

## MEN O' WAR

*Power plays at home and abroad.*

BY JOHN LAHR

“Circumstances make man, not man circumstances,” Mark Twain once quipped. As proof of his claim, take the smart, well-intentioned collection of political operatives who intervene in the war-torn tribal no man’s land of Afghanistan and make what turn out to be disastrous decisions in J. T. Rogers’s ambitious “Blood and Gifts” (crisply directed by Bartlett Sher, at the Mitzi E. Newhouse). The play, set in the dozen years after the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan, on Christmas Eve, 1979, dramatizes the undercover machinations of Pakistan’s I.S.I., America’s C.I.A., and Britain’s M.I.6 to organize poorly armed Afghan freedom fighters—the mujahideen—against their former ally. Dolled up as a political thriller, this episodic tale of slippery alliances and cultural differences is really a teaching play, a sort of global-positioning device meant to carry the audience through the fog of war to an understanding of how America’s anti-Soviet obsession got it unwittingly stuck in Afghanistan, rather like Brer Rabbit with the Tar-Baby.

Although “Blood and Gifts” rotates from Islamabad to the Afghan frontier to C.I.A. headquarters, all the action takes place on Michael Yeargan’s elegant, minimal set, which turns the stage into an abstracted meeting ground, with gray-blue benches on three sides, on which the opposing factions sit in silent symbolic witness when not involved in the scene. (The stage picture is a visual correlative of the play’s epigraph, from William James: “Whenever two people meet there are really six people present. There is each man as he sees himself, each man as the other person sees him, and each man as he really is.”) The drama centers on the earnest, square-jawed C.I.A. operative James Warnock (Jeremy Davidson), as he tries to cover America’s tracks while engineering the subversion of the Russians through his Pakistani counterpart, Colonel Afridi (Gabriel Ruiz). Both sides are playing a

double game. The Pakistanis, who hope to make Afghanistan their satellite, steer American money and weapons to Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, a Pashtun Islamic fundamentalist and the most brutal of the Afghan warlords, whom they are grooming to become the puppet head of state. British intelligence wants the weapons in the hands of another man, Ahmed Shah Massoud, who is a Tajik. “Most Afghans are Pashtun and they see Tajiks as spies for the Iranians. We must focus our support on a Pashtun commander,” Afridi tells Warnock, who agrees, only to immediately seek out his own man in the field, Abdullah Khan (Bernard White), who hates Hekmatyar. “What he gets, does: unimportant. I have a chance—we have a chance—to do what is right,” Warnock tells Khan, in the first of many ruefully innocent statements that come back to haunt the play.

Warnock’s subterfuge is explained to the audience through his relationship with the frayed, ironic Simon Craig (the superb Jefferson Mays), a British spy, who becomes a kind of sidekick in skulduggery, trading his deep knowledge of the area for access to American information. The character also allows Rogers to bring a little waspish wit to the play. Hekmatyar, for instance, has “no warlord fashion sense”; the Afghans are “charming, semi-civilized, and utterly untrustworthy. They are the French without the food.” Craig also has a few choice words about Britain’s “special relationship” with America: “We bend over and you give it to us special.”

Warnock provides the Afghans with money, then with outdated, untraceable weapons, then with sniper rifles equipped with night sights to pick off Soviet officers. “We are giving them just enough to get slaughtered! What kind of support is that?” he complains to Walter Barnes (John Procaccino), his gangly, benighted boss back in Washington. “Jim, they are shepherds! Now, God bless them and their elephant-sized balls,” Barnes re-

plies, adding, “The Afghans . . . are not our problem. . . . We are there to keep the Soviets from winning the Cold War and tearing down this world!” Procaccino’s Barnes has a combination of sourness and scruple that lends a piquant gravity to the role and contrasts with Davidson’s oddly inert heroic posturing. “In this work there is no perfect and there is no good. At best there is decency,” Barnes tells Warnock. “That’s the closest thing we get to winning.” In the end, Stinger missiles are what bring victory to the mujahideen. (From 1986 to 1989, the C.I.A. doled out up to twenty-five hundred of these heat-seeking, shoulder-fired weapons, at more than eighty thousand dollars apiece, which brought down Soviet helicopters and transport planes and forced the Soviet generals to change their tactics.)

“War is a slippery beast. . . . Who are we to think we can steer it whichever way we wish?” Colonel Afridi tells Warnock. And so it proves. After the weapons have forced the Soviets out, the Americans try to buy them back, but with little luck. Abdullah Khan, for instance, Warnock’s best “asset,” sells his to the Iranians and uses the money to continue the Afghan war effort, but with a difference. He has now joined up with the hated Hekmatyar. “Afghanistan is a wound that must be cleansed,” he says in the play’s historically dubious penultimate lines, adding, “First, we will cleanse our country. And then we will cross oceans.”

“Blood and Gifts” is a strange kind of political play, written in a style that mixes documentary with TV melodrama. Rogers wants to make a drama out of the conflict between public and private loyalties: most of the main characters discuss their personal allegiances, which play out offstage, while we watch their political ties shift onstage. But this doesn’t work. Rogers’s historical synthesis is exciting, admirable, and alive; his attempt to make his characters’ private lives resonate is clumsy, notional, and dull. This doesn’t destroy the evening, but it does make it oddly schizophrenic: at once intellectually stimulating and emotionally static.

**T**homas Higgins’s “Wild Animals You Should Know” (an M.C.C. production, directed by Trip Cullman, at the Lucille Lortel) opens with Matthew (Jay Armstrong Johnson), “a young Adonis,”

according to the stage directions, reciting the Boy Scout oath. In my day—I was Order of the Arrow—we used to joke that we were “on our honor/ to do our best,/ to help the Girl Scouts get undressed.” Here it’s other Boy Scouts that the Boy Scouts dream of undressing. As a birthday present, the macho Matthew, a little package of perversity, does a Skype striptease,



*Davidson and White as C.I.A. operative and mujahideen in “Blood and Gifts.”*

complete with Boy Scout salute, for Jacob (Gideon Glick), his best friend, who is gay. “I don’t know what I look like,” Matthew says at one point, fixing the angle of his screen. He is the wild animal who doesn’t know who he is: a teen-age narcissist trying to locate himself in the eyes of others. “You should be in a museum, and pilgrims should travel from all over the world to smooth the ripples of your chest with their oily fingers,” Jacob gushes. At the end of the scene, Matthew’s voyeuristic game is trumped by the sight of his Scoutmaster, Rodney (John Behlmann), kissing another man in the house next door.

In a series of terse, well-written scenes, each with its own ironic Scout legend spelled out above the proscenium—“How

to Make Fire,” “Receiving a Message,” “Cooking on an Open Flame”—Higgins gets his adolescents into the woods, where Larry (Daniel Stewart Sherman), a gung-ho, beer-swilling parent, and Matthew’s milquetoast father, Walter (Patrick Breen), wrangle the troop from the comfort of their folding chairs. Matthew, at once appalled and excited by his confused

sexual feelings, taunts Rodney, who is teaching him to fly-fish, by grinding his backside so offensively that the Scoutmaster leaves. Later, when Rodney refuses to tell Matthew that he’s beautiful, Matthew takes the provocation further—with devastating consequences.

In the play’s best scene, Walter goes toe to toe with his cruel son. They roar each other into silence. “Why would you do this to someone? . . . You took away that man’s career; his life,” the father says finally. “I wanted to destroy someone. To see if I could,” Matthew answers, both pronouncing the truth and foreshadowing the sadist he will grow up to be. “Wild Animals You Should Know” is a chilling, arch little play that augurs bigger things for its young playwright. ♦