

## **the lonely soldier's march to stage**

Helen Benedict met her first lonely soldier in New York, during an event where veterans were talking to a crowd about their experiences at war. That is, the male veterans. Sitting alone at the back of the room was a female soldier who didn't take part in the talk. Being the seasoned reporter she is, Benedict approached her. It is thanks to the conversation that followed that she first became aware of the kind of life of abuses and injustices that American female soldiers are facing.

According to the figures Benedict gathered in her book, almost a third of all females serving in the military has been sexually abused by fellow soldiers. Benedict, who did a great deal of work with rape survivors and has published a book on the subject, interviewed extensively forty female veterans. She published several articles and now a book, "The Lonely Soldier", a painful and illuminating account of five women's experience in the military, from enlistment to post traumatic stress disorder. The book denounces the constant sexual harassment and abuse women go through while serving in the military, and the lack of recognition for their work when they come back. Through her impressive reporting, the author succeeds in drawing the full picture of life in the military as a woman, and makes an attempt at outlining possible changes that could improve it.

By the time it makes it to the stage of the Theater for the New City as "The lonely soldier monologues", the work has lost much of its power. Benedict had originally envisioned the play, which is her first attempt at playwriting, as two monologues. The enthusiasm of Sesame Street writer and off-off-Broadway director William Electric Black, who put up the production, convinced her to expand it to include seven characters.

The result is a procession of accounts of experiences that are not sufficiently different from each other to justify the inclusion of all of them in the play. The narrative structure also doesn't help: by the time we meet the second woman, we feel we already know what is coming next, and the sense of predictability kills the drama of the stories being told. Perhaps a more seasoned cast could have succeeded in the task of bringing these different women to life, and to expose more efficiently the differences among their tales, but the performances of the young women in the cast felt gimmicky and didactic.

Among them, Kim Weston-Moran's interpretation stands out. She plays an American Indian sergeant, who realizes while in Iraq the absurdity of the American invasion, and starts relating strongly to the Iraqis, to the point of questioning whether she is fighting on the right side of the war. "We are not protecting anybody's country here, we are taking it," she says in one of the most intense moments of her character.

The rest of the production is also not convincing. The design of the set is minimal, yet distracting: all along the play, the actors keep rearranging the three wooden benches, in a way that feels both disorderly and purposeless. The same applies to the choice of having the actors reciting certain lines all at the same time, as if in a choir: the phrases, shouted against the audience, turn into some kind of a refrain, and like it often happens to refrains, they lose their meaning.

But the most disturbing element of the whole production is probably the one lonely soldier: in the production there is a single male actor, who assumes at different times the role of abusive commander or untrustworthy friend. He almost never speaks, and often looks quite clueless: having this solitary soldier representing the male military establishment is catastrophic, considering the thesis that is being portrayed. Against this bunch of women, he looks helpless, quiet and definitely not credible as the incarnation of the brutal and barbaric military mob.

Contrarily to what the book does, "The Lonely Soldier monologues" goes against the warning that comes from Benedict herself, which is of always focusing the attention on the perpetrators rather than on the victims. By excluding the men, and by having the characters complaining about how ghastly it is for women to live in the camps or to be instructed to drive over children on roads in case of danger, we are dangerously left wondering why should there be a difference for men and women in the horror of being at war. In fact, as Benedict noted in

a recent interview, the difference is that men go to war with their comrades, while women go to war with their rapists.

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