

'Heads' gets inside the plight of hostages coping in Iraq

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"Heads," EM Lewis' new drama at the Blank Theatre Company, tells a story so topical that it feels as if the play was co-written by CNN.

In a prison somewhere in Iraq, two American journalists (Jeremy Gabriel and J. Richey Nash) have been taken hostage by insurgent forces. Sharing a single cell, the captives bicker about space (there is little), food (even less) and means of escape. In another room, an engineer (James Eckhouse) who has been imprisoned for six months gets acquainted with his new cellmate, a cynical British diplomat (Beth Broderick).

Alternating between scenes from the two cells, "Heads" charts the ways in which forced intimacy breeds antagonism. The playwright has created complex, often abrasive characters who can be downright mean to each other. "You smell," says the diplomat to the engineer. Later, the engineer performs sit-ups in an attempt to block out her endless chatter. There's a sense that these hostages are their own captors, in a Sartrean, hell-is-other-people way. Director Darin Anthony's decision to keep the Iraqi kidnappers offstage only reinforces this suggestion.

More interested in human behavior than politics, the play finds moments of warmth and even humor in its dire scenario. "I cut myself shaving this morning. And then I spilled coffee on my shirt," recounts one of the journalists. "I wondered what the third thing was going to be." The two journalists gradually come to depend on each other's company, if only to stave off boredom. (In a nice touch emblematic of the playwright's attention to detail, one of them is a TV anchor while the other is a lowly freelance photographer.) The cast delivers impressively nuanced performances, with Gabriel especially memorable for playing the photographer as one part Robert Capa, one part Han Solo.

Watching the play, it's almost impossible to not think of Daniel Pearl or any of the more recent hostage crises.

To its credit, the play avoids sensationalism, focusing on the quotidian and banal aspects of confinement. It also steers clear of political sermonizing, with the brief exception of a speech about journalistic ethics that feels tacked on.

The play grows progressively introspective as the clock ticks down, denying the prisoners big dramatic catharsis. This intelligent drama knows that day-to-day, hour-by-hour survival is dramatic enough.