

You Are Dead. You Are Here.

nytheatre.com review by Joan Kane
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In *You Are Dead. You Are Here.* Playwright Christine Evans tells a story of ordinary people who are trying to recuperate from the catastrophe of war. Without making judgments or preaching she presents characters in a deep well of despair trying desperately to move forward. The evolution of this play began in 2010 when director Joseph Megel commissioned Christine Evans to write a script for the Virtual Performance Factory as part of the CHAT Festival at UNC Chapel Hill. Inspired by the powerful response to the work, and with media designer Jared Mezzocchi joining in collaboration, the trio decided to work together on a full-length version. In 2010, they joined HERE as Resident Artists.



Anthony Gaskins in a scene from *You Are Dead. You Are Here.* | Lana Duiverman

In the play Michael, a veteran of the Iraq War, is suffering from posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). His experiences include watching “death in the rear view mirror” when his buddy gets blown to pieces by a roadside bomb while on patrol in a Humvee. These details live below the surface of his psyche and cause him to have severe anxiety in the most ordinary circumstances such as shopping for toothpaste. He tells his therapist “I have survived Fallujah but I can’t handle Walmart.”

To help Michael cope with his PTSD he agrees to participate in an experimental program to help veterans. The program uses technology as a new therapy tool called Virtual Iraq, a virtual reality program originally developed for military training that has been adapted to help in the treatment and rehabilitation of PTSD. Hanna, who is the head therapist of the treatment program, helps Michael to relive the traumatic events to try to heal his emotional scars and adjust to living a normal life.

The story of Zaynab, an Iraqi teenage girl blogger, is skillfully woven into the storytelling. She documents her life in the war; the lack of water, food, intermittent electricity, nine family members crammed into a small apartment including a crying baby, the finding of the head of her brother’s friend in the garbage, the death of her mother by an American combat soldier. Her story is told in parallel to Michael’s treatment. Episodes of her story explode onto the VR screen and are projected onto the office walls. The set designed by Melpomene Katakalos put us firmly in the icy environment of the therapist’s office.

Joseph Megel’s skillful direction unified all aspects of the storytelling. I am always anxious when projections are used in theatre, worried that they will break down or take me out of the story as I wonder how the artist created these special effects. In this case I was put at ease immediately and I was completely absorbed in the story. The beautifully detailed performances by Anthony Gaskins, Kathleen Khavari and Kittson O’Neill left me deeply moved. *You Are Dead. You Are Here* was one of the best shows I have experienced in 2013. I’ve read the articles in the Science Times about PTSD but never was I this moved and inspired to fully grasp the extent of the suffering that soldiers retuning from combat suffer.



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