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Tours of Duty and the Price Paid at Home

Lives of Returning Marines in 'Basetrack Live' at BAM

NYT Critics' Pick

By CHARLES ISHERWOOD NOV. 12, 2014

“When I was in Afghanistan, all I wanted to do was come back to America. But when I got home to America, there was this empty feeling, and I just wanted to go back to Afghanistan.”

That sobering statement, from a Marine who is at the center of the new show “Basetrack Live,” attests to the psychological disorientation faced by so many soldiers who have served in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The experience of these American service members — fighting for their country abroad, and sometimes fighting new battles on the home front when they return — is given riveting life in this production, a powerfully moving work of documentary theater from the newly resurrected En Garde Arts company, run, now as before, by Anne Hamburger.

The production, which can be seen at the Brooklyn Academy of Music through Saturday, weaves together the dramatized story of the Marine Corps infantryman AJ Czubai, played by Tyler La Marr, with video testimonials and photography featuring other members of the First Battalion Eighth Marine Regiment, which was deployed to Helmand Province in Afghanistan in 2010. The show, created by Edward Bilous and directed by Seth Bockley, was inspired by a web-based project of the same name that embedded journalists with the company and collected a rich trove of interviews with the Marines and their wives and girlfriends back home. (It also helped keep the service

members and their families in communication, and created a social media forum for them in which they could share their stories.)

The experience of soldiers fighting the long wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have been widely documented, of course, but “Basetrack Live” — adapted by Jason Grote in collaboration with Mr. Bockley and Ms. Hamburger — brings a vital intimacy, and a compelling visual allure, to the journalistic enterprise. Most of us know about the impact of the wars on the soldiers, including numerous suicides, but this production brings the gritty, brutal truths alive in ways that nothing I’ve read or seen has succeeded in doing.

AJ grew up mainly in Texas, but when his mother and stepfather divorced, and he moved to Virginia, he dropped out of high school and began drinking and doing drugs: “just not living a good life,” as he puts it. One look in the mirror on a bad morning and his life changed: “I went onto Marines.com, and the next day a recruiter called, and I was sold.” Although his recruiting officer wanted him for an intelligence unit, he insisted on joining the infantry.

Mr. La Marr, and Ashley Bloom, who portrays his wife, Melissa, are the only actors in the show, although a richly varied music score, by Michelle DiBucci, Mr. Bilous and Greg Kalember, is played live by a four-piece band. Above the stage, videotaped interviews with AJ’s fellow Marines and their wives and girlfriends are projected on a huge burlap-colored screen. The combination of live performance and video can be tricky to pull off effectively — often one upstages the other — but they flow together naturally here.

A theme running throughout the show is the extreme levels of anxiety experienced by the family members left behind, who hear only intermittently from the soldiers on the ground, and are haunted by the fear that at any moment bad news could arrive. “If the phone rings, or if the door knocks, whether it’s pest control or the maintenance guy, your heart stops beating, thinking that that’s the guy coming to tell you he’s not coming back,” Melissa explains.

Naturally, the soldiers in battle face even greater pressure. The way they can matter-of-factly discuss the possibility of facing death every day — and the different ways they might die — is both disarming and disturbing. “I just hope that every step I take I don’t step on the wrong spot on the ground,” one Marine says.

I should make clear that for all the dark subject matter it explores, “Basetrack Live” is not just a dreary trawl through sad stories, a full evening of eat-your-spinach theater, if you will. The images of Afghanistan often have a hypnotic beauty, and the music brings a consoling warmth to even the grimmer passages. Mr. La Marr and Ms. Bloom give engaging, natural performances, so that while AJ and Melissa tell their stories in retrospect, they still have a sharp immediacy.

And there are plenty of moments of sly humor. In an early battle, AJ becomes more enraged that his Oakley sunglasses have been scratched than he is that he’s being fired upon. The Marines have amusingly differing perspectives on life in Afghanistan. “It’s a beautiful country,” one says, “but, uh, I guess maybe I just like it a lot better than Jacksonville, N.C. Maybe that’s why they put us in Jacksonville, so we’d all get really happy when we come to places like this.”

The tales of battle are not the most harrowing in “Basetrack Live.” Even those have an occasional glint of macabre humor, as when the seriously injured AJ takes notice of how badly he’s hurt only when he reaches for his cigarettes and finds they’re soaked in blood. It’s the details of the soldiers’ often traumatic return to civilian life that really get under your skin. Having lived under such extreme conditions, the men cannot easily make the psychological readjustment to a world in which danger isn’t lurking around every corner. Many suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder, whether they are willing to identify it as such or not.

AJ buys a handgun, to Melissa’s dismay. (By now they have a young daughter.) He drinks too much and acts out. And his troubled return is by no means unusual. Another Marine is pulled over by a cop for speeding. He has been drinking, too. “And he walked up to me and was like ‘Where ya goin’?’ ” The smart-alecky but telling answer: “Nowhere fast.”

Basetrack Live

Created by Edward Bilous; composed by Michelle DiBucci, Mr. Bilous and Greg Kalember; directed by Seth Bockley; adapted by Jason Grote in collaboration with Mr. Bockley and Anne Hamburger; music direction by Ms. DiBucci; performance technology design by William David Fastenow; lighting by Paul Hudson; sets by Caleb Wertenbaker; costumes by Claudia Brown; based on the website One-Eight Basetrack started by Teru Kuwayama. An En Garde Arts production, presented as part of the Next Wave Festival

by Brooklyn Academy of Music, Alan H. Fishman, chairman of the board; Karen Brooks Hopkins, president; Joseph V. Melillo, executive producer. At the Harvey Theater, Brooklyn Academy of Music, 651 Fulton Street, Fort Greene, 718-636-4100, bam.org. Through Saturday. Running time: 1 hour 20 minutes.

WITH: Tyler La Marr (AJ Czubai) and Ashley Bloom (Melissa Czubai).

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