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THEATER REVIEW | 'OH WHAT WAR'

Congregation of the Damned in a No-Man's-Land Cabaret

By ANDY WEBSTER

World War I always seems like the ignored conflict in the American psyche, eclipsed by World War II and Vietnam. And yet, after years of seemingly endless losses in Iraq and Afghanistan, it proves the right metaphor for our time in "Oh What War," a scabrous, multimedia assault of a show at the Here Arts Center.

Conceived and directed by Mallory Catlett, in collaboration with the writer Jason Craig, and performed by the Juggernaut Theater Company, it derives from Joan Littlewood's 1963 satirical revue, "Oh! What a Lovely War" (itself an adaptation of two earlier works). Ms. Littlewood's show was also the basis for a star-studded British movie musical in 1969. But there is precious little of the sunny sentiment we might expect from a stage songfest.

There was a legend among the troops that an underground shelter in no man's land was occupied by scavenging deserters, and that is the show's setting: a trenchlike refuge (envisioned by the designer Peter Ksander) housing a group of ragged souls, often in goggles and gas masks. They include a leering, lusty Czech (a vigorous Mr. Craig); a dry, facetious Frenchwoman (Kelli Rae Powell); a blinded Italian (Jessica Jelliffe); a boyish Canadian (Tom Lipinski); and a shell-shocked German (an arresting Magin Schantz).

Interspersed among their fatalistic exchanges are period tunes, like "Gassed Last Night" and "The Bells of Hell." Eventually the Frenchwoman leads a Brechtian cabaret of mocking repartee, in which this congregation of the damned tells stories and, in one devastating tableau, portrays nightmare caricatures of war profiteers.

Punctuating the proceedings on monitors and scrims are images from the actual conflict (assembled by the video designer Zbigniew Bzymek), including several of wounded soldiers evoking the grotesque canvases of the Weimar painter Otto Dix. Smoke and irregular explosions (courtesy of G. Lucas Crane, the credited "noise artist") keep the audience disoriented.

You couldn't call this dense stew linear. But then, aside from the imaginings of politicians, generals and arms manufacturers, war rarely is. What you can call this production is lurid,

feverish and powerful.

“Oh What War” continues through Oct. 4 at the Here Arts Center, 145 Avenue of the Americas, at Dominick Street, South Village; (212) 352-3101, here.org.

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