



An Online Entertainment Magazine

Johnny Got His Gun

By Steve Hendrickson

Inside the tiny Stages Theater, with only himself, one medical-esque chair, and Leigh Allen's primal illumination, Grant Tyler takes us on a one-man tour of hell. Tyler gives flesh, a story, a name, a face, to those who were fed into the enormous mechanized abattoir we now call World War I...

Tyler's daunting and evocative performance comes in Bradley Rand Smith's adaptation of Dalton Trumbo's 1939 *Johnny Got His Gun* (Smith also directed). We see the entire story only through Tyler's body and Allen's lighting. Tyler uses the small, cold space to make us feel the entrapment of the front lines, then the prison of a mutilated body that entraps the character Joe Bonham.

Along the way, Tyler deftly takes us back to Bonham's rural American roots, where, in his memory, Bonham lovingly evokes smells, textures, and sounds of civilian life that preceded the deafening roar and stench of trench warfare.

At these moments, "Johnny" celebrates tactile pleasures we take for granted. Ultimately, with his limbs, sight and identity erased, touch is the only connection between his universe and the hospital outside of himself.

Tyler makes it work with skill and timing. Timing, of course, has a further disquieting dimension. This isn't just a World War I story — Tyler's Bonham reminds us this is the story of any war in which leaders remain safely away from the battles they send their countrymen's youth to fight. It cannot be lost on an audience that faces an administration with many key figures who have not known war, who are sending America's sons and daughters to face searing pain and the sudden loss of ability, limb, perhaps even life.

Allen's lighting creates a sterile harshness to evoke Bonham's hospital. In other scenes, Allen uses rich, primal colors, coming at a slight angle that also creates puddles of shadow that envelop Tyler. The stage belongs to just the two: Tyler and Allen. They fill it powerfully.

Johnny Got His Gun is running at Stages Theatre Center, 1540 North McCadden Place, Hollywood, (323) 465-1010 . Thursdays through Sundays, 8.p.m. Runs through March 16. \$20