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THEATER REVIEW | 'SAND'

## A Grainy Reality

By CARYN JAMES

There are some stunning, hallucinatory moments in “Sand,” Trista Baldwin’s three-actor play about American soldiers in an unnamed, Iraq-like war zone. Pedro Pascal as Armando, a sergeant and the senior of the three, at times smoothly shifts into the role of Ahmed, a Middle Eastern man — he may be real or imaginary — who wanders into the barren desert where the soldiers are guarding a gas pump. In these graceful dramatic turns the play suggests how the line between enemies, and even identity itself, shifts as easily as the sands for anyone in the surreal state of combat.

These scenes also offer a glimpse of Ms. Baldwin’s gifts as a playwright, even though much more of “Sand” is earnest and ordinary. The play, which opened Sunday night at the Women’s Project’s Julia Miles Theater, exposes the difficulty of writing freshly about war.

Along with the Puerto Rican Armando, the other young soldiers offer a schematic ethnic mix. Justin (Alec Beard) is a white working-class man, Keisha (Angela Lewis) an 18-year-old black woman. Justin and Keisha spend a lot of time talking about how and why they joined the Army, saying bluntly that they were poor and adrift and didn’t know what else to do. “Instead of sending me to college, they’re sending me to die,” they chant together.

Those conversations, and the occasional silences, may reflect the banality of wartime experience, but they come dangerously close to spreading boredom to the audience, even in a play that runs only 85 minutes.

Ahmed, who carries a boom box playing the Backstreet Boys, adds some needed tension. Is he as benign as he appears, or a lethal threat? Mr. Pascal handles the shifts with virtuosic clarity, as Armando’s prayer in Spanish becomes Arabic and the character morphs. These scenes are more dramatic than the two inevitabilities the play briefly gets around to: sex among this bored, lonely trio, and an enemy attack. And Armando/Ahmed overshadows Justin, meant to be the central character, who questions what he is seeing.

Solidly directed by Daniella Topol, “Sand” also has a striking set designed by Anita Fuchs, a swirling sculptural backdrop in which the desert sand is constructed of beige combat fatigues. There is enough invention onstage to make you wish Ms. Baldwin had indulged more of her most daring impulses and fewer of her safest.

*“Sand” continues through March 2 at the Julia Miles Theater, 424 West 55th Street, Clinton; (212) 239-6200.*

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