

“INTO THE FIRE”

A short play about veterans and PTSD

By Robert Puett, PA-S

No curtain. No makeup or costumes. No intermission. *Had To Be Productions'* short play “Into The Fire” takes a minimalist approach to presenting the words and thoughts of veterans and veteran family members in their struggles with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Two actors, one man and one woman, assume multiple roles with dialogue taken from interviews with veterans and their loved ones as they talked about their experiences during and after the wars in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan.

The play begins with an explanation of the average number of rounds fired during a typical combat zone firefight, along with the observation that soldiers must, rather than duck or run away, advance into the fire. The actors deliver their lines at an appropriately rapid-fire pace, and change characters just as swiftly, indicating the switch by adopting a different voice or posture. Painful memories of combat and episodes of post-tour maladjustment fly at the audience until one feels overwhelmed by an avalanche of emotion. The actors use silence just as effectively, pausing after certain anecdotes until one wonders if they will proceed, or simply bring the play to an abrupt halt.

The characters explain or act out many of the cardinal symptoms of PTSD: poor anger management, anxiety, alienation, nightmares, hypervigilance, and so on. And, unlike many plays in which there is a “fourth wall” behind which the actors can be oblivious of the presence of the audience, “Into The Fire” breaks that wall as the actors confront the spectators directly. One feels challenged and put on the spot, and yet still secure in the knowledge that this is a play, and no one is going to be hurt or humiliated.

This emotional remove is an effective way of conveying the pain of veterans returning from war. It opens the audience members up to the emotional toll without making them uncomfortable or fearful for themselves or the veterans. And, as the actors themselves state after the drama ends, the play is more effective at getting PTSD sufferers to open up to treatment than a number of military training films have been. A film preparing soldiers for the likely post-combat challenges they face may be well intentioned, but the emotional remove of characters on film may be too distant for young men and women in combat to relate to. Watching flesh-and-blood characters on a stage in real time is a valuable way to convey the pain veterans experience, as well as the role friends and family members fill through understanding, patience, and involvement in professional treatment.

“Into The Fire” also stresses that seeking help for PTSD, TBI and other ailments requires just as much courage as facing battle in the first place, and concludes with a reiteration of the average number of rounds shot during a typical firefight, and how service men and women must ignore their instincts for self-preservation, and advance into the fire.