

Robert Myers' New Play is Not Propaganda

By Alan Bisbort

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Long before Jon Stewart dubbed it "Mess-O-Potamia," Iraq was the "cradle of civilization."

Blessed by the Tigris and Euphrates, it was a fertile area in an inhospitable region that, for millenia, was the center of the Sumerian and Babylonian civilizations.

When Robert Myers refers to *Mesopotamia* — the title of his new play, a staged reading of which will be held Oct. 21-22 at the Whitney Humanities Center — he's not joking around.

Indeed, because the history of Iraq is so fraught with tension, Myers backed his way into the subject. His dramatic entry point is Gertrude Bell, the British "Arabist" and diplomat who after the First World War helped draw the lines in the sand over which Bush the Elder and Bush the Younger have been high-stepping for 20 years.

Though less well-known than her ally T.E. Lawrence ("of Arabia"), she was, Myers says, "far more erudite. She was the second woman to graduate from Oxford, she learned, spoke Arabic and led important archeological digs." In short, she's the sort of figure to whom Myers was attracted in previous plays, up there with Fanny Kemble and Flannery O'Connor.

A visiting scholar at the Whitney Center, Myers is a literature professor at the American University of Beirut who, among his cool credentials, once wrote monologues for Dick Shawn and columns for Paul Krassner's *Realist*, as well as a popular play about George H.W. Bush's deceased advisor (*Atwater: Fixin' to Die*).

The thematic backdrop to his play, Myers says, is that, "The reality of the modern Middle East reinforces the fictional nature of nation states. Look at the 30 Years War, which completely and arbitrarily redrew the map and power structure of Europe. The modern Middle East is just living a more recent phase of this process."

One of the consoling myths about the Middle East, Myers says, is that "this argument has been going on for thousands of years. That is simply not true. It has been going on since 1948 with the creation of Israel, or maybe since the Balfour Declaration of 1917 [which Bell vehemently opposed]. It's easier to believe the conflict is ancient and therefore preordained."

Myers, however, knows that no play can work as simply an allegory or propaganda.

"You have to live in that world on stage," says Myers, whose setting for *Mesopotamia* is the British Colonial Office in Baghdad and its adjoining garden on the banks

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of the Tigris River. The cast of eight players is led by the acclaimed Kathleen Chalfant (*Wit*), who will read the part of Bell. Myers met Chalfant at a Vassar play festival and told her about Bell's life, which instantly resonated with her.

"You hear complaints that there are no roles for women of certain age, but Bell's is such a compelling story," he says. "Yes, she's a historical figure and the play is set in the 1920s, but it really is all about now."

The Whitney show will be a staged reading with lighting and sound but otherwise "minimal stage values." Augmenting the play is the exhibition *Gertrude Bell in Mesopotamia* (on view at the Whitney through Dec. 16), which Myers co-curated with NYU professor Miriam Ayres, using letters, maps, intelligence reports and Bell's photographs to more fully document the life and career of this extraordinary woman.

Mesopotamia

7 p.m. Oct. 21-Oct. 22, Whitney Humanities Center, 53 Wall St. 203-432-0670, yale.edu/whc

Gertrude Bell in Mesopotamia

Opens Sept. 19. Ends Dec. 16. Whitney Humanities Center, 53 Wall St. 203-432-0670, yale.edu/whc

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