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‘Elliot’: a fertile seed, growing

"A Soldier's Fugue," The opening salvo in Profile Theatre's season of plays by Quiara Alegria Hudes, plants the promise of bigger things

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One of the most striking bits of information you'll encounter if you go to see Profile Theatre's production of *Elliot, a Soldier's Fugue* is dropped offhandedly into a program note by artistic director Josh Hecht, who mentions that "there are currently 21.8 million veterans in the United States." That's around seven percent of us, as if we'd sent the whole state of Florida, say, off to war — or the entire Northwest plus a chunk of Northern California. Or, to put it in terms that might hit home to 19-year-old Elliot Ortiz, serving in Iraq with the 1st Marine Division, that's three and a half times the population of greater Philadelphia.

In any case, it's quite a figure for a nation that thinks of itself as peace-loving, or at least peace-keeping; a peaceful nation ever at war.



Cristi Miles, Anthony Lam (in fatigues), Jimmy Garcia, Anthony Green (far right) in "Elliot."
Photo: David Kinder

The bulk of those veterans still around served in either Iraq, Vietnam or Korea: places — or do we think of them merely as conflicts — that serve as the generational benchmarks for Quiara Alegria Hudes' play, which was first produced (in a slightly different version) at Portland's Miracle Theatre in 2005. Inspired by the Iraq War experiences of her own cousin, Hudes presents three generations of men in the same family, examining what they made of their time at war and what that time made of them.

Hudes studied composition at Yale before turning to playwriting, and her musical orientation shows in the title and structure here. Like a musical fugue, the play interweaves short statements, variations on a theme, building its effect through both juxtaposition and echo. Its most potent motifs are developed more fully and resonantly in two later plays with the same central character, *Water by the Spoonful* and *The Happiest Song Plays Last* (both of which Profile will stage in November).

Here she builds on an epistolary form, with fathers and sons reading letters from one another, a device which allows her to move deftly across decades and continents. Letters are a way of revealing interior experience to others, as are the monologues that also recur throughout the play. Both approaches, however, can feel static, almost abstract; there's little actual dialogue except when Elliot, as wounded war hero on a visit home to Philly, gets interviewed by reporters, or when we get to see his parents meeting cute in a Vietnam field hospital.

Then again, Hudes is dealing primarily with experience and memory, and how those subjective things affect not just us but our interactions. In that sense, the play is as much meditation as it is fugue, studded with unpretentiously poetic lines such as "a seed is a contract with the future," or the observation of an infantryman scouring the landscape for body parts who notes, "It's like bird watching: You develop your eye."

In her program note, director Alice Reagan calls it "a memory play with one urgent question at its center: Will Elliot return to Iraq?" But actually that question isn't foregrounded at all, even less so than the related issue of whether Elliot's father will ever open up about his own tour of duty. But plot isn't really the point. There are passages here that recall the kind of finely textured cultural detail that makes August Wilson's plays so rich: a soldier crawling on the ground during night patrol but yearning for the sugary breakfast cereals back home ... a wife and mother musing on the joys of nurturing her garden, on the sexiness of plants and the wildness of nature ... a flute passed along as a source of emotional sustenance and an unlikely symbol of manliness amid hardship....

What accrues out of these episodic reminiscences is a multifaceted feeling about the day-to-day experience of being in war and being in family. That the two can be so intertwined comes across as neither political criticism nor emotional cynicism, merely compassionate recognition of a societal truth.



Anthony Lam as Elliot. Photo: David Kinder

Reagan, a New Yorker whose work was seen here two years ago in Portland Experimental Theatre Ensemble's *Enter the Night*, finds a comfortable rhythm that lets the piece breathe but not lag, supported by a spare yet colorful scenic design (Kaye Blankenship) and a sometimes literally heart-pounding sound design (Phil Johnson). She gets strong performances from Tony Green (teetering toward infirmity as Grandpop, coolly detached as plummy-voiced public-radio interviewer), Jimmy Garcia (good-humored yet fiercely guarded as Pop) and Cristi Miles (sweetly thoughtful as Ginny), though we too often hear the effort behind their Puerto Rican accents. Fittingly, it's Anthony Lam as Elliot who's easiest to connect to. He nails the cocksure charm, the moments of sudden distress, the undercurrents of youthful vulnerability.

Elliot, a Soldier's Fugue became a Pulitzer Prize finalist in 2007 and it succeeds on its own terms as a short, concentrated consideration of a theme. For that, it's by no means unsatisfying. But it might be most valuable as an introduction: For all the heart and skill it shows, the emotional fullness, the sophistication of craft, the sense of dramatic engagement in store in the succeeding Elliot plays, particularly the 2012 Pulitzer winner *Water by the Spoonful*, are an order of magnitude greater. Consider it a fertile seed, a contract with your playgoing future.

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Profile Theatre's *Elliot, a Soldier's Fugue* continues through February 19 on the Morrison Stage at Artists Repertory Theatre. [Ticket and schedule information here.](#)