arab (or non-Arab) and another.

It's a jolt, then, to watch jovial Rafiq boil over with rage at the memory of seeing his nephew killed by American mercenaries. Even more unnerving are the memories of the imam, Abdul-Aliyy (Demosthenes Chrysan, in a passionate perf), arrested at his mosque on a misunderstanding and dragged off to Abu Ghraib prison.

Of all these victims, the imam lost more than most — family killed, home destroyed, papers and passport gone, virtual banishment from his country. So it's hard to answer him when he looks out on the audience and says: "I thank these people for their feelings, but there are mistakes for which apologies are not enough."

Wednesday, September 16, 2009



In the wake of war & love gone bad

Issue-oriented docudramas culled from interviews with real people always run the risk of being more preachy than provocative, more earnest than eye-opening. There's even something about the title "Aftermath" suggesting that it's theater that's supposed to be good for you.

But such reservations fade minutes into this graceful and gripping work by Jessica Blank and Erik Jensen, creators of "The Exonerated," about Death Row inmates.

The play relates a half-dozen stories of Iraqi civilians scarred physically, emotionally and spiritually after the fall of Saddam Hussein. They include married artists, restaurant owners, a dermatologist, a pharmacist, a religious leader and a young mother. An interpreter is also ever-present, inspiring varying degrees of distrust, if not disgust, from subjects as he translates their words.

The stories unfold bit-by-bit over 80 minutes and are haunting and harrowing, but there's also room for humor. The staging, by Blank, is fluid; the performances excellent across the board. "Aftermath" marks a strong start to the season at New York Theatre Workshop.

That downtown venue has been a showcase for Flemish director Ivo van Hove, whose bold revivals there range from "A Streetcar Named Desire" with a naked Blanche splashing in a bathtub to a "Hedda Gabler" dripping in tomato juice to "The Misanthrope" buried under goop from a food fight.

As part of the New Island Festival on Governors Island, van Hove is offering his take on Jean Cocteau's 1932 monologue, "La Voix Humaine (The Human Voice)." It comes soaked in tears, bile and raw, messy emotions. They all flow during a desperate young woman's phone call with her ex-lover.

Van Hove's production, in Dutch with English super-titles, is spare and without many fancy flourishes. He relies on Halina Reijn ("Valkyrie") to convey the anguish and ultimate resignation of an abandoned, suicidal woman. The actress nails it all.

The director makes a few discombobulating choices, like maintaining the telephone party line of the original work, while weaving in current pop hits, like Beyoncé's "Single Ladies (Put a Ring on It)." It gives the production a time-warped feel. His final choice — to play a certain Paul Simon hit — comes off as cheesy.

Nonetheless, it's easy to recommend the play. Wear walking shoes if you go. There's a 20-minute stroll to and from the abandoned warehouse where van Hove has slyly designed this tale of a human time bomb.

jdziemianowicz@nydailynews.com



'Aftermath'

Through Oct. 4, NYTW,
79 E. Fourth St.

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'La Voix Humaine'

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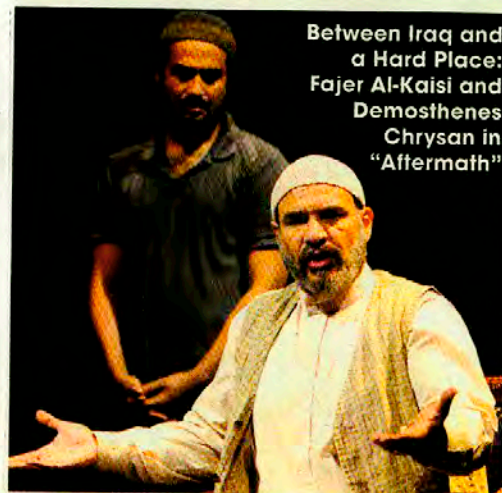
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Between Iraq and a Hard Place: Fajer Al-Kaisi and Demosthenes Chrysan in "Aftermath"

AFTERMATH

at New York Theatre Workshop

Simple isn't easy, but playwrights Erik Jensen and Jessica Blank

CRITIC'S PICK

prove just how powerful it can be in their disquieting, moving, intensely human docudrama "Aftermath." Nine actors play eight refugees from the Iraq war and their translator. The text, taken from their own words, recounts the terrible toll war and its consequences have taken on them and their loved ones. It all makes for riveting and important theater.

We meet a dermatologist, an artist, a theater director, an imam, a pharmacist, a married pair of cooks, and a wife and mother. All have been forced to flee to Jordan, their lives irreversibly scarred in appalling ways. But this isn't a cornucopia of woe. Instead, what we come away with is the amazing resilience of the human spirit. Not in a Pollyanna sort of way, however. These people co-exist with awful damage, yet none is defeated by it, and all are intent on retaining their humanity and moving forward with their lives.

Jensen and Blank wisely eschew the political arguments of whether the U.S. should or should not have attacked Iraq. Instead, they focus tightly on the person-

al. The result is to remind us of what can happen to people in wartime, and so we should remember the appalling civilian carnage any armed conflict is likely to create before choosing to initiate one. The tightly structured script unfolds seamlessly and has been arranged impeccably, with stories interweaving in surprising, reinforcing ways. The choice of including the interpreter is an inspired one, allowing the characters to initially speak in their own language, then segue effectively to English while making it clear they are not really speaking it. Even better, the interaction between the interpreter and the characters reveals things about them they don't show us directly. Finally, the running use of a TV broadcast of a World Cup Qualifiers soccer match between Iraq and Australia proves a canny device that results in a highly effective understated dramatic climax.

Blank's invisible direction knows just when to linger and when to accelerate, and her simple staging on the black-box set filled with nothing but an assortment of living-room chairs seems inevitable. She is aided immeasurably by the superb company, composed of actors of Middle Eastern descent. Omar Koury and Rasha Zamamiri are a completely convincing husband and wife as the cooks forced to flee due to postwar religious strife. As another married couple, Maha Cheloui is full of shy charm as an artist who struggled against losing the will to create, while Daoud Heidami cleanly captures the unconscious theatricality of a man who puts on plays for a living. Laith Nakli's pharmacist moves effortlessly from determinedly jocular hospitality to bewilderment and rage. Leila Buck's wife and mother is devastating in her emotional

directness. Demosthenes Chrysan as the imam masterfully negotiates his long sequence recounting his experiences in being charged as a terrorist. Following his fine work last season in Christopher Durang's "Why Torture Is Wrong," Amir Arison does even better as the cocky, materialistic dermatologist who has his alpha-male attitudes ground to powder. As the translator, Fajer Al-Kaisi is a calming presence whose intent listening tells much.

If I had any reservation, it would only be that in a show like this, which feels as if it wants to use this group of characters as a composite portrait of a society, there is no gay or lesbian character. The world is not monolithically heterosexual, and there are certainly gay Iraqi refugees out there. That caveat aside, don't miss "Aftermath." It's an inspiringly good piece of theater.

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thepublicreviews

Aftermath - Old Vic Tunnels, London

Writer: Jessica Blank & Erik Jensen

Director: Jessica Blank

Reviewer: Toni Stott-Rates

The Public Reviews Rating: ★★★★★



In Britain every time a soldier dies we are confronted with his picture an account of what happened - if possible - and comments from the bereaved family, sometimes a picture of the funeral mourners. Where is the reporting of the daily death and injury toll for the citizens of the countries we have invaded? This leaves us the British and the West outraged by the loss of life of our soldiers but indifferent and ignorant of the daily atrocities the populace living in warzones have to live through.

Part of LIFT 2010, a festival focused on bringing events and experiences that would transform the audience's understanding of ourselves, and the communities within London and the world around us. Director/writers Jessica Blank and Erik Jensen have presented a piece of agitprop verbatim

theatre comprised of interviews from Iraqi refugees now living in Jordan. They have skilfully interwoven stories using a translator as a guide, as key that unlocks the stories of a people who have had their suffering ignored for years.

This piece starts by gently introducing us to the lives and loves of these refugees with self told stories of their families, how they made a living before the war, how they met their spouses, their children. In this way we are introduced to a way of existence and a people who are quietly and happily getting on with their lives in Fallujah or Bagdad despite Saddam's regime. We invest our emotions in their happy memories and as their memories turn sour with the start of the war, the occupation and eventually exile, so our stomachs curdle with our empathy and our outrage.

This piece is biased, it is not a balanced story of Iraq it does not include a 1st person narrative of an American soldier's fear and anxiety of the unknown enemy, there are no stories from Iraqi government officials or militia police about the strain or pressure of the job and any tales of their fear or regret, because this piece is not about them. It is about giving a voice to the citizens of Iraq who's only crime, was being Iraqi.

The Old Vic tunnels make for an atmospheric venue lending a feel of an underground bunker to the show, the rumbles of the overhead trains, which sometimes make it a wee bit difficult to hear the actors speak, are like echo's of bombs blasting in the distance. The set like the acting is bare and basic there are no trappings here, we are not observers of a spectacle, we are witness to people's lives and their stories of survival. This bareness allows us to intuitively empathise as opposed to having our emotions coaxed and played like a violin; this leads us to believe in the honesty of the narrative, which in turn gives these people real human faces. You walk out in tears of rage motivated to do something about what you've heard as opposed to the cathartic elements of most theatre which allow for a comfortable barrier to be constructed between audience and the make believe that happens to characters on stage.

This piece should be seen by as many people as possible, I'd even go so far as to say should be compulsory viewing for GCSE levels school kids, politicians and soldiers, because this piece isn't just about Iraqi refugees, its about how easy it is to let our government go to war and simply ignore another nation's suffering as long as we don't have to live with the consequences.

Aftermath of war

OneWorld UK

By Daniel Nelson

Actor/directors Jessica Blank and Erik Jensen talked to 35 of the 500,000-700,000 Iraqi refugees in Jordan, each with more than an ordinary lifetime's drama to tell, and have boiled the interviews down to 90 minutes – funny, gripping, moving, tragic minutes.

The testimonies have been edited, shaped and intercut for maximum dramatic effect, and *Aftermath*, in London until 17 July, doesn't make the claim of most "verbatim theatre" that every word is real. But the overall result tells a truth about the US-led invasion and its impact.

The staging is simple. Nine characters – a translator, a dermatologist, a mother, an artist, a theatre director, an imam, a pharmacist, a cook and his wife – recount their experiences. But what experiences. The words and acting are riveting. They grab your attention and never let it go, despite the noisy train rumblings that are an inescapable feature of a venue fashioned from the tunnels under Waterloo station. (The Old Vic has a lease on some of the tunnels for 2010 and a chance to view a rarely seen slice of subterranean London would be reason enough to go, even if the production were not so gripping.)

Their stories are pure theatre – from a theatre of war, to use an absurd and dishonest euphemism much loved by the military. So though powerful, the evening is "entertaining". And the people on stage are not stereotypes of the Noble Victim: their stories are shaped to produce maximum impact on audiences from the invading powers, but the characters have their failings and frailties, indeed their absurdities. They can be seen for what they are, but are never mocked.

Britain played a big role in the unforgivable invasion and incompetent occupation, and this show ought to be seen by a wider audience. Humanitarian instincts – whether a reminder of the unintended consequences and human cost of conflict, or of the crushed hopes and ambivalent feelings of Iraqis – always need re-enforcing.

+ Amnesty points out that 23,000 Iraqis have sought refuge in Europe, and that several EU governments – including the UK – are forcibly returning Iraqi nationals to Baghdad. Amnesty believes that this is unsafe and that [returns should take place only when the security situation has stabilised.](#)

* *Aftermath* runs until Saturday 17 July at The Old Vic Tunnels, Station Approach Road, London, SE1 7XB. Tickets £15/£12 from the [Old Vic box office](#), or on 0844 871 7628.

THE  TIMES

Aftermath at the Old Vic Tunnels, SE1



Demonthenes Chrysan as Abdul Ali and Fajer al-Kaisi as Shahid are ordinary Iraqis telling of survival after “liberation” Alastair Muir

Libby Purves

Last updated July 9 2010 12:10AM

Yasima remembers how her husband’s legs were heat-welded to the plastic car seat so she couldn’t drag him out, but it was weeks before her father told her that her husband, sister and baby son died in the attack. Twinkly, hospitable Rafiq was a Fallujah pharmacist, proud to let the local poor off paying for their prescriptions. Fouad and Naimah ran for the border after their Shia neighbour was murdered and their fellow Sunnis demanded they turn informers. Both cooks, they miss their kitchen. Asad is a theatre director: used to do Albee and *Pericles* before the Islamists moved in and banned things. Dr Yassar became a dermatologist because he doesn’t like blood: when war came he saw more than enough.

They are Iraqis, telling their stories to researchers in Jordan to be made into a verbatim play by Jessica Blank and Erik Jensen for the New York Theatre Workshop, the only major US

performance taking the Iraqi point of view. It begins with prewar reminiscence, complete with shrugging black jokes (the TV repairman who just pasted a picture of Saddam on the screen saying “he’s always on”). Life wasn’t perfect, concedes Rafiq, “but we didn’t walk down the streets in grey with sad faces, we’re not Russians!”.

There were spies and informers, and when sanctions bit it was upsetting not to be able to give a kid his medicine, but old tribal tenets of justice held things together and Sunni, Shia, Jew and Christian rubbed along and wise people avoided politics. But Shock and Awe brought bombs, raids, shootings, and such poor planning that policing and social order were a lethal vacuum, in which forgotten rivalries festered and Islamists arrived from elsewhere with ridiculous dress rules to baffle the easygoing majority. The whole “liberation” was, says one sadly, “like saying to a young woman ‘I will get you a better garment’ and taking her garment away so she was naked . . . but giving her no new garment, she’s still naked”.

It’s set in the labyrinthine Old Vic tunnels under Waterloo, with trains overhead like distant bombers. Thus oddly, for the next week the station is a metaphor. Above in the old Eurostar terminal, *The Railway Children* evokes a happy-ending Edwardian Britain where daddies are let out of prison because it was all a mistake. Below is chronicled another world, where no childish courage or adult integrity will save you, because your land is stripped naked.

Box office: 020-7566 9767, to July 17

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Interviews come alive in Aftermath

By Henry Hitchings, Evening Standard 12.07.10

[More reviews by Henry Hitchings](#)

Jessica Blank and Erik Jensen established their reputation with *The Exonerated*, a dramatic study of wrongly convicted inmates on Death Row.

Aftermath reasserts their interest in the documentary possibilities of theatre.

This verbatim performance is part of the London International Festival of Theatre and is a product of the New York Theatre Workshop. It's the fruit of interviews with Iraqis who have fled the conflict in their country and started new lives in Jordan.

The characters are initially presented to us by Shahid, a translator who is engagingly played by Fajer Al-Kaisi. His role as a linguistic and cultural go-between is intriguingly precarious. Shahid introduces a pharmacist whose nephew has been killed by American troops, a theatre director who spars enjoyably with his artistic wife, and an imam who insists that the guns found at his mosque have been set aside for purely defensive use.

Their stories and several others, told courteously though with a mounting vehemence, are neatly interwoven. The material could do with being more varied but the result is a corrective to the all-too-common indifference to the plight of Iraqi citizens whose homes and hearts have been ravaged by war. We're struck by the characters' courage and genuine affection for the land that they've left behind.

Blank, who directs, has created a satisfying intimacy and there are attractive performances throughout, with Amir Arison especially striking as a playboy dermatologist who models himself on [Tom Cruise](#) and [Richard Gere](#).

A fanciful explanation would be that the background noise suggests the sound of nearby explosions. In practice, it simply compromises the piece's effectiveness. Until July 17. Information: 020 7566 9767.



Aftermath

Until Sat Jul 17 [Old Vic Tunnels](#), Station Approach Rd, SE1 7XB [Full details & map](#)

By Andrzej Lukowski

Posted: Tue Jul 13 2010

A little on the schematic side and ill-served by this noisy venue, Jessica Blank and Erik Jensen's 'Aftermath' is a nonetheless emotionally gripping piece of theatre that throws the present reality of post-war Iraq into painful focus at a time when Western attention has drifted toward Afghanistan. Largely verbatim, the dialogue is culled from interviews Blank and Jensen conducted with Iraqis who'd fled the militia-ridden chaos of their home country. Structurally, it's a touch hackneyed, especially the beginning, where all the interviewees smile, joke and extend good Middle Eastern hospitality, as if we really needed to be told that Iraqis are normal people too.

We're here for the hard stuff, and in time we get it. These bewildered stories of American callousness and the chilling pointlessness of Sunni/Shia strife are devastating. Almost unbearable Demosthenes Chrysan's old Iman, falsely imprisoned by the Americans and tortured at Abu Ghraib . It's hard to say which is more shaming: his suffering, his anger, or the dignity with he continues to conduct his ruined life.



Aftermath at The Old Vic Tunnels

13 July, 2010 by: [Naima Khan](#)

Naima Khan finds *Aftermath* provides a louder voice for the human sounds of conflict.

Of all the great things there are to say about *Aftermath*, nothing stands out more than the script. It's 95% verbatim, and it could go either way. When you rely almost completely on the words of real people you risk a long-winded and un-theatrical production but [Aftermath](#) at The Old Vic Tunnels is graceful, evocative theatre.

It's the result of some very clever choices by the creators Jessica Blank and Erik Jensen. Using the testimonials of Iraqi refugees in Jordan, they allow their characters to tell their own stories, which, collated in this way, form the story of a nation at a turning point. *Aftermath* reminds us that this isn't history yet.

Being born of war and with its nature so political, [Aftermath](#) is placed in a category of theatre that you expect might leave you feeling guilty, if not heartbroken. But its core is human nature and so the stories that unfold are full of romance, and bad jokes: people are married, houses are built, babies are born and families grow – both before the war begins and as it goes on. The array of characters include an ageing Imam, a young couple, a wealthy doctor, Christians, Sunnis and Shi'as. Blank and Jensen have created a well rounded production that cleverly ties the stories of the past together with a simple, effective current narrative. With storytelling like this, everything hinges on the actors, who are all excellent.

The venue will split the crowds. If you're near the front, the trains rumbling overhead heighten the atmosphere, the underground grows cooler and the intensity is heightened. But if you sit further back I imagine it'd be difficult to hear the actors. More importantly, these are intimate stories, chosen to forge a delicate connection with the audience; The Old Vic Tunnels might be too vast a space to achieve this in.

Some viewers – like the woman sitting next to me – will see *Aftermath* as a collection of civilian war stories. Having grown up in Australia amidst memories of Vietnam from the sizeable immigrant community there, she felt *Aftermath* to be generic, that you can change the name of the place and still have much the same stories of gratuitous violence, unanswered questions, lawlessness and a lack of consequences. I disagree. What *Aftermath* provides is a chance to hear something different among the onslaught of news images of the Iraq war. It's those images that have become generic. With few theatricals on stage, director [Jessica Blank](#) gives a louder voice to the human sounds of conflict and the cyclical nature of war. She further brings home how civilians deal with the chaos and onslaught of hidden enemies that we rarely see. It won't please everybody but it's definitely recommended viewing.

Aftermath

Old Vic Tunnels, London

By Michael Billington

The Guardian, Friday 9 July 2010



Fortitude and love of their homeland ... Maha Chehlaoui and Daoud Heidami in *Aftermath*. Photograph: Tristram Kenton for the Guardian

Underground theatre is all the rage. But this brick-walled space directly beneath Waterloo Station strikes me as an ill-chosen venue for a piece of verbatim theatre comprising interviews with Iraqis driven to seek refuge in Jordan. The material is fascinating. However the production, part of the London

International Festival of Theatre, is not helped by having to compete with the thunderous rumble of trains overhead.

The show's creators, the American husband-and-wife team of Jessica Blank and Erik Jensen, have realised one crucial fact: verbatim theatre, like any drama, has to have a narrative arc.

Their interviewees start by describing their lives in Saddam's Iraq: undeniably a world of fear and terror, but one that bred its own ironic survival mechanisms. The subjects move on to relive the trauma of the bombing and its aftermath, where they are often caught, literally, between two fires: those of the occupying American forces, and those of brutal local militias. Finally, they sum up their feelings about being refugees.

And what is striking is both their fortitude and their passionate love of their homeland.

Blank and Jensen have the ability to focus on telling detail. A dermatologist recalls his shocked disbelief at hearing George Bush say on TV that "we will fight the sons of al-Qaida on Iraqi soil". A theatre director and his artist-wife, endangered by accepting American money for a festival, are asked what fictional work present Iraq reminds them of. "Braveheart" she says, "King Lear" he replies. A pharmacist describes how his nephew was gratuitously killed by US soldiers, and repeatedly asks what law allows this. An imam imprisoned in Abu Ghraib tells how even a single word was savagely punished.

For the most part, the refugees recount their experiences factually rather in rancour. Blank's production also hits the right note of sombre reminiscence as the interviewees, introduced by Fajer Al-Kaisi as the translator, come forward in turn.

Amongst the cast, Amir Arison as the hedonistic dermatologist, Demosthenes Chrysan as the imam, and Leila Buck as a grieving wife and mother make a strong impression. But the show's final importance rests on two things: one, it comes from a US source, the New York Theatre Workshop; two, as even the Chilcot inquiry has slipped from front pages, it reminds us of the tragic consequences of the Iraq invasion. It is compelling theatre that deserves to be staged in a more sympathetic space.

STAGE REVIEW: 'Aftermath' examines the plight of Iraqi refugees

By Michael Kuchwara
The Associated Press

NEW YORK - An unrelenting sorrow swirls through "Aftermath," a collection of remembrances by people without a country.

Actually, they have a country - Iraq - but all have fled to Jordan since the American arrival in 2003. Their stories have been collected by Jessica Blank and Erik Jensen who interviewed more than three dozen refugees before winnowing down the stories into a heartbreaking evening of theater.

The result, which opened last week at off-Broadway's New York Theatre Workshop, is a docudrama of the highest order, one that personalizes and puts into perspective the staggering human cost of the last six years in Iraq.

In a brisk 85 minutes, Blank and Jensen present a scrapbook of lives interrupted and forever changed. The structure is fluid, with an ingratiating translator, played by Fajer Al-Kaisi, giving a reportorial veneer to the production. He introduces the people to the audience and then, more or less, gets out of the way. The man lets them speak quietly, almost matter-of-factly of their journeys to freedom and uncertainty.

The refugees are a careful cross-section of society - ranging from a well-to-do dermatologist to a theater director and his artist wife to a pharmacist to husband-and-wife cooks to an Imam, who ends up at the notorious prison, Abu Ghraib.

One of the most affecting stories is delivered by Leila Buck, playing a young Christian woman who loses most of her family, including a child, in a horrific explosion. Buck delivers the chilling details with an overwhelming sense of despair.

Outrage of a more political kind is introduced by the Imam, played with a righteous anger by Demosthenes Chrysan. His descriptions of incarceration are unnerving, all the more so because they leave a lot to the imagination.

There are fleeting moments of black humor, most of them provided by Yassar, the dermatologist, portrayed with a swaggering confidence by Amir Arison. The man says he went into dermatology because he couldn't stand the sight of blood. After the war starts, he has no choice but to look.

Yassar is also the one refugee most attuned to Western luxuries and culture - a fancy

neighborhood, expensive cars and a frame of pop reference that ranges from Tom Cruise to Whitney Houston.

Blank and Jensen have created this type of theater before, most notably "The Exonerated," their look at wrongfully convicted inmates on Death Row. "Aftermath" is an impressive addition to journalism as theater.

THE EXONERATED

Riverside Studios

LONDON ★★★★★

The Exonerated is a powerful verbatim play (compiled and eloquently structured by Jessica Blank and Erik Jensen) that brings the audience face-to-face with six victims of the American justice system (so-called) – people who had to spend years on Death Row before their innocence was eventually proved. It's very cleanly and simply staged – a cast of 10 actors (including visiting film stars) sit in a line at lecterns – and the script is based on interview material, court transcripts and letters relating to these cases. The quietly compelling production, by Bob Balaban, is all the more effective for keeping its anger so controlled. With an argument this powerful, there is no need for raised voices.

We're introduced to a world of appalling inequities. The police emerge as a body less interested in solving murders than in notching up convictions, which is bad news for anyone black or from the white underclass or with a record for lesser offences who happens to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. It also means that the innocent can fall foul of the iniquitous plea-bargain system whereby the wised-up can trade in false evidence

for their own acquittal. Movingly played on the night I caught the piece by Stockard Channing, Sunny Jacobs, a gentle hippie type, was framed for the murder of two policemen. Sixteen years before she was released, the true culprit had made a full confession and, though she eventually walked free, it was without her equally misjudged husband Jess, who in 1989 had been executed for the murder in a bungled electrocution that took 13 minutes.

The piece continues to be painfully revealing as it follows the exonerated into the insecurities of freedom. "The state of Texas executed me a thousand times over, man, and it just keeps on doin' it," declares the haunted Kerry, his pain beautifully understated in Aidan Quinn's performance.

Thrown on Death Row when he was 19, on a murder charge established by unscientific fingerprint evidence, this man had to go through repeated violent rape and to live with the knowledge that his wrongful conviction had led to the alcoholic decline and murder of his older brother, before DNA testing proved his innocence more than two decades later. It can't help his peace of mind to think that, as the result of a plea bargain, his sibling's killer got a 10-year sentence and was out in three.

Paul Taylor

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To 11 June (020-8237 1111)

Los Angeles Times

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THEATER

Life After Death Row

Two actors traveled the country to meet people wrongly convicted. The result: a drama and a new perspective.

By HUGH HART

Two summers ago Jessica Blank and her boyfriend, Erik Jensen, embarked on a road trip from New York to Minneapolis. It was no vacation. They were visiting survivors of death row.

"We'd drive to one person's house, do an interview for two or three hours, get back on the road, drive 12 hours into the next state to get there just in time for the next interview. One of us would sleep and one of us would drive," recalls Blank, sitting in front of the empty stage at the Actors' Gang theater.

Beside her is the congenially rumpled Jensen, who picks up the tale: "And the whole time we've got the cell phone in the car with this weird Radio Shack recharger, and I'm charging the phone and Jessica's typing on the laptop transcribing stuff while we're driving in the car."

In the course of that frenetic journey and six other trips through Texas and other Southern states, New York actors Blank and Jensen interviewed 20 people who'd been released from prison after being wrongly convicted of murder. "The Exonerated," a documentary drama opening for previews April 13 at the Actors Gang, weaves together six of those stories.

Stories like Gary Gauger's. His mother and father were found stabbed to death on Gauger's Wisconsin farm. After being questioned for 14 hours, the disoriented hippie farmer gave a "vision statement"--a what-if scenario in which Gauger described how he would have killed his parents, if he had killed them. That statement was described in court as a confession. Gauger was sentenced to death and spent seven years in prison before two motorcycle gang members confessed to the killing.

Then there's Kerry Cook. In 1977, he was a frightened 22-year-old bartender who made the mistake of lying when homicide investigators asked if he'd ever been in a murdered woman's apartment. Cook's fingerprints were found on the door frame. He was convicted of murder and spent 20 years in a 6-foot-by-14-foot Texas prison cell before DNA tests proved the victim's ex-boyfriend was the culprit.

Or Sunny Jacobs. She and her husband, ex-convict Jesse Tafero, were sentenced in 1976 for murdering two policemen at a Florida rest stop. Tafero was executed before an associate, Walter Rhodes, admitted his guilt. By then, Jacobs had spent 16 years in prison.

Jensen says, "I think our initial idea was that these stories would be very dramatic, like 'Hamlet' dramatic, and very serious"-- "and maybe just very, very sad," adds Blank. "But when the interviews started happening," Jensen continues, "it was weird because they were also filled with incredible hope and gratitude. Like with Sunny, the one time she teared up in our interview was when she talked about this juror who had gotten in touch with her when it was all over and said he was sorry. She just had this incredible forgiveness."

Blank is reminded of their visit with Gauger. "We went to talk to Gary on his amazing organic farm where he gave us garlic..." "... that's still growing on our fire escape in New York," adds Jensen.

"And here's a guy, when they found the people who really did kill his parents," Blank continues, "Gary requested that those guys not be given the death penalty. You hear things like that, it's pretty astounding."

Listening to the survivors' tales first hand shook the couple considerably, Jensen says. "I've been in New York for the last 10 years, and I take pride in what I can handle. But hearing these stories blew us away and the people themselves blew us away. I'd never seen anyone so courageous as the people we met that summer."

"Doing those interviews put our lives into an incredible perspective. Somebody cutting me off in traffic, that is not a big deal anymore."

Blank interjects, "Who cares!"

Jensen: "Or like personal things between Jess and me, we can work it out, because there is nothing in our lives that can compare to being on death row when you shouldn't be."

Growing up in Minnesota, where his grandfather worked as a highway patrolman, Jensen remembers being the only student in his Apple Valley High School history class willing to argue against capital punishment.

Blank says she's been interested in prison reform practically all her life. Her parents were Washington, D.C.-based antiwar activists in the '60s. She double-majored in theater and philosophy at the University of Minnesota, gravitating early in her acting career to documentary theater as embodied by performance artist Anna Deavere Smith.

Jensen, who earned a bachelor's in fine arts from Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, cites as an inspiration his friend Moises Kaufman, who conceived and directed "The Laramie Project." Recently televised in a version on HBO, the piece used interview material to reconstruct the aftermath of Matthew Shepard's murder.

By the time they began dating in early 2000, Blank and Jensen were paying the rent with film, TV and stage gigs while tapping into Manhattan political circles through benefits and spoken-word performances. But they hankered for a more ambitious project that would meld activist impulses with compelling storytelling. A few weeks after they met in a New York restaurant, Blank and Jensen got the push they needed in the form of a heart-rending phone call. Jensen recalls, "Jessica dragged me to this anti-death penalty conference at Columbia University. It was gonna take six hours, it was a pain ... but I went." They sat through typical talking-head forums, then gathered around a speaker phone. "It was this inmate in Chicago," Blank says. "His confession was basically tortured out of him. There was something in him that was just pleading for somebody to hear his story."

Blank and Jensen decided it was time to act.

Raising \$12,000 in dribs and drabs to finance their expeditions, Blank and Jensen hit the road with a tape recorder, video camera and a list of contacts provided by the Center for Wrongful Convictions and other groups. In Chicago, they visited Delbert Tibbs, who spent three years in prison after he was convicted for murder in Florida. Tibbs, a former seminary student, was a foot taller than the real killer. But, like the actual culprit, Tibbs was an African American, and that was sufficient for a witness to point to him as the guilty party.

When he was first contacted by a mutual friend, Tibbs recalls, "I wondered, 'What is this, somebody working on their master's thesis?' And they tell me, 'Well no, they're artists and want to use their art to do something about the death penalty. And I said, 'Do they have any money?' because I wasn't working at the time.

"'No, they don't have any money.' And to myself I say, 'Well, maybe this is something good. Just for the sake of the cause--well, yeah, I'll talk to 'em.'"

When the two showed up at his door, recalls Tibbs, "they told me when they get back to New York, they'll be looking for an angel and put it on, and I'm thinking, 'Well ... everybody's looking for an angel in New York to put on a play.' But anyway, I did an interview with them, and I just sort of let it all hang out. They recorded it. And then they called me three or four months later and said, 'We'd like you to come to New York. We're gonna pay your fare.'

"They had pretty much put what I had told them right back in the play. When it was over, the people just kept applauding, it seemed like for 10 minutes. They took, like, three curtain calls." Afterward, Tibbs met actor Charles Dutton, who portrayed him. "He and I had some bubbly wine and hors d'oeuvres and all of that afterwards. I thought it was a fine thing."

In September 2000, Blank and Jensen returned from their travels with 150 pages of unedited manuscript. They didn't find an angel but did hook up with a priceless connection in the person of Bob Balaban. An astute New York actor-director-writer-producer, Balaban hired character actor and first-time writer Julian Fellowes to create his Oscar-winning screenplay for "Gosford Park."

Balaban had befriended Jensen after directing him in Arthur Kopit's play "Y2K" at the Manhattan Theatre Club in 2000. "My main contribution was access," says Balaban. "I knew celebrities who were very interested in the subject, so when Erik and Jessica called me with the piece, the first thing I said was, 'Susan and Tim are friends of mine. I'm going to ask them if they'd like to do a benefit.'"

That would be Susan Sarandon and Tim Robbins. When the two actors signed up for a staged reading at the Culture Project at the 45 Bleecker Theater in November 2000, "The Exonerated" gathered momentum. Richard Dreyfuss, Parker Posey, Blair Brown, Steve Buscemi, David Morse, Cherry Jones, Martha Plimpton, Debra Winger, Ossie Davis and Dutton participated in four benefit performances, including one at the United Nations.

The play's dramatic potential was obvious to Robbins. "I think the thing that makes for interesting acting and interesting plays is high stakes. I don't think it gets much higher than what you find in 'The Exonerated.'" After the readings, Balaban urged Blank and Jensen to undertake another round of research. "I wanted to give 'The Exonerated' a reason to be an evening in the theater and not just a benefit," says Balaban, who will direct the expanded version of "The Exonerated" when it moves to New York for an off-Broadway production. "I suggested that Erik and Jessica add court transcripts so that you feel some structure to the piece. And structure, whether it's TV or plays or movies, is really everything--what to begin with, what you choose to put back to back." The couple made more trips, read thousands of pages of trial records, examined microfiche newspaper articles, sorted through affidavits, read depositions and looked up police interrogations to add dramatic counterpoint to their protagonists' monologues.

Compressing all that raw material into a 90-minute performance required months of rewrites. Says Jensen, "It was like writing a play the way Moby writes music: We were mixing words. Depending on how you juxtaposed things together, different things, completely different meanings, would pop. That's what really created the power of the piece."

While Jensen was in North Carolina shooting the medieval comedy "Black Knight" --he played a warrior sentenced to be executed--Balaban and Blank labored on in New York. Last winter, Robbins offered to stage "The Exonerated" at the Actors' Gang where he serves as artistic director.

One could easily imagine that Blank and Jensen, conversant as they are with crime statistics, pending legislation and case studies of prosecutorial misconduct, would be more than happy to get on a soapbox.

But Blank and Jensen, who got married last summer, deliberately kept their personal views out of "The Exonerated." Says Jensen, "The last thing we want to do is some kind of revolutionary beret-wearing, fist-in-the-air kind of theater. That turns more people off than it draws in, and we're not doing that with this play. We just want to present these stories as cleanly and clearly as we can."

"I see our roles as being a conduit," Jensen says. "People think actors are kind of self-involved, and it's kind of nice to do something that doesn't really have anything to do with us."

The effects of imprisonment have left their scars on the real-life "Exonerated" characters, some literal, some figurative. Cook still has marks carved on his body by convicts who attacked him in prison. Freed from Florida prison, David Keaton cannot get a license to practice his former profession as a horse groomer, even though his felony conviction was later purged. Blank says, "It's not just like, 'Oh, it's a happy ending, they're freed from prison, yay, hooray!' You know, the effects are really not that different from coming home from a war."

Tibbs, for one, forges ahead in Chicago, where he's writing his autobiography in between odd jobs. "As the guys on the road used to say, it was a hellified experience. I don't know if I will ever get over it," he says. "It's changed me in ways I'm not even sure I can articulate. I'm not sure it made me a better person. But I did not allow those times to make me a worse person. I'm not a kid. I'm 61. And yeah, it traumatized my life to an extent, but I'm a persevering bastard. For the most part, it's good to be alive, man."

* * *

"The Exonerated," Actors' Gang, 6209 Santa Monica Blvd., Hollywood. Previews, Saturday; runs April 19-June 16. Showtimes are 8 p.m. Preview, \$10. Regular shows, \$15-\$20, with \$5 student and senior discounts Thursdays and Sundays. (323) 465-0566.

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Hugh Hart is a regular contributor to Calendar.