

**Arts** 02.03.11

# The day I emptied the Pentagon

At the height of the turmoil in Egypt, 1,200 Pentagon staff went off to the theatre for a day. Director **Nicolas Kent** explains how he seduced the US military



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Three years ago, as yet another script about the war in Iraq crossed my desk, I became very aware that the story had moved on - but that the arts and, to some extent, the media had not. Afghanistan was going to be the challenge for western foreign policy for the next decade, yet in early 2008 there was not much reporting of it, and no artistic response to the war except for *The Kite Runner*.

I knew little about Afghanistan, but was determined to find out more. After talking to playwrights, a plan evolved. The project became a day-long immersion, 12 half-hour plays interspersed with verbatim interviews from politicians, journalists and soldiers, taking the audience on a journey from the first Anglo-Afghan wars to independence; from the Russian invasion to the CIA arming of the Mujahideen; from the rise of the Taliban to Operation Enduring Freedom.

In April 2009, *The Great Game* opened at the Tricycle theatre in London, and last year we revived the production and took it on a US tour. Before leaving for America, General Sir David Richards, then head of the British army, hosted a day-long performance for the British military. Taking to the stage, he said that, had he seen these plays before going to Afghanistan in 2005, they "would have made me a much better commander".

He told me he would do his best to ensure that people from the Pentagon saw it. We opened in Washington in September, and the production was warmly welcomed, but our fortnight's run was ignored by the Pentagon and Capitol Hill - until a few days before its end, when a congresswoman was asked by General Petraeus, in Kabul, to send him a tape of the plays. Then, on the last Saturday performance, General "Mick" Nicholson came. He was incredibly enthusiastic and asked to meet the cast. He was about to be posted to Kabul as head of operations for Petraeus, and thought it vital that more people from the Pentagon saw the plays.

Three weeks later, at 7.15 on a chilly

October morning, I found myself standing outside the Pentagon, waiting for a military escort to take me to a meeting to discuss a special performance of *The Great Game*, to be hosted by the Pentagon. The original idea was to stage the plays in the Pentagon theatre - yes, it has a theatre, not to mention a drugstore, supermarket, a Blockbuster video store, and two shoeshine boys in its 17 miles of corridors. Sadly, the theatre was too small and, as it was located in the sub-basement, we couldn't have got our set down there anyway. What's more, it had taken me 20 minutes to penetrate security; the idea of getting the guns and explosives needed for the production through those doors seemed a challenge too far.

The Shakespeare theatre in downtown Washington came to our rescue, offering to host the plays for two days last month. The Pentagon were adamant that, though they wanted the production, they couldn't use taxpayers' money to fund it. The next few weeks were spent frantically trying to raise money. Finally, Bob Woodruff, a US reporter who was injured in Afghanistan, came to our aid with a grant from his foundation; the British Council kindly helped with most of the rest.

#### Captain in a mink coat

On arrival at Dulles airport, we were amazed to be greeted by an immigration official who had seen the plays; he whisked us through the "US citizens only" line, and soon the whole company were having dinner in downtown Washington. The next two days were spent in a blur of rehearsals, amid a feeling of excitement. During one break, I was surprised to see a striking, tall blonde woman, in a full-length mink coat, leading a delegation of uniformed officers through the foyer. She turned out to be Navy Captain Roxie Merritt, until then just one of the 15 voices on our weekly Pentagon conference calls. In less than 48 hours, she was off to get married to a merchant banker on a Jamaican beach with a Rastafarian officiating.

On the day of the first performance,



I went into the foyer to watch the audience arriving: lots of uniforms, lots of braid, quite a few in camouflage fatigues, Pentagon staffers in suits, and people from USAid and policy groups. I had been told 1,200 people would be coming from the Pentagon during the two days; the Egypt crisis meant a few empty seats for the morning show, but by the evening they were filled.

There was an extraordinary engagement and thirst for information. The audience hung on every word, every resonance: from the first play (about the 1842 Anglo-Afghan war, the worst defeat in the British army's history) chiming with a later one about Soviet invaders in the 1980s; to the last play,

**"Tremendous food for thought" ... The Great Game**

**Some only came for the afternoon - they didn't want to leave America 'undefended for a day'**

about a British sergeant coming back from Helmand and finding himself unable to re-adjust to family life. A marine colonel told me what a healing experience the day had been for the six marine captains he had brought along. They had all served in Afghanistan or Iraq, had all had trouble re-integrating, and were now all divorced.

When the audience streamed out for lunch, the conversations were all about Afghanistan. "You hit the ball right of the park," said Douglas Wilson, the Pentagon's assistant secretary for public affairs. "This is absolutely wonderful."

During the evening break, there was a crowded press conference. I was amazed to see such interest, until I realised how unprecedented these performances were: the Pentagon had never before sponsored a theatre show. I know Wilson had encountered fears the plays would be anti-war, and would deliver a counterproductive, negative message to a military audience; but he had always felt it was a "no-brainer", and responded to one question with the words: "There is an assumption that the arts and our men and women in uniform are from different planets. It's not the case. The arts can provide a means to discuss and explore and, in this case, learn about the history and culture of a very complicated country. It is tremendous food for thought."

Then came the VIP reception. On our way there, Indhu Rubasingham, my co-director, and I were ambushed by reporters - she by a Japanese journalist, me by Icelandic TV. Somehow I couldn't help feeling that a British theatre director discussing the Afghan war in Washington might seem slightly incongruous to viewers in Reykjavik.

The reception was packed with movers and shakers, along with at least three generals and a couple of admirals. General Busby welcomed the audience and stressed the importance of focusing on the conflict in Afghanistan. I noticed that the speakers, when talking about the conflict, had almost always replaced the word "winning" with "transitioning out".

As we took our seats for the evening performances, I was greeted warmly by Masood Khalili, Afghanistan's ambassador to Madrid, who had flown in for the performance. Khalili had been a friend and adviser to Afghan hero Ahmad Massoud, who was killed by suicide bombers posing as TV journalists in 2001. The story of how Khalili, who had been interpreting, survived that attack was about to be told, and the actor playing him was nervous - although, from the huge hug he received afterwards, he shouldn't have worried.

Some of the audience had joined for either the afternoon or the evening, not wishing to leave America "undefended for a day". Most were with us for over