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Youth Onstage! takes on Iraq War

By LINDA ARMSTRONG
Special to the AmNews

There is an expression that goes "from the mouths of babes," and it comes to mind as you watch the new production, "Over There/Over Here" being produced by Youth Onstage! at the All Stars Project's performing arts and learning center at 543 W 42nd Street. This production is quite thought provoking and is an indictment on President Bush and the war in Iraq. The most amazing thing about this production is that it is actually written by an Iraq War veteran, 22-year-old Michael Reyes, who resides in Brooklyn. He worked with the nine young performers, all 17-24 years old, who so brilliantly bring this captivating, vividly candid



Christlabeledsay Elian and Johnny Paulino.

and often very funny production to life.

"Over There/Over Here" first looks at soldiers in Iraq, and one soldier, Private Ramirez (played by Johnny Paulino), who sees the war as a means to making money. He has connections to get supplies to the other soldiers from cookies to liquor. Another recruit, Marcus Jackson, believes that the war is totally justified and we are there to protect our country after the 9/11 attacks. He feels that he is doing something important by being a soldier and fighting for his country. A female soldier, Sgt. Stone, has the beliefs of the '60s and loves to talk about Dr. King and Malcolm X. She is in Iraq, but only because her choices were the army or jail.

There are scenes in the show that touch on so many of the negatives associated with the war, such as the killing of children if it's

believed might be packing a bomb. You also see the racism that some Black soldiers



(l. to r.) Christlabeledsay Elian, David Friggle and Johnny Paulino.

may be experiencing at the hand of the white officers. Private Jackson becomes an important focus of the play when he is wounded, crippled and sent home to his drug-infested Crown Heights neighborhood.

What's really interesting about this script is how statements about the poor treatment of servicemen who come back from Iraq is almost mentioned in passing. In a conversation between Jackson and an undercover police officer, Stephanie Shepard, he reveals that he was in Iraq for seven months before being wounded. He's been home for three months, but his paperwork is backed up and the check must be "in the mail" because he hasn't received any benefits yet.

This production successfully takes several jabs at the war and problems soldiers face when they come home, especially soldiers who come home wounded and have to battle the war in their own minds, trying to convince themselves that their being wounded and now having their lives forever changed is justifiable. The strong and very grounded views of those who oppose this war are also clearly shared.

You begin to question, why are we there? Is this a war about 9/11 and terrorism or about oil and profit?

The members of this marvelous ensemble cast include Michael Alcide, who does a superb job as Private Jackson; Christlabeledsay Elian, who plays dual roles as Jackson's drug dealing, drug taking cousin, Jimmy,

and Private Williams; Lisa Edwards plays Cindy, the woman who loves Jackson and is the mother of his daughter. She is also the person who has to deal with his ups and downs when he returns home wheelchair bound. Ralph Francois plays the Michael Jackson-loving Ali, who supplies the troops with everything from porno tapes to liquor, and plays Sean, Cindy's little brother. David Friggle gives a powerful performance as the racist officer Lt. Holiday and then shows versatility as the rock band musician Dillinger. Johnny Paulino gives memorable performances as both Ramirez and Enrique, a cafe owner in Crown Heights who voices his distaste of how White business owners are invading the neighborhood and opening competitive businesses. Gillian L. Rougier plays a reporter, Lisa, who's trying to interview the troops about the war and also plays a student activist who is against the war named Rebecca. And lastly Sita Sarkar works her dual roles well as she plays Aseel and Natalie.

The show is directed by Brian Mullin. This dramatic production is playing through January 26. Tickets can be purchased by calling (212) 941-1234.



Michael Alcide and Lisa Edwards in the Youth Onstage! production of OVER THERE /OVER HERE.

(Ronald L. Glassman photos)