



## THEATER BEAT

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### A testimony to the ravages of war

With future prospects reduced to "lying like a side of beef for the rest of my life," the nightmare introspections of the maimed World War I hero of "Johnny Got His Gun" prove as harrowing on stage as they did in Dalton Trumbo's classic 1939 antiwar novel.

In adapting this 256-page book into a solo performance piece told entirely from the point of view of the limbless GI Joe Bonham, Bradley Rand Smith impressively honored the integrity of Trumbo's plot and searing eloquence of its language. Finally making its West Coast debut in a 20th anniversary production under Smith's direction at Stages Theatre Center, the show features a gripping performance from hard-working Grant Tyler, whose wholesome youth and innocence immediately engage our sympathy and never let go.

By taking us inside Joe's mind, Smith allows Tyler to move about freely, just as Joe sees himself in his memories and fantasies. In strategic moments of intruding horror, Tyler suggests Joe's physical prison through posture — lying on his side with his back to the audience and limbs tucked out of sight, kneeling with his head flung far back to indicate his lack of facial features, and so forth.

For the most part, Joe is presented as a complete human being, eliminating easy emotional detachment as we witness a fully sentient being's struggle to come to terms with his condition. Amid the despair we cheer at his simple but world-changing triumphs, from learning to tell time by temperature changes to communicating in Morse code through taps of his head.



MICHAEL MORTILLA  
**GI JOE:** Grant Tyler in "Johnny Got His Gun."

Transitions between Joe's internal and external realities are further punctuated by Leigh Allen's abrupt lighting shifts from idyllic amber hues to a sickly blue cast, and Michael Mortilla's sound and music montages.

Smith's adaptation falters only when incorporating sermonizing passages that force Tyler to step out of character and adopt a vocabulary and analytical sophistication that are not credibly within Joe's repertoire. At such moments the piece becomes more of a polemic than a theatrical experience — unnecessarily so, if Smith would only trust the narrative and his performer's ability to convey its full implications without the need for commentary.

Limitations notwithstanding, "Johnny Got His Gun" is a visceral and timely challenge to an increasingly prevalent view of warfare as a bloodless, high-tech abstraction. — PHILIP BRANDES

"Johnny Got His Gun," Stages Theatre Center, 1540 N. McCadden Place, Hollywood. Thursdays-Sundays, 8 p.m. Ends March 16. \$20. (323) 465-1010. Running time: 2 hours.