

# BACKSTAGE

## Heads

by Neal Weaver

Aug 29, 2007

Many years ago, a fledgling theatre company launched its first production, Michel Tremblay's *Hosanna*, in a tiny basement theatre at Gardner Stages. The company was the Blank Theatre Company, and the artistic director and leading man in that first show was Daniel Henning. Now that company is inaugurating its 17th season with EM Lewis' *Heads*, and founder-artistic director Henning is still in charge. Over the years, his company has racked up a distinguished record.

*Heads* is set in an old warehouse in Iraq in 2004. Onstage are two grungy, bare, makeshift cells, where four kidnapped prisoners -- all civilians -- are being held. Two American journalists -- intense, hyperactive freelance photographer Jack (Jeremy Gabriel) and naive greenhorn reporter Michael (J. Richey Nash) -- occupy one cell. In the other are Harold (James Eckhouse) -- an American engineer who has been in captivity for months -- and sophisticated Caroline (Beth Broderick), an English divorcée who was working at Baghdad's British Embassy. None knows why they have been kidnapped, who their captors are, or what their fates will be.

Each victim deals with captivity differently. Harold tries to maintain sanity through personal discipline, Caroline employs a defensive wit, Jack is hell-bent on making an escape, and Michael clings to the hope that the U.S. government will rescue them. Tight quarters lead to squabbling and fighting, but each pair manages to find comfort in each other, though hope is in short supply.

Everything about the production is exemplary. Darin Anthony directs with sensitivity, the script is tautly written, the actors offer contrasting, richly nuanced performances, and all the technical credits are impressive, including Dan Jenkins' bleak set, John Eckert's lighting, Sherry Linnell's costumes, Dave Mickey's sound design, and the gritty newsreel footage by media designer Richard Baumgartner. The play is not overtly propagandistic, but it seems not to tell us anything we don't already know from the nightly news. And it's harrowing to watch a play in which everything is terrible at the start and we know it's just going to get worse.

Presented by the Blank Theatre Company at the 2nd Stage Theatre,

6500 Santa Monica Blvd., Hollywood.

Thu.-Sat. 8 p.m., Sun. 2 p.m. Aug. 18-Sep. 23.

(323) 661-9827. [www.theblank.com](http://www.theblank.com).