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# ATP's moving anti-war Dust overcomes a few potholes

STEPHEN HUNT, CALGARY HERALD | 03.17.2013



Gavin Young, Calgary Herald Esther Purves-Smith, Deena Aziz and Kyle Jespersen in Dust, at Alberta Theatre Project

Gavin Young Gavin Young / Calgary Herald

Who knew that the single most searing image of Dust, an antiwar drama set in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Canada, would take place (sort of) in Toronto?

And yet there it is, at the tail end of the middle segment of a three

SECTIONS | dramatic (dis) harmony of sorts that explores the human cost of  
on women and families everywhere.

It's a pretty big mission that playwrights Jonathan Garfinkel (<http://www.penguin.ca/nf/Author/AuthorPage/0,,1000072789,00.html>) and Christopher Morris (<http://www.humancargo.ca/bios/christopher-morris>), (who also directs) have set out to explore.

Is it mission accomplished, as a certain American President once famously declared?

Maybe not entirely. There are a few potholes one must drive over in *Dust*, which is not only constructed as three separate stories, but told in a series of monologues and brief scenes that feel like a pastiche of interviews the playwrights conducted in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Canada over the past five years.

That results in some pretty episodic storytelling that occasionally feels less organic than cut and pasted together, (particularly in the opening story, set in Pakistan).

However, it also results in a drama that features the voices of characters who rarely have their stories told on Canadian mainstages, and in its own unconventional manner, *Dust* eventually becomes a powerful, moving drama that feels more true than most war movies.

Unfolding on a simple, but highly evocative set (designed by Scott Reid) — nothing but sand — *Dust* starts its journey in Pakistan.

The Taliban, represented here by a woman (Samiya Mumtaz) are from the country, while do-gooders like a female doctor (Deena Aziz),

is educated, thinks like a westerner and attempts to re-educate  
SECTION | Taliban widow's son — are city people, full of traitorous western  
ideals that are a betrayal of their faith.

That's the backdrop that leads to the doctor, trying to shake the suicide bomber son out of his death wish, shouting, "Your family is your jihad. Math is your jihad!" and that paradise exists on earth, not in heaven.

Mumtaz is a star in South Asian pop culture, and here she fills up the stage with a kind of unholy charisma that almost undermines her character. Dressed in a gorgeous flowing red outfit (by Gillian Gallow), she looks more ready for a Golden Globes carpet walk than what one might anticipate the wife and mother of the Taliban would dress in — but when she does an impromptu physicalization of her anguish, the result is beautiful, even if it feels a little incongruous.

The Afghanistan segment is really a Toronto segment, where Michael (Kyle Jespersen), a Canadian do-gooder movie guy, helps an actress (Aziz) and her young son (Purves-Smith) emigrate after her husband is murdered by a relative in Kabul for refusing to forbid his wife from acting (it brings shame on the family).

Morris has a talent for pulling stunning images out of his shows, and the opening of the Afghanistan segment, which features Aziz with her son draped over her shoulders, grief-stricken and traumatized, making the journey to her new life in Canada, is exactly that — stunning.

That might be a new beginning for some people, but the problem with new beginnings, as we discover, is that they happen even as

SECTIONS | e still attempting to process the trauma of leaving the old try. It's as much an immigration story as a war story — but maybe the two are so completely intertwined, it would be impossible to separate them.

The final image, the mirror opposite of the opening image - which features Purves-Smith, with Aziz draped over her shoulder, as he realizes the success of their life in a new country is up to him, is devastating.

The final segment of Dust tells the story of a Canadian couple, played by Erin MacKinnon and Jespersen. She lives on the base in Petawawa and euphorically describes their lovemaking when he returns home for a few days of leave — until one day, when, getting her nails done, she receives the sort of bad news every military spouse dreads.

The casting of Dust is colour-and-gender blind, which makes for some uncomfortable moments early on, as the white actors play Pakistani characters, but the farther Morris goes with it — he has Mumtaz playing the husband in the middle segment, and Purves-Smith playing a boy in the final one — the more your self-consciousness about it falls away. It doesn't hurt either, that Aziz and Mumtaz both deliver beautifully calibrated performances throughout, while Mackinnon, Jespersen, Purves-Smith and Dugan each find singular moments — particularly Mackinnon's Petawawa turn and Purves-Smith's young Afghan boy as a fish-out-of-water in Toronto — that are admirable.

Arriving almost a decade to the day that the United States launched its shock and awe tour of the Middle East by invading Iraq, Dust feels both timely and destined to start a lot of conversations.

Arta Theatre Projects (<http://www.atplive.com/>) presents Dust

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at the Enbridge playRites Festival of New Canadian Plays through April 7

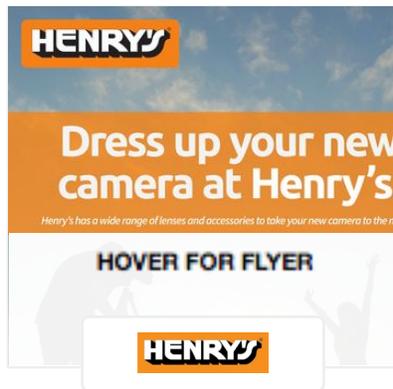
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