

Politics & War at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe

by [Larry Bridwell](#)

Politics have animated theater since ancient times, presenting stories of war, brutality, government oppression, and national identity. These themes were powerfully represented in August at the 2014 Edinburgh Theater Festival Fringe which hosted performing arts groups from all over the globe to create the largest number of theatrical presentations held in one city, with important plays examining war and politics with artistic flair.

The most significant war of the last eleven years has been in Iraq, and “The Collector,” written by British playwright, Henry Naylor, goes back six thousand years to place the American military occupation in historical context. The artistic departure point for the play is a compelling opening statement by a young Iraqi woman, Zoya (Ritu Arya):

“[Iraq is] a magical nation of fable and mystery
A place with a long and ancient history
Boasting a rich and combustible soil,
Fertilized with blood and soaked in oil.
Writing began here and even drawing,
And beating with hoses and waterboarding.
Ours is the story of all mankind
Of the triumphs and failings of the human mind.”



The play takes place in a prison run by Americans, with a male commanding officer, Captain Kasproicz (William Reay) and a female Intelligence specialist, Sergeant Foster (Lesley Harcourt), who interrogates Iraqi prisoners. The interaction between Iraqi politics and American culture in the prison establishes the dramatic dynamics.

The actors narrate the life experiences of an unseen Iraqi translator who is also a musician and loves 21st-century American popular music, including the rapper, Eminem. He hopes that American involvement will lead to a better Iraq for him and

Zoya, his fiancée. Sergeant Foster uses the translator to interrogate prisoners, which leads to his unwitting involvement in the internal politics of the Iraqi conflict.

The play magnificently juxtaposes ideals associated with American culture and the brutal realities of the Iraqi War. At one point, the translator says:

“To the world, America isn’t a place or a flag – it’s a state of mind. America is justice, and freedom, and liberty. The world wants America...”

This vision of a better life is overwhelmed by the Iraqi reality in 2014, as Zoya poetically summarizes:

“We are combatants in the perpetual war
Which began here 6000 years before.
The seeds of our struggle were sown back then
The struggle that’s embedded in the hearts of men.
For when we made the Cradle of Civilization
We also grew anarchy, along with the nation.
And what sprouted out of our Fertile Crescent
Wasn’t always good, wasn’t always pleasant.
For our richest crop is political crisis
And our latest harvest is that of Isis.
But they aren’t our real foe – nor Al-Qaeda, nor Saddam,
The real foe is deep in the heart of man,
For the history of Iraq shows a chilling reality
That man’s greatest enemy is our own brutality.”

Two other plays focused on World War I, in recognition of the conflict’s hundred-year anniversary. They were powerful theatrical presentations about the human impact of war.

“The Bunker Trilogy: Morgana,” written by Jamie Wilkes, and directed and designed by Jethro Compton, is set in a space about the size of a large living room. The setting creates the emotional feeling of being in a bunker that is crowded and intimate as the audience surrounds three British officers, Arthur (Hayden Wood), Lancelot (Sam Donnelly), and Gawain (James Marlowe), who are characters from the Legend of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. Passing time during a lull in World War I, they have dreamy encounters with Morgana (Bebe Sanders), a seductive sorceress in the Arthur legend. The wide-ranging bunker conversations of the personal lives of the officers poignantly humanize the geo-politics of World War I.



“Private Peaceful,” a solo performance with Andy Daniel as Tommo Peaceful, adapted and directed by Simon Reade from a story by Michael Morpurgo, shows how two brothers respond to the incompetence of their officers. During World War I, the older brother enlists in the army and his younger brother, Tommo, joins him when he is old enough.

Eventually they go into combat together. A crisis comes when the older brother is wounded and the younger soldier must decide how to help his sibling in view of contradictory military orders.

Morpurgo also wrote the story on which the play and movie, "War Horse," were based. Both productions powerfully portray the personal impact of the political failures associated with World War I.

After "The Great War," the ideologies of fascism and communism dominated the 20th century in Europe and also fueled World War II and the Cold War. The Tumanishvili Film Actors Theatre in Georgia, which was part of the former Soviet Union, has produced a fascinating rendition of George Orwell's classic novel, *Animal Farm*. The play was adapted and directed by Guy Masterson of Theatre Tours International.

The farm is owned by a capitalistic human, but after a revolutionary uprising by the hard-working animals, the self-organized creatures take over its management. The actors speak Georgian, but the story is made clear by English supertitles and more importantly, by powerful acting which vividly portrays the animals, among them horses, pigs, and chickens. The first few weeks after the revolution are idyllic, but then vested interest politics among the animals lead to callous repression. Who better to communicate the dangers of a noble ideology which deteriorates into an ugly dictatorship but a very talented cast from a former communist country?



These plays of wars and ideologies profoundly raise the issue of how human beings should be governed. Since the end of World War II, most of Europe and the Western Hemisphere (except communist Cuba) have evolved into various forms of democracies. This year, the people of Scotland voted to decide its independence or

continuation as part of the United Kingdom. Several plays at the festival dealt with this historic decision.



The emotional power of Scottish nationalism is portrayed in "The Pitiless Storm," written by Chris Dolan. David Hayman, a brilliant actor directed by his son David Hayman Jr, plays a Scottish labor union leader who has been honored with the prestigious award of the Order of the British Empire. He debates whether he should accept the OBE, because accepting an honor from the aristocratic establishment might negate the left-wing working-class politics of his life.

After the performance, Hayman, also a political activist, took questions from the audience. He said Labor Party Prime

Ministers Tony Blair and Gordon Brown had betrayed socialist ideals. He said that a vote for independence would mean for him that Scotland would never again be forced to accept right-wing decisions made in London.

The same nationalist emotions, running high in Scotland in the month before the referendum, are reflected in “Spoiling” by John McCann and directed by Orla O’Loughlin. The play, which takes place in the future, revolves around Fiona (powerfully acted by Gabriel Quigley), a charismatic woman who had mobilized and inspired working-class voters to support the independence referendum. But after the victory, when she will be named a cabinet minister, the governing party and its political strategists want to control her. They are especially concerned about the potential populist public statements she might make.

A young party worker, Mark (Richard Clements), has been assigned to manage her, but the tension between his inexperience and her deep, visceral knowledge of Scotland surfaces when he refers to the birth of a new country. Fiona treats him as an ignorant child, dramatically pointing out that the vote was not a trendy 21st-century event, but the profound re-birth and restoration of an ancient nation. The newly empowered politicians in negotiations with the United Kingdom emphasize the revisionist slogan of “Interdependence.” Fiona passionately believes that the people voted for independence, but the establishment in both England and Scotland was planning to dilute the impact of the referendum by plotting a de facto reversal of the vote.



The September, 2014 referendum failed. Intriguingly, the youth of Scotland voted strongly in favor of independence, but exit polls showed that it was senior citizens who overwhelmingly voted to stay within the United Kingdom. Edinburgh in the 1990’s built a modern parliament building. A future referendum fueled by plays about Scottish nationalism may once again re-establish the city as the capital of an ancient, sovereign, independent nation.

Globally, with violent flashpoints in the Middle East, Ukraine, Africa and Asia, tragic political conflicts are still with us, even after six thousand years of civilized life. The Fringe Festival shows that theater can powerfully portray the multifaceted dynamics of both the history and future of human governance.

“The Collector,” written and directed by Henry Naylor.

“[The Bunker Trilogy](#): Morgana,” written by Jamie Wilkes; directed and designed by Jethro Compton.

“[Private Peaceful](#),” adapted and directed by Simon Reade from the story by Michael

Morpurgo.

“[Animal Farm](#),” adapted and directed by Guy Masterson, Theatre Tours International, featuring the Tumanishvili Film Actors Theatre, Georgia.

“[The Pitiless Storm](#),” written by Chris Dolan; directed by David Hayman Jr.

“Spoiling,” written by John McCann; directed by Orla O’Loughlin, at the [Traverse Theatre](#).

[Edinburgh Festival Fringe](#)

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