

Choosing Sides in Afghanistan: Spies Playing in the Great Game

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Theater Review | 'Blood and Gifts'

By **CHARLES ISHERWOOD**

The gifts referred to in the title of “Blood and Gifts,” a superb new play by J. T. Rogers about the long history behind the American involvement in Afghanistan, are on ominous view throughout the play. Big boxes are carried onstage and cracked open to reveal piles of artillery. Shiny new rifles are waved in the air like harmless toys. Suitcases full of dollars are handed over with a cool smile.

On the other hand, blood never flows in Mr. Rogers’s drama, which opened on Monday night at the Mitzi E. Newhouse Theater in a first-rate production from [Lincoln Center Theater](#). But then it is hardly necessary to go to the theater to get an unpleasantly vivid sense of the violence that has stained the country for decades now. You only need to read [today’s headlines](#) to comprehend the continuing human cost of the political and military transactions depicted in this engrossing, illuminating play from [the author](#) of “[The Overwhelming](#).”

Although the history “Blood and Gifts” relates is complex, and the players involved range from Afghan warlords to Pakistani military functionaries to United States senators, the production, directed with a steady hand by [Bartlett Sher](#), has the taut grip of a spy novel by Graham Greene or [John le Carré](#). Set in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Washington in the years between 1981 and 1991, the play gives a remarkably lucid and compelling account of how the American and British view of Afghanistan as a vital front in the cold war against the Soviet Union shaped the calamitous recent history of the country.

The play opens as a motley assortment of Afghan fighters is desperately trying to regain control of the country from the Soviet forces, who were invited in by the reigning, repressive government to help quell incipient rebellion. James Warnock (Jeremy Davidson), a C.I.A. operative, has been sent to Islamabad to forge an alliance with the Inter-Services Intelligence, or ISI, the intelligence branch of the Pakistan Army. (You may [have read](#) a little about this organization lately.)

His mission is delicate, because the Americans are not officially engaged in this conflict. Hence the need for the Pakistani middlemen, led by the ISI chief Afridi (Gabriel Ruiz), and the rather unimpressive first “gift” to the Afghan cause Warnock has come to offer: 100,000 rifles manufactured in Greece and India.

This inspires outrage in Afridi and snorts of scorn in Simon Craig (the ever-amazing Jefferson Mays), Warnock’s British counterpart, working for the British intelligence service MI6. But Warnock has a blunt message for both of them: “Deniability, first and foremost. No weapons can be traced to us.”

With deniability, of course, comes a lack of responsibility and control. And Warnock and particularly Craig are dismayed when they learn that Afridi insists that the weaponry should go to a warlord, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, who is known for his fanatical Islamic beliefs and his penchant for wanton violence, sometimes directed at his own people for their lapses in religious fervor.

Behind Afridi’s back, Warnock establishes his own relationship with another Afghan warlord fighting the Soviets, Abdullah Khan (Bernard White). “I need someone on the ground,” Warnock tells Abdullah, “and I can’t set foot in your country.” This, of course, will ultimately involve more “gifts.”

As the Soviet aggression increases, and the Afghan armies begin to gain strength, their demands for weapons — functioning, first-class American weapons — become ever more urgent, and their calls find a willing ear in

Washington, where several scenes in the second act take place.

“Everything here is connected,” a mistrustful Warnock says grimly at one point, and the strength of Mr. Rogers’s drama is in its dramatically clarifying the murky motives driving all the big players in the drama, at the same time humanizing the characters representing them. A history lecture “Blood and Gifts” definitely isn’t; Mr. Rogers’s knowledge of the hearts and minds of his characters is as deep as his grasp of the geopolitical games being played. President Karzai has freed several Taliban prisoners from detention in Kabul, which the Taliban had asked for.

And Mr. Sher has cast the production in depth, resulting in vital, precisely detailed performances in both the major roles and the minor ones. Mr. Davidson could ease up a little on the wary squint and the John Wayne swagger as Warnock, but his cool reserve is effective. As Dmitri Gromov, the Soviet agent who strikes up a sort of neutral friendship with Warnock for reasons personal (they both miss their wives back home) and professional (better to keep your enemy close), Michael Aronov is winning and quite funny, especially when Gromov’s hearty good cheer wilts into glum resignation as the Russian mission falters.

I suspect Mr. Mays has been boning up on Greene and le Carré to prepare for his performance, so richly saturated is it in the sardonic humor and bruised humanity of the best depictions of cynical British operatives in those novelists’ work. Craig is always scrambling in late for meetings with the sweat of a hangover still upon him. He is also often hilarious in his bitter commentary on both the British government’s impecunious support for the cause and the moral morass that the Afghan conflict has become.

When he learns that major weaponry is to be channeled to Hekmatyar, Craig erupts in a typical burst of seething sarcasm, asking Afridi if the Afghans themselves have been consulted: “You know, ‘Hello Afghans! Would you mind terribly if we try and install a maniac to rule you and then sink your country into civil war?’ ”

Plays determined to give audiences a quick adult-education class in history tend to be staid lectures clumsily dressed as drama. (See David Hare’s “Stuff Happens.”) By contrast, the characters in “Blood and Gifts” never come across as proxies for the author, re-enacting his view of the events for our edification. They really seem to be living in this turbulent history, trying to stay one step ahead of the unfolding chaos, and to stay alive, too, while retaining some small measure of moral dignity.

BLOOD AND GIFTS

By J. T. Rogers; directed by [Bartlett Sher](#); sets by Michael Yeagan; costumes by Catherine Zuber; lighting by Donald Holder; sound by Peter John Still; stage manager, Jennifer Rae Moore; managing director, Adam Siegel; production manager, Jeff Hamlin. Presented by [Lincoln Center Theater](#), under the direction of André Bishop and Bernard Gersten. At the Mitzi E. Newhouse Theater, Lincoln Center; (212) 239-6200, telecharge.com. Through Jan. 1. Running time: 2 hours 30 minutes.

WITH: Michael Aronov (Dmitri Gromov), Jeremy Davidson (James Warnock), Robert Hogan (Senator Jefferson Birch), Jefferson Mays (Simon Craig), Andrés Munar (Military Clerk/C.I.A. Analyst), Rudy Mungaray and J Paul Nicholas (Mujahideen/Clerks/Aides), Paul Niebanck (Soldier/Administrative Aide), John Procaccino (Walter Barnes), Liv Rooth (Congressional Staffer), Gabriel Ruiz (Colonel Afridi), Pej Vahdat (Saeed), Andrew Weems (Political Speech Writer) and Bernard White (Abdullah Khan).