

Afghanistan General's verdict on war series The Great Game

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Friends, a new series of plays at the Tricycle Theatre in London called the Great Game and dealing with Afghanistan, Pakistan and the region's history since the 18th century has just opened. I am a character in one of the plays which is mentioned in this review below.

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General Sir David Richards

These plays offer a deeper perspective on Afghanistan, says the Chief of the Defence Staff designate General Sir David Richards

On Friday I was watching an exercise on Salisbury Plain involving a brigade that returns to Afghanistan in the autumn. They will have gone through a year's preparation for this six-month tour, which includes not only purely military training but also education about the culture and history of Afghanistan, the role Islam plays, how to behave and so on. *The Great Game*, a series of 12 short plays being performed at the Tricycle theatre in London, reinforces this cultural dynamic and affords a real depth of understanding.

We talk about the theatre of war but it is rare that a general has time to watch a proper drama, let alone one that lasts so long (although you can split the series over three nights), but I found *The Great Game* a fascinating, entertaining and historically accurate account of Britain's involvement in Afghanistan since the 1840s and well worth the time. More than 200 members of the audience were from across the military and defence, including 15 Sandhurst officer cadets who saw it with me on Thursday.

Nothing learnt in the classroom will have had the same subliminal effect as this. It is crucial that all of us who work out there have a more nuanced understanding of the historical background that got us to this point. That is why I am glad that when it has finished its current run in London, it will be touring America. I hope plenty of people in Washington take time to see it.

I went with my own immediate staff, quite a lot of MoD people and others from across Whitehall, including a senior Treasury official and the Second Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Defence. There was a good cross-section of soldiers, but importantly there were non-military opinion-formers, such as Baroness Williams of Crosby, with whom we could debate the issues of Afghanistan over a curry during the interval. It was first staged last year – my daughter Joanna saw it and came back full of praise. “You’ve got to see it,” she told me. “Furthermore, you’re in it. There’s someone playing you.” Well, that intrigued me and I managed to get along to the second to last performance, where I met Nicolas Kent, the artistic director, and the cast.

The actor playing me seemed quite apprehensive when we met. I ticked him off about having a moustache and sideboards, when I have neither, so I was pleased to see that I had got one concession for the revival: he had got rid of his moustache and shaved his sideboards a bit. He asked me if that was enough because he said he was quite fond of them.

I love the theatre but I don't often go because I tend to have a seven-day-and seven-night job. If I do get a night off, my particular love is opera. I've often thought that I might like to have been an opera singer but the Army has claimed me. In another life, I'd have liked to be a slimmed-down Pavarotti. My wife would rather I came back as Plácido Domingo, who we saw in the wonderful *Simon Boccanegra*, but I think Pavarotti has a richer voice.

There is a vignette at the end of *The Great Game*, called Canopy of Stars, that is particularly well done: two soldiers talking about the impact that soldiering has on families and wives. I also liked the commentaries, based on discussions with people involved in Afghanistan, that link the plays in the third part, monologues by characters such as Ahmed Rashid, Masood Khalili, Hillary Clinton – and myself – that put the plays beyond what could be seen as educational entertainment. They bring home the seriousness of the venture, the cost

and what we stand to gain.

There is a play by David Greig, called *The Miniskirts of Kabul*, that was about President Najibullah, the leader in the later-1980s, which I thought was done well. It allowed us to see that not everyone by any means in the communist era was necessarily of malign intent. Even if they got it wrong in many respects, they achieved much that we today would like to achieve, such as a broadly Islamic state with a light touch, women's rights, children's education, with an emphasis on educating girls and road-building. People don't understand that Najibullah's government lasted four years after the Russians pulled out and collapsed only when the flow of money from Moscow disappeared.

We often forget that the vast majority of Afghans do not want the Taleban back. They will do anything to keep them out, but they are growing impatient with the time that we are taking to fulfil our promises. And the play brings this out, as it does the role that Pakistan must play in creating a stable Afghanistan.

I have said many times before that the Afghan people have got into my bloodstream and I still believe that we can pull off the success we need, with a stabilised Afghanistan that can contain any residual insurgency. The Prime Minister has talked about 2015 as the date when combat operations will cease – when we need an Afghan army and police of sufficient quality as well as size – but it is important everyone realises that we still have a huge job ahead of us. Things are starting to turn our way, with the Obama surge still pouring in and General Petraeus at the helm.

As told to Patrick Kidd

***The Great Game* is at the Tricycle Theatre until August 29**