

AMERICAN THEATRE

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Young Blood

NEW YORK CITY: It's not that there haven't been plays about the war in Iraq. But it's rare for them to be written from the perspective of teens from working-class neighborhoods. "We don't think of the war as a youth issue," points out director **Brian Mullin**, "but young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are fighting and dying there. For a lot of public high school kids, the armed services are their avenue of advancement." *Over There/Over Here*, playing at **Castillo Theatre** through Dec. 10, is war according to a 22-year-old playwright, **Michael Reyes** who spent nearly a year guarding the Ministry of Oil in Baghdad. And it's based on characters developed from a cast of nine between the ages of 17 and 23, most of whom are first or second generation Americans from black or Latino backgrounds. "This is a segment of the population that often doesn't get to speak out about how the war affects them," points out Mullin (himself not yet 30).

The two-act piece was born at Castillo (which was founded by **Dan Friedman** in 1984 to bring experimental political theatre to a working-class NYC audience) as part of its Youth Onstage! program, which provides free theatre training to young people. This is Brooklyn-raised playwright Reyes's first full production, though Castillo has done readings of two of his previous plays. During an intense two-month development period, the ensemble members discussed their own feelings about war, interviewed active service people who believe strongly in their mission and watched Arab-American theatre artists



Michael Alcide and Sita Sarkar in *Over There/Over Here*.

perform scenes about the conflict from their own point of view. They also hit the streets in Brooklyn and the Bronx (and even hopped on the Staten Island Ferry) to ask passers-by for their thoughts. The dueling perspectives the inquiry uncovered were the basis for improvisation, from which Reyes shaped his narrative.

The tale's not autobiographical, per se: Its young soldier protagonist comes home from Iraq wounded; only then does he begin to question the purpose of the war, especially as he encounters a

barrage of opinions from friends, family and strangers. Reyes, luckily, was not injured in action. He says of daily life in Iraq: "What I remember in particular was the unbelievable tediousness and boredom. Then all of a sudden something happens. I was shaving when we came under attack by a rocket propelled grenade. On the one hand, you're always waiting for something to happen, but most of the time, you're in a state of nothingness. This is part of what I'm trying to bring to the production." Visit www.castillo.org