



THEATER REVIEW | 'THE OXFORD ROOF CLIMBER'S REBELLION'

# World War I Veterans Face Sweet and Fitting Lie



Urban Stages

Dylan Chalfy, left, as T. E. Lawrence (of Arabia) and Stafford Clark-Price as Robert Graves.

By WILBORN HAMPTON  
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Two young men who have just returned from war meet one night at a college party and discover that their mutual abhorrence of what they have been through has led them to a deep loathing of the politicians who caused it. In Stephen Massicotte's excellent new play, "The Oxford Roof Climber's Rebellion," the two veterans are T. E. Lawrence and Robert Graves, and it takes no leap of the imagination to translate their World War I experiences into stories from today's newspaper.

The play, produced by Urban Stages, inventively expands on the real-life friendship of the two soldier-scholars and their shared passion of disillusion. In Mr. Massicotte's version Graves and Lawrence meet at Oxford in 1920 and undertake a campaign against the heresy, promulgated by politicians, that war is noble and that its victims are all heroes.

The plot revolves around a plan by Lord Curzon, the British foreign secretary, to set aside Nov. 11 as a permanent Day of Remembrance to honor "the glorious dead" from the Great War. Lord Curzon first asks Lawrence to give a speech on the occasion. When rebuffed by the fabled Lawrence of Arabia, Curzon asks Graves, already a poet of some standing.

As the friendship of Lawrence and Graves waxes and wanes, threatening Graves' marriage in the process, each man tries to find a way to put the war's horrors behind him. Graves, who was seriously wounded at the Somme, is haunted by nightmares from his experience in the trenches. But it is Lord Curzon who puts into words the questions asked by every soldier after every war: Why did we kill? Why did we die? And why was I spared?

At one point, when Lawrence's ire against the continued British military presence in the Middle East involves hanging an Arabian flag on a roof at Oxford, he and Graves have an exchange that diplomats in Washington might find pertinent.

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"You can't make England Arabia," Graves says.

Lawrence shoots back, "Neither can we make Arabia England."

It is Graves who finally lays the war to rest, telling a Remembrance Day audience that the heroes and the victims will all be forgotten. "People forget," he says. "We forget the horror so we can carry on."

And he couples that unromantic truth with a warning about future wars: "An enemy killed is an enemy created. Every pace you march into another man's home is one pace farther from your own."

Stafford Clark-Price as Graves and Dylan Chalfy as Lawrence give first-rate performances, creating a friendship that might turn physical were it not for Lawrence's famous aversion to being touched. George Morfogen is quietly brilliant as Lord Curzon, the servant of an empire on which the sun is already beginning to set.

Erin Moon is credible as Nancy Nicholson, Graves's first wife and an early feminist who scandalously rode around Oxford on a man's bicycle, and Tom Cleary delivers a nice turn as Jack Dawkins, Lawrence's manservant, whose son is serving with the British Army in Mesopotamia (soon to be renamed Iraq).

Roger Danforth, the director, maintains the tension throughout, and Alex Koch's video design transports the audience from the trenches of World War I to the Arabian desert to the ivied walls of All Soul's, Oxford, through enlarged photos on a backdrop.

Mr. Massicotte may indulge in some slight anachronisms, and some of the actors' English accents occasionally slip, but the drama of his riveting play could not be more timely.

*"The Oxford Roof Climber's Rebellion" runs through Nov. 18 at Urban Stages, 259 West 30th Street, Manhattan; (212) 868-4444, urbanstages.org.*

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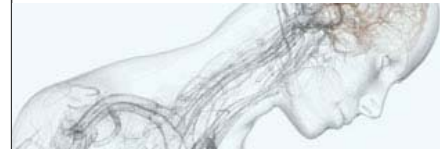
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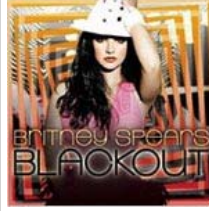


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