



EM Lewis writes plays which are hard-sells. Her recent *Infinite Black Suitcase* featured a large cast of characters dealing with death and/or dying over the course of a single day. She has followed this with *Heads*, the story of three Americans and one Brit held hostage in an Iraqi warehouse, in a pair of dank filthy bare cells, over the course of about a month. Not easy stuff to sell to folks looking for a summer evening at the theater. But just as *Infinite Black Suitcase* was as much about the joy of living and loving as it was about death and dying, so Lewis has managed to find great humanity, and moments of surprising humor, in this grim story "ripped from today's headlines," as they say. Cellmates Jack Velasquez and Michael Aprés are journalists just taken hostage. Caroline Conway is a British embassy employee, also just captured, who finds herself sharing a cell with engineer Harold Wolfe. She recognizes Wolfe, whose TV appearances holding an Iraqi newspaper and possibly making forced anti-American statements have been seen around the world. As Velasquez tries to convince Aprés that a "prison break" is their best option, Wolfe must adjust to the first human contact he's had in seven months, and ex-smoker Conway just wants a fag=British for cigarette. (She doesn't understand why Wolfe doesn't keep a stash under the mattress for barter, like in the movies.) If sudden humor sounds incongruous, well, that's just the type of gallows humor that keeps prisoners alive, and provides audiences an occasional, and welcome, relief from the building tension and suspense. Playwright Lewis is lucky indeed to have Darin Anthony directing this world premiere play. Just as he proved in the recent *Burn This*, Anthony (an actor himself) is an actor's director, and had guided his cast of four to superb performances every one. Beth Broderick and James Eckhouse prove once again one of the reasons L.A. theater is so great. Yes, these are actors who've made names for themselves on TV, she in 140 episodes of *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*, and he in 142 episodes of *Beverly Hills 90210*...yet both are gifted and experienced stage actors as well. Broderick is all well-coifed, well made-up sophistication upon her arrival, but as her imprisonment progresses, she is just another frightened victim of terrorism (it doesn't matter which side it's on). Fine work from an underrated actress. And Eckhouse, virtually unrecognizable under a thick beard and wearing filthy clothes which look like they haven't been washed in all the time he's been in solitary confinement, does equally well at capturing the alternating fear and resignation of a longtime hostage. The meatiest roles go to a pair of gifted young actors, both with extensive stage credits. J. Richey Nash as Michael Aprés, a recent arrival in Iraq, undergoes the greatest change, from TV anchor-ready newsman to terrorized and brutalized prisoner. It's a powerful and most effective performance. Jeremy Gabriel's Jack Velasquez, with his black hair and beard, provides the perfect contrast to clean cut blond Nash. A kind of "war photographer of fortune," in Iraq for two years, Velasquez sees much better than his cellmate what a dire situation they find themselves in, hence the desperation to escape, which Gabriel captures perfectly, giving gives an intensely forceful performance that has star written all over it. Equally important to the success of this production are the design elements. Dan Jenkins' has created side by side cells, grimly windowless and bare. John Eckert's lighting is stark

and dramatic. When a cell door opens, all we see is a blinding light, and in scene changes, the total darkness we sit in is truly frightening. Sherry Linnell has designed costumes that seem to have been taken off of real hostages' backs. Dave Mickey captures the sounds and the silence that add to the hostages' terror. Rick Baumgartner has created two hostage videos which could easily have been taken from CNN footage. The makeup (no designer has been credited) looks like real dirt, and real blood. This is a class A team of designers at the top of their craft. Ultimately, Heads is not just a fine opener for the Blank's 2007-2008 season, but a perfect illustration of the power of stage to transport us to other places, to offer us different experiences, and to allow (or force) us to live other lives in a darkened theater. It deserves to be seen. 2nd Stage Theatre, 6500 Santa Monica Blvd., Hollywood; 8 p.m. Thursdays through Saturdays, 2 p.m. Sundays; Through Sept. 23; Price: \$22 and \$28 (323) 661-9827

--Steven Stanley