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Adaptation of article on war to be performed today

by Wendy Butler, 3/19/2006

This is what they said, believe it or not.

“What I Heard About Iraq (A Cry for 5 Voices)” is not wholly nonfiction, nor is it fiction.

Simon Levy’s play contains quotes from U.S. officials about war.

Those quotes cover more than 10 years and people who hear these quotes are apt to notice that official statements made in 1992 are markedly different than ones made by the same people in 2002. Levy’s play is an adaptation of Eliot Weinberger’s article “What I Heard About Iraq,” which was published in the London Review of Books in February 2005.

The Weinberger article traces the chronology of the current Iraq War.

Weinberger uses actual quotes, but he does bridge each quote with what some might consider a bit of editorial comment. His article begins this way: “In 1992, a year after the first Gulf War, I heard Dick Cheney, then secretary of defense, say that the U.S. had been wise not to invade Baghdad and get ‘bogged down in the problems of trying to take over and govern Iraq.’ I heard him say: ‘The question in my mind is how many additional American casualties is Saddam worth? And the answer is: not that damned many.’”

The Fountain Theatre in Los Angeles will premiere Levy’s play on Monday, to mark the third anniversary of the Iraq War.

Additionally, The Fountain Theatre, in association with the internationales literaturfestival berlin (www.literaturfestival.com/news1_3_2_496.html) and the Peter Weiss Foundation for Art and Politics, is coordinating a worldwide reading of “What I Heard About Iraq (A Cry for 5 Voices)” on Monday.

Humboldt Bay Chapter 56 of Veterans for Peace Inc. and the Humboldt branch of Women’s International League For Peace and Freedom are sponsoring a theatrical reading of “What I Heard About Iraq (A Cry for 5 Voices)” today at 4 p.m. at the Arcata Community Center.

Five Dell’Arte International School of Physical Theatre MFA students will perform a 50-minute reading of the play. That will be interspersed with poetry and live music.

“They are exactly the quotes that these politicians made,” Dell’Arte MFA student Steve Cross said. “By the time you go through the 50 minutes you realize the people contradicted themselves.”

The article and now Levy’s theatrical adaptation provide a war summary, he said. “We can look at it from where we all stand as citizens of this country,” Cross said. “From that we can go away going ‘Maybe I should be a little more alert here.’”

Cross added that he is skeptical of anyone who pulls quotes out of context for their own purposes, such as Weinberger’s decision about how he would utilize quotes to make his own statement about the war.

Levy said in a prepared statement that his intention with this theatrical adaptation was to unite community through theater.

“The power of theater is its ability to affect people, to make us feel,” he said. “Although this is fact-based theater, documentary theater, investigative theater in the tradition of ‘Laramie Project’ or ‘The Exonerated’ or ‘Guantanamo’ or ‘Execution of Justice’ or ‘Are You Now or Have You Ever Been?’ and many such plays — it must also be theater that emotionally engages and galvanizes each audience member to take action in her/his way. It’s also meant to stir debate.

“And this is about the art of the actor, the magic of imagination and transformation.”

Becky Luening is an associate member of Veterans for Peace and a member of WILPF.

“We believe that the arts have a way of reaching people or touching people in a way that regular discourse does not,” she said. “If you hear a poem or you hear music, if you hear a certain song, it can make you cry.

“It has a way of bypassing the brain and going straight to the heart.”

This theatrical reading is part of local veterans’ efforts to enlighten community residents about war’s consequences. “There are a lot of veterans in Veterans for Peace who have experienced war,” she said. “Their personal experiences are the basis for their desire for the abolition of war; not just this war, but all wars.”