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Soldier Puts Down His Sword, Picks Up a Pen

BY LEWIS BEALE

Michael Reyes had an epiphany about the Iraq war while stationed in Baghdad as a member of the First Armored Division. His job was to help guard one of the most heavily fortified buildings in the city, the Oil Ministry. Every day, the Brooklyn-born soldier would see all sorts of high-profile Americans and Iraqis enter and leave the premises.

He also noticed something else: a displaced family camped outside the compound, in a shelter of their own making. For eight months Reyes watched this family, along with the movers and shakers who passed by without offering them any help.

"That's when I realized this war was all about oil," Reyes says. "That's why we invaded. All this big business was going down, and this family had no shoes or anything."

Reyes' disillusionment with the war followed him home after his discharge, eventually culminating in *Over There/Over Here*, a play he wrote that is playing at the Castillo Theatre in Manhattan through Dec. 10. (Roger Grunwald, an organizer for the project, said he is very optimistic the play will be extended into January, and is in preliminary discussions with an L.A. producer to bring the work there.)

Reyes' work is unusual on a number of levels: It is the result of a collaborative, almost guerrilla-like process aided by Youth Onstage!, a program that provides young people with free theatre training. And while other plays have been written about the war, this one was written by an inner-city native who saw joining the armed forces as a way to get



RONALD L. GLASSMAN

Christlabelsay Elian, David Friggle and Johanny Paulino in the Youth Onstage! production of *Over There/Over Here*.

out of his neighborhood, only to find that he and others like him had become cannon fodder in an unpopular conflict.

"A lot of plays have been written about Bush and the war," says Brian Mullin, the play's director, "but they're written from an abstract perspective. [*Over There*] asks, What is the social situation that allows this war to happen? The young people from poor communities are the ones fighting and dying, but we don't get to hear their voices in the political discourse."

A Different Kind of War

Reyes, 22, was an only child raised by his mother in Brooklyn's Park Slope neighborhood. He was involved in gang

activity as a teen, but after being nearly beaten to death in a fight, he joined the Army, figuring it would give him money to go to college.

After basic training at Fort Knox — "It was one of the first real accomplishments in my life," Reyes says — he was stationed in Germany and then sent to Iraq. Reyes believed in the military's integrity, but during his time in the service he gradually grew disillusioned with what he describes as its "favoritism and racial bias."

That, plus his autodidactic reading program — Noam Chomsky and playwrights like Pinter and Ionesco were high on the list — gave him a perspective that soon developed into defiance. After talking back to his officers one too



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Taking it to the Street

Mullin also decided that for the play to work, the playwright and the actors (all non-professionals) would have to hear from a variety of viewpoints. So they talked to Vietnam veterans and to an Arab-American actor who had lived in Iraq while Saddam Hussein was in power. They also talked to some gung-ho active-duty service members who thought the war was necessary. In addition, cast members went out on the streets to ask average New Yorkers what they felt about the conflict.

Over There/Over Here is divided into two acts. The first takes place on an Army base in Baghdad in late 2003, where a group of mostly minority non-commissioned officers discuss their differing perspectives on the war. In the second act, one of the characters, who has been wounded, returns home to Brooklyn, where he encounters supporters and opponents of the conflict.

"Michael's vision of the war is that it's a bigger continuation of the hustle he knows from Brooklyn," Mullin says, "that Bush and the others are out to make money on the war."

But Reyes says it's more than that. He sees working-class kids as unwitting cannon fodder. They join the military for the opportunities it supposedly offers, and then encounter a different reality altogether.

"A lot of the people who join the military are from lower-income families," he says. "I felt when I joined I didn't have many other options, and I didn't have anyone to tell me that I did."

Now a produced playwright, Reyes continues to write. He has penned a play about drug dealers in the Brooklyn neighborhood of Flatbush, a series of political sketches, and a satire about commercialism that takes place inside a Wal-Mart on Sept. 11.

"Michael says the kind of stuff he wants to write is not getting produced," Mullin says. "Political plays from a proletarian perspective. In terms of focusing real Americans on the ground level of the Iraq war, I don't know another play like Michael's."

Michael Alcide and Lisa Edwards in the Youth Onstage! production of *Over There/Over Here*.

many times, he was given a general discharge for misconduct.

Reyes had long been interested in writing, mostly short stories. He felt that form was inadequate for the tales he wanted to tell, however, so he began writing plays. Yet he knew nothing about getting a play produced. Reyes spent a day going around to New York theatre companies handing out one of his early plays, only to find out "that's not the way shit is done," he says.

Someone at Roundabout Theatre Company told him about the All Stars Project, which runs the Youth Onstage! program. It was there Reyes met Mullin,

who was intrigued by the veteran's raw talent. "Michael has a great ear for dialogue," the director says, "and he's very funny."

Reyes participated in a playwriting workshop. Mullin, who was interested in mounting a production about the war, suggested they have actors improvise ideas about Iraq, then Reyes would write scenes based on what he was hearing.

"I was going to write the material around the actors and the strength of the actors," Reyes says, "so what each actor brought to the project was important."