Welcome to Rajiv Joseph's *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo*.

Fresh from two critically acclaimed productions at Center Theatre Group’s Kirk Douglas Theatre and Mark Taper Forum, *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo* has arrived at Broadway’s Richard Rodgers Theatre starring Academy Award® winner Robin Williams. This remarkable play throws two homesick soldiers, a tormented Iraqi and a brooding tiger together and dares you not to look away from its honest and hauntingly theatrical depiction of the aftermath of war.

Before we tell you more, take a moment and imagine what might happen when the above characters meet. How will they interact? How will they communicate? Can you picture the city of Baghdad through the eyes of an American soldier serving in Iraq? Can you imagine the soldiers through the eyes of their Iraqi translator? What is the experience of war for a tiger caged in a zoo, 10 thousand miles from its original home?

Turn the page to explore *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo*: the setting, subject matter and theatrical style. Think about Iraq—its location, history and language. Read an interview with playwright Rajiv Joseph discussing the craft of playwriting and his inspiration for writing *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo*.

Reflect on violence onstage and in life. Why use theatre to explore the aftermath of violence? Why use theatre to explore war? How might theatre and imagination help us better understand incomprehensible real life events?

Theatre raises questions and challenges audience members to discover their own answers. See what questions this information raises for you and what questions and answers the performance provides. Thank you so much for joining us for *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo*. We look forward to seeing you at the theatre!

It makes you wonder what’s going on on the other side of the cage.

—*Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo*
The gun he uses to kill the Tiger is not just any gun; it’s a gold gun that Tom stole from Uday Hussein, son of dictator Saddam Hussein, during a raid. The ghost of the Tiger does not wander the streets of war-torn Baghdad, caught in an existential haze. It begins to haunt his killer. Kev, until Kev breaks down and takes his life by severing his own hand. Like the Tiger, Kev becomes a ghost and questions himself and his identity. Meanwhile, Musa, once Uday Hussein’s gardener, is trying to adapt to his new job as interpreter for the occupying American forces. Musa is haunted by the ghost of Uday Hussein, the man who raped and killed his little sister, Hadiya. The gold gun binds the men and the Tiger to Baghdad’s brutal past and their actions and by the violence of their present.

I’m not the kind of person who does this. It is not who I am.” —Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo

Violence

In this play, the characters find themselves in cruel and violent situations. Characters are tortured and killed, people lose their limbs, their minds and their lives. The play explores what happens to people, places and animals in the aftermath of violence.

What makes one capable of violence? Is it innate, or is it learned? Is it different when an animal commits a violent act than when a human does? What is the difference?

What is the value of watching violence against? How might it help us reflect upon the violence in our own world? How does witnessing the violence in the play and its impact on the characters deepen your understanding of the consequences of violence and of war?

Topiary

Topiary is the art of trimming living trees and shrubs into decorative shapes. The best trees and shrubs for topiary art are box trees: yew, roses, rosemary shrubs, holly and box hedges. Topiary was practiced as early as the 1st century AD. The art is thought to have evolved from the natural and necessary trimming, pruning, and training of trees. The earliest topiary was probably the simple shaping of dwarf box edging and the development of columns, columns, and spires of box trees to accent a garden scene. This architectural use gave way to more elaborate designs: shrubs were shaped into hips, hunting, and animals. In the 18th century, topiary was called the art of the tree barber, but its practitioners call it the art of the tree mower and hedge surgeon. Recently, topiary is making a comeback in Baghdad.
When you're this far from home, you know you’re never getting back.

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**Iraq**

Iraq is a country rich in ancient history. It is believed to be the home of the Garden of Eden. It was Mesopotamia, the cradle of civilization, where writing, mathematics, and the world’s legal system began. About the size of California, Iraq is a triangle of mountains, desert, and a fertile river valley bordered on the east by Iran, on the north by Turkey, on the west by Syria and Jordan, and on the south by Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. It sits between two rivers, the Tigris and the Euphrates. The country has and desert land west of the Euphrates, a broad central valley between the Euphrates and the Tigris, and mountains in the northeast. Iraq is a land rich in oil, and it controls 10% of the world’s oil reserves.

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**Baghdad**

Baghdad is the capital city of Iraq. Located on the Tigris River, it was once the heart of Mesopotamia, and one of the world’s largest and wealthiest cities, as well as a center of Islamic culture, education, and civilization. Its name means “Green by God’s grace.” Many Muslims revered it as the center of the Arab and Islamic worlds when they were at the height of their grandeur in the West. Many know Baghdad as the mystic land told through The Thousand and One Nights, a collection rich in Middle Eastern stories. In peaceful times, modern Baghdad has been a prosperous and sophisticated city, with a rich cultural life full of museums, universities, parks, gardens, and a zoo.

Algebra was even invented here, you know? In Baghdad, by this dude, Abu ja’far Muhammad ibn Musa al-Khwarizmi...And algebra comes from the Arabic word al jebra which means ‘a reunion of broken parts.’

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**Bengal**

Much of Bengal is often referred to as West Bengal, a state of India located in the north eastern part of the country. Forests occupy more than one-tenth of the total land area of the state, and the region as a whole has a rich and varied plant life. The forests are inhabited by tigers, panthers, elephants, wild cattle, and rhinoceroses, as well as by other animals of the Indian plains.

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**Far From Home**

The characters of Kev and Tom are American soldiers serving in Iraq. The Tiger is from Bengal and was captured and brought to the Baghdad Zoo. These characters are far from their homes during this play.

- Have you ever been a stranger in a strange land?
- What do you remember most about being far from home? How did that experience change you?

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**Occupation**

When the United States invaded Iraq in 2003, the U.S. government assumed we would be welcomed as liberators by the Iraqi people from the repression of Saddam Hussein. Instead, when the military overthrew Saddam Hussein’s government, the U.S. military gained control of the country. Many Iraqis were given the chance to govern their country, but the process was slow and difficult. The American soldiers have been deployed to Iraq to protect the American people and to work with the Iraqis to build a democratic government.

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**Assumptions**

Assumptions about the war in Iraq have been shaped by many factors, including the media, the Internet, and personal experiences. Here are some possible assumptions about Iraq and its culture:

- What do you think about the war in Iraq? How is the play similar to those images and stories?
- How is it possible to truly care about and take care of places that we don't belong to?
- What don’t you know about Iraq? Is there something you are curious to know about this country and its people? If you could ask one question to one person from a different country, what would it be? Would you want to talk to them if you were able to communicate?
- What do you think that the United States has a responsibility to do in Iraq?
- What do you think life is like for women in Iraq? Can you picture Iraq outside of the realm of war or violence?
- What do you think it is like to be a teenager in Iraq? What do you think about the war in Iraq?
- What do you think about the war in Iraq? How is the play similar to those images and stories?
Rajiv Joseph

The Bengal Tiger at Baghdad Zoo is a play that addresses the aftermath of the Iraq War, focusing on the experiences of U.S. soldiers stationed in Baghdad and the impact of their presence on the local zoo and its animals. The play explores themes of violence, survival, and the human-animal relationship, using the lens of a Bengal Tiger to comment on the broader context of war.

The story opens with a U.S. soldier named Joseph, who has just returned from a tour of duty in Baghdad. He is approached by a zookeeper who asks him to help feed the tigers. Joseph, eager to do something meaningful, agrees and begins to interact with the tigers. He quickly learns that the tiger he is trying to feed is one of two Bengal Tigers at the zoo, and that the other one has already been killed by another soldier.

Joseph discovers that the zoo was once a place of wonder and education, now reduced to a place of suffering and fear. The animals, once loved by the people, are now relegated to a prison, with no one to care for them.

The play also delves into the personal lives of the soldiers, showing how their experiences in Iraq have changed them. Joseph, in particular, is struggling to make sense of what he has seen and done, and is haunted by the memories of the tiger he killed.

The Bengal Tiger at Baghdad Zoo is a powerful and thought-provoking play that invites the audience to consider the wider implications of the war on the lives of the soldiers and the animals alike.

Marcos Najera

Marcos Najera is a playwright and a professor of theater at the University of Michigan. He is known for his works that explore the themes of identity, culture, and the human condition.

Marcos Najera's play, The Bengal Tiger at Baghdad Zoo, is a work that addresses the impact of war on the natural world. It is a play about a Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo, which is surrounded by conflict and violence.

In the play, Najera explores the idea of what we can learn about war by looking at it through an animal's perspective. He does this by bringing a Bengal Tiger to life and making him a character in the play. The tiger becomes a symbol of the broader themes of the play, such as the destruction of nature and the loss of innocence.

Najera's play is a powerful reminder of the consequences of war and the need for a more peaceful future. It is a work that challenges the audience to think about the impact of war on the natural world and to consider the importance of preserving it for future generations.
The Tiger appears.

TIGER

This place is lousy with ghosts.
And the new ones are irritating. They’re walking around, wide eyed... What happened to me? Where am I? You’re dead and you’re in Baghdad. Shut up.

Anyhow, the other day, I’m walking down the street. The street is literally ON FIRE.
And I see this little girl. Her life is like a soap bubble, and then pop! She’s here, in the middle of the street, looking up at me. And she says to me: What are you? And I tell her, I’m a tiger. And she says why?

She says why.
I don’t know, I tell her. I just am.
Which is true. I don’t want to lie.
She asks me am I going to eat her.
And I say, no, I gave up eating children.
She says why?
And I say, it’s this philosophy I’m working out about sin and redemption since God is apparently nuts.

And the girl just kind of looks at me.
And I’m like: think about it, if God’s watching, why’d he snuff you out? Why are you standing here, alone, in a burning street, with a dead tiger?
Why are you dead?
Why is half your face gone?
And she says yeah, but why’d you give up eating children?
And I tell her the bit about the two kids in the forest, and how I keep thinking about them and how I have all this guilt.
She doesn’t understand that. The guilt thing. She doesn’t have any guilt. And I’m like, of course you don’t. What did you ever do? Nothing.

She tells me she’s afraid:
I tell her I am too.
Which you’d think would be comforting, given the circumstances, but somehow, being blown to bits and then coming face to face with the likes of me...
Well the girl starts to cry, you know?
Her one eye, cries.

And I say, don’t cry. But she cries harder. And so I say to her: Hey do you want to see something amazing? And she stops crying for a second. And she’s like, what?
And I say it’s a... I tell her it’s a garden.
She looks at me as if to say, big fucking deal, like I haven’t seen a garden before?
And I say, no it’s a special garden.

Lights up on the topiary animals.

It’s a special garden. And I don’t know why I say this, but I say, it’s God’s garden.
I tell her it’s God’s garden.
He likes gardens, see. He tests us in them, he tempts us in them, he builds them up and tears them apart. It’s like his fucking hobby.

And she’s skeptical, I can see that, but I bring her here and she sees these plants, these animals, and she’s never seen anything like them before. And I nailed it because she’s not crying anymore. She’s walking around the garden, pointing.
A lion! A camel! An elephant!

Fucking kids, you know?

And I mean, this whole time I’m talking out of my ass, this business about God’s garden, etcetera. Maybe she knows I’m bullshitting, too. The girl is no dummy, even if she does only have half a brain.

But for a second we both look up at these ruined shrubs and think, okay Man: You work in Mysterious Ways. We get it.
And I feel this swell of hope.
The World Premiere of *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo* was originally produced by Center Theatre Group, Los Angeles, Michael Ritchie, Artistic Director; Charles Dillingham, Managing Director

References

Sources

Ukhuth eedee, ishfee gissmee ilmitgetta’, ikhithnee min il-sahraa’. Kheele bal-ee yirtahh.

Take my hand, heal my severed body, take me from the desert. Let my mind find peace.

—*Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo*