

GO HEADS EM Lewis' intense drama portrays the nightmare of four Western hostages facing execution in Iraq. American engineer Harold Wolfe (James Eckhouse) has been held in isolation for six months when Caroline (Beth Broderick), a British Embassy employee, is tossed into his tiny, dank holding cell, bound, gagged and blindfolded. Following her initial panic, the sardonic, well-coiffed Brit (how does she keep her do in place till the final scene? — a minor quibble) combats her terror with disdainful irony, snubbing her cellmate and scorning the meager nourishment he counsels her to eat. Meanwhile, in a neighboring cubicle, two recently kidnapped journalists — volatile Jack (Jeremy Gabriel), a seasoned loner, and idealistic Michael (J. Richey Nash), a petrified greenhorn — clash over what an escape attempt might do to their chances of survival. As weeks pass, the deadline for the beheading of Harold and Michael nears. While the play implicitly opposes U.S. policy, the main thrust is psychological, not political: to probe the transformations human beings undergo as they endure isolation, deprivation and dread. For middle-class audiences with lives of privilege, the similarity of their social station to the hostages on the stage will only intensify the drama's considerable power. Under Darin Anthony's direction, and underscored by designer Dan Jenkins' cavernous yet claustrophobic set, the question of who we are beneath our posturing lands with such force, it jangles the nerves long after the play has ended. **THE BLANK THEATRE**, 6500 Santa Monica Blvd., Hlywd.; Thurs.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 2 p.m.; thru Sept. 23. (323) 661-9827 or www.theblank.com. (Deborah Klugman)