“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-
ploys, adding, “The Afghans . . . are not our problem. . . . We are there to keep the Soviets from winning the Cold War and tearing down this world!” Procacci-nio’s Barnes has a combination of sour-
ness and scruple that lends a piquant
gravity to the role and contrasts with Da-
vidson’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 thou-
sand 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. Rog-
ers wants to make a drama out of the
conflict between public and private loyal-
ties: 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. Rog-
ers’s historical synthesis is exciting, admi-
rable, 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 stim-
ulating and emotionally static.

Thomas Higgins’s “Wild Animals
You Should Know” (an M.C.C. pro-
duction, 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 pres-
ent, the macho Matthew, a little package
of perversity, does a Skype striptease,
complete with Boy Scout salute, for Jacob
(Gideon Glick), his best friend, who is
gay. “I don’t know what I look like,” Mat-
thew 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 nar-
cissist 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 voy-
euristic game is trumped by the sight of
his Scoutmaster, Rodney (John Behl-
mann), 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 com-
fort of their folding chairs. Matthew, at
once appalled and excited by his confused

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

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