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Deconstructing demons

By **Chris Bergeron**/ Daily News Staff

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An IRA bomber and Ugandan child soldier reveal the dark secrets that drove them to violence. Fighters of the Al Asqa Martyr's Brigade and Ulster Volunteer Force recall injustices that convinced them to seek revenge in God's name.

A terrorists cell in Fallujah? A safe house in Dublin? A suicide mission in Lagos?

Terrorism has arrived in Boston.

As current as tomorrow's headlines, this drama explodes on stage in the American premiere of "Talking to Terrorists" produced by the Sugaan Theatre Company.

Written by Robin Soans and performed to critical acclaim last year in London, it opens tomorrow in the Plaza Theater at the Boston Center for the Arts and runs through April 8.

Sugaan Artistic Director Carmel O'Reilly said she wanted to stage Soans' play because "it reflects what's going on at this moment right now."

The theater critic for the prestigious English newspaper The Guardian called it "the most important new play we have seen this year."

A cast of eight area actors playing multiple roles gives voice and a recognizable humanity to actual terrorists who have become the bogeymen -- and women -- of modern times.

This play is not agitprop for random mayhem.

Former members of Catholic, Islamic, Kurdish, Protestant and Ugandan terrorist organizations share the stage with their victims and politicians, relief workers and clerics who try to understand them by restoring order and peace to a damaged world.

Although she had not seen it performed, O'Reilly was drawn to the idea that Soans "had spoken with real people" whose lives were touched by terrorism.

"These are all real stories. This is really happening," she said in a lightly accented brogue. "These stories are so topical. This production will provide a forum for people to listen to and discuss things affecting us all."

Soans' script utilizes interviews of the exact words of ex-members of the IRA, National Resistance Army of Uganda, UVF, Kurdish Workers Party and the Islamic Al Aqsa Martyr's Brigade.

Occupying the stage simultaneously, they speak matter-of-factly of brutalized childhoods and routine indignities inflicted in the name of an authority that is indifferent to their dreams.

A Kurd, a Catholic, a Muslim, a Protestant and an African teenage girl, they are drawn into secret organizations that promise to redress injustice. Instead, they kill and see comrades die. They are imprisoned and consider the consequences of their acts.

At one point, a Protestant bomber concedes regrets for the suffering he caused but adds, "Circumstances made our actions inevitable."

Founded 14 years ago by Carmel O'Reilly and her husband, Peter, Sugaan Theatre is devoted to producing contemporary plays drawn from its Irish and Celtic cultural roots.

The group's name derives from the Gaelic word for "straw rope," which suggests the idea of a "communal activity" binding performers and viewers together.

Born in Northern Ireland near Belfast, Carmel O'Reilly said Sugaan "has a responsibility" for staging "Talking to Terrorists" because it addresses issues that have affected both her native and adopted homes.

"Theater belongs to everyone. Although (Sugaan) is essentially Irish, we want to embrace the political and emotional issues that touch all humanity," she said.



Gabriel Kuttner and Eve Kagan rehearse a scene in 'Talking with Terrorists'. (Mike Springer photo)

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Soans has written two other well-received documentary plays, "A State of Affairs" in 2000 and the highly acclaimed "The Arab Israeli Cookbook" in 2004.

In the Sugan production, eight actors, including Lau Lapidés of Wellesley and Geralyn Horton of Newton, play the 20 roles based on actual people who belonged to terrorist groups or lived through the consequences of their actions.

O'Reilly expects the play to provoke debate but emphasized the script does not justify violence. Rather, she said, it explores the complex motivations of terrorists with different political and religious agendas.

"This play is not just about 'talking to terrorists.' It's about listening to the victims, relief workers and journalists who've lived through it. It provides a global perspective about individuals and their responsibilities," she said.

Lapidés expects the play to generate controversy about the origins of terrorism but insists the script has "no political ax to grind."

A longtime Wellesley resident who also teaches speech and dramatic arts at two area colleges, she plays Rima, a journalist, and Phoebe, a relief worker.

Lapidés said the chance to play multiple roles appealed to the professional "chameleon" in her.

Based on Soans' script, she said the terrorists' tormented backgrounds suggest "the idea we're all really capable of anything."

Lapidés acknowledges some people will prefer to demonize terrorists as irredeemably evil rather than consider their acts as responses to injustice.

"There will be a certain percentage (of viewers) who'll be annoyed if not outraged. We sort of expect that to some degree," she said. "This play is important because it will give people in Boston a bird's-eye view of peoples' lives, not from a political, but a personal perspective."

Living 11 years in London, actor Gabriel Kuttner absorbed some of the anxieties that have become part of our post-9/11 lives.

The 31-year-old Boston resident plays an ex-member of the UVF imprisoned 15 years for a bombing and a British official who discovers suspected terrorists are being tortured for information.

Kuttner believes the play's strength is its courageous willingness to suggest that terrorists choose violence in response to genuine grievances. "It wants to understand what makes a normal person want to blow up people for a cause. It's a very provocative -- I hope not incendiary -- idea. I don't know what the response will be," he said.

Born in Boston, Kuttner trained at the London Academy of Music and Dramatic Arts and married an English woman. Since 1993, he has acted in, produced or directed 40 plays in England and Europe.

Like other cast members, he maintains Soans' play asks the essential question about terrorists' motives without ignoring the bloody consequences of their actions.

"I don't think you can condone violence, but you have to have a willingness to know where it comes from," Kuttner said. "Without empathy as a starting point, I don't think any useful dialogue would happen."

As Ireland's former Secretary of State Mo Mowlam, Newton actress Horton utters the play's signature line: "Talking to terrorists is the only way to beat them."

After rehearsal, she described her fourth Sugan play as "astonishing" theater that has sometimes left her in tears. "I'm in awe. This is about as vivid as you could get. It's touched everyone (in the cast) in some way. I can't actually be in rehearsal without being moved," she said.

Lapidés predicts the audience will share those intense feelings.

"All theater, and especially this play, provides a truly personal experience," she said. "The audience should strap themselves in for a roller coaster ride that'll take them into the depths of the human soul. They'll feel anger, joy, sorrow, even humor and empathy. I know they will feel something."

fyi:

WHAT: Sugan Theatre Company's "Talking to Terrorists"

WHEN: March 17-April 18

WHERE: Boston Center for the Arts

COST: \$35/\$40, BostonTheatreScene.com

INFO: 617-933-8600, www.sugan.org

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