

Review of Mike Strozier's play Guns, Shackles & Winter Coats

By Dr. Hugh Fox

I love the beginning. This guy and his wife are at home, she goes out to buy some food and all of a sudden we're in the Middle East in the middle of a war. And it seems we're really there. Very effective dialogue, very deep over-viewing comments:

What the hell are we doing here? Everyone knows President Bush and Cheney are oilmen, with lots of Saudi Arabian friends. Texas oil: that's why we're fighting this war, which the U.S Congress barely supported. We hear it every day, on Rod's short wave radio, on the BBC. How are we supposed to fight and die in a war our country doesn't want us to fight?

You really believe we're there in war territory. Only we're not. This whole war-business is in Brown's *head*. It's all imaginary. Brown thinks he has shot an Iraqi....as his wife comes in with the food she went to buy. Brown is totally nuts, nuts, nuts.

Great dialogue here:

Kara: Here's the Chinese food. I brought extra hot sauce. I know how much you like hot sauce.

Brown: You're going to die.

Kara: John, stop it! Put down the pistol! It's me, Kara. The soldier is gone.

The soldier isn't gone; he was never there except in Brown's insane imagination. Next we move into a mental hospital and Brown is being

tossed out, although he's still a real case. But he's told they can't keep him there because there's not enough money to go around. So out he goes.

His wife appears, and tells him she's had an abortion and is going to get a divorce.

Kara: I had an abortion.

Brown: Why did you do that, Kara? I told you not to do that! You can't kill something alive inside of you! That life was going to replace all of the death in the war. You have taken that life from me! You say you're religious. You're a murdering bitch!

Kara: Meine Mutter hatte Recht mit dir, du bist nicht gut. Du tust gar nichts, um dir selbst zu helfen. My mother was right about you! You don't frighten me anymore. You are pitiful.

A little translation of the German here? I think not. The German by itself makes her whole final speech more convincing, the total distance between them more believable.

There's one last scene in which Brown has been living on the streets like a bum, and he finally shoots himself in the head, a suicide preceded by this horrible ironic statement:

My soul has left me.

*'And I'm proud to be an American, where at least I know I'm free.
And I won't forget the men who died, and gave that right to me.
And I'd gladly stand up, next to you, and defend her still today,
Cause there ain't no doubt I love this land, God bless the USA!'*

Brown puts the pistol to his temple. Gunshot sound over the sound system, and the lights go black.

In the last few years there has been a tremendous change in dramatic formatting. Recent plays have nothing to do with old-time sequential normality, things happening as they pass through time. And the whole idea of dramatizing the insane meanderings in a madman's brain is 100% contemporary technique.

The amazing thing about Strozier, though, is that in the midst of experimental, avant-garde techniques, he still not only *manages* to drag the theater-goer into the real world in real time, but makes blood-curdling statements about our whole contemporary world, the things that haunt our nights after we watch the evening news like BBC America, CNN, etc. You walk out of the theater feeling that some sort of gospel truth has been flung at you viz a viz our involvement in the Middle East and its effect on the lives of our troops and the personal world that surrounds them.

What we have here is a classic play that will be on stage hundreds of years in the future, telling the future world (if there is one) just what happened in the 20th-21st centuries. And technique-wise, instead of merely playing with avant-garde techniques for their own sake, Strozier uses them to give a message across that no theater-goer will ever forget.