

JOHNNY GOT HIS GUN  
at Stages Theatre Center



Reviewed By T.H. McCulloh  
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During both World Wars, particularly in London and New York, the most terrible casualties were not allowed to enter the country through populated centers of transportation, so as not to frighten the populace and destroy their jingoistic patriotism and their desire to run off and fight the enemy. That's why in 1939 Dalton Trumbo published his novel *Johnny Got His Gun*. It describes what is certainly the most terrifying end result of a bomb blast on the battlefield and the nerve-racking existence of the victim when he wakes up in a military hospital. Trumbo wrote it to wake people up. The novel should be given to every heroic recruit, if they haven't seen this exceptional stage adaptation.

The tragic truth slowly dawns on 20-year-old Joe Bonham, the soldier damaged in the bomb blast. He realizes his left arm has been removed. Then he discovers that they have removed his other arm, both legs, his eyes, his tongue, his lower jaw, teeth, and ears. Joe decides to refer to himself as a "stump." This is what he will be for the rest of his life. His greatest loss is the ability to communicate. He recalls and describes many voices and events in his young life, but he feels so isolated he hates the medical efforts to keep him alive.

Adapted for the stage and directed by Bradley Rand Smith, this is a stunning work. Smith has taken Joe's interior life in what is left of him, has found the overpowering tragedy, but has also shown the hope that can never be destroyed in Joe's mind. Leigh Allen's masterful lighting, as much a character as Joe, is awesome. On an almost bare stage they have created a small but clear world for Joe to exist in.

But these things would not be as effective without an actor capable of bringing Joe to life. Grant Tyler gives an extraordinary performance as Joe, wrought in confusion and fear when he is the "stump" but bright, charming, and often funny as the boy and young man Joe remembers himself as. Memories of his mother making apple butter in the kitchen, fishing with his dad, and his innocent and glowing romance with Cathy are as real and touching as they can be. The show's most magical moment occurs when Joe, who has been trying to send messages by pounding his head against his pillow in Morse Code, to no avail, finally finds one doctor who understands and taps on Joe's forehead, "Merry Christmas." Joe's overpowering joy—as Tyler yells, "I can talk!"—can break your heart.

Don't be squeamish about the subject matter. The play, the direction, and Tyler's performance are so full of hope and love you soon forget the awful disaster that has befallen this young man, and many others, through what Trumbo believed was idiotic jingoism.

"Johnny Got His Gun," presented by and at Stages  
Theatre Center, 1540 N. McCadden Place,  
Thurs.-Sun. 8p.m. Feb.6-Mar. 16. \$20. (323) 465-1010 .