

One-woman play offers perspectives on Iraq

By Judith Egerton jegerton@courier-journal.com The Courier-Journal

An American soldier in a convoy traveling through Iraq prays that a boy with a live grenade won't jump in front of her truck, forcing her to kill the child.

An Iraqi woman watches as soldiers raid her neighbors' home and drag away an 80-year-old man while his children and grandchildren sob and shake with fear.

These and other first-person accounts of the war in Iraq have been formed into a new one-woman show, "Women Speak: Iraq."

Louisville native Shannon Woolley, who teaches acting at Stage One, will portray about a dozen characters with a variety of perspectives concerning the war. The play premieres Thursday night at the Rudyard Kipling. Produced by the Looking for Lilith theater company of Louisville, the production will be directed by Kelly McNerney of Louisville and performed through Oct. 8.

Woolley, 32, said she became interested in talking to Iraqi women and American women in the armed services after Looking for Lilith created the play "What My Hands Have Touched," about women during World War II, including a pilot, a factory worker and a USO performer.

She was curious about encounters between female U.S. soldiers and Iraqi women. What was that like? What did each of them think and feel about the war? She also was interested in the viewpoints of women in the U.S. who were not directly involved in the war, but who were concerned about it or had relatives in Iraq.

With funding support from the Kentucky Foundation for Women, Alternate ROOTS, the Ford Foundation and the Nathan Cummings Foundation, Woolley and McNerney interviewed nearly 30 women from around the country. They were helped in their research by the Women in Military Service for America Memorial Foundation of Arlington, Va., which sent a call out to women veterans about the development of the play. The organization maintains records about women in the military and provides educational services related to the history of women in the services.

"One of our main intentions for this piece was to create a range of perspectives so the audience would hear a perspective that they haven't heard before -- and that will inspire dialogue," said Woolley, adding, "We tend to talk about the war with people who agree with us."

Asked how she can be sure that the stories she gathered were true, Woolley said, "I think everyone I interviewed told me the truth as they know it, but everyone's truth is colored by their experiences."

A mother and daughter Woolley interviewed for the play brought the war close to home. She talked to Rikki Stewart, a reservist in the Georgia Air National Guard who spent a year in Iraq and is now based at Warner Robbins Air Force Base in Macon, Ga., and her mother, Sally Jessel of the St. Matthews area, who is administrative assistant to Bill Schreck at Metro Inspections, Permits & Licenses.

Jessel's daughter was involved in delivering supplies to Iraq and Afghanistan. Her son, Joseph Michael Stevens, an Air Force police officer, also served in Iraq. He has returned home and is now based in Las Vegas.

In her interview with Woolley, Jessel said she talked about exchanging e-mails with her daughter while she was deployed and hearing from her on her satellite telephone. "I

was nervous and scared, but I had the ability to communicate with them when they were there, and that helped."

Jessel said she plans to see "Women Speak: Iraq" on opening night and is pleased that Woolley has gathered the experiences of female soldiers. "I think it needs to be said and needs to be done -- to show the women's side of war in a different way. I've seen other plays she has done in the past, and I know she's good."

Researching the play was inspirational for Woolley, who said she was "amazed and grateful for the openness of people who were willing to tell me painful, funny and embarrassing stories."

Looking for Lilith was formed in 2001 by Woolley and Louisvillian Trina Fischer, 33, who have been friends since they were in first grade together at Field Elementary School. Originally, the nonprofit theater was based in New York, but Louisville became its home last year when both women returned to the city.

The name is derived from a legend that purports that Adam had a wife before Eve and her name was Lilith. She was banished from Eden because she believed herself equal to Adam and refused to be subservient.

Woolley, Fischer and McNerney, 33, attended the Youth Performing Arts School in Louisville together but went their separate ways for college and theater-related jobs before reuniting recently in Louisville.

Woolley earned an acting degree at Southern Methodist University and a master's degree in educational theater at New York University. Fischer, who also teaches at Stage One and works for the Blue Apple Players, earned a degree in performance studies at Northwestern University. McNerney graduated from the University of Illinois and was running the St. Croix Festival Theatre in Wisconsin before her recent return to Louisville.

Woolley said that "Women Speak: Iraq" is a challenging acting job she was eager to take on. The most difficult scene to perform, she said, is one between a private and a sergeant who have polar-opposite opinions expressed in dueling dialogue. To do that scene, Woolley uses two chairs as props, each designating one of the characters. "It's really difficult to present each of their truths without commenting on it," she said.

Although New York is considered the theater capital of the country, Woolley said Looking for Lilith is happy to be based in Louisville, where the troupe has already developed a following.

"We love the theater scene in Louisville. When we were in New York, it was so expensive to produce a show. We were working our fingers to the bone to produce a show in a city that is glutted with theater."

Louisville is home to another theater group, the Pleiades Theatre Company, that produces plays by and about women. But Woolley said the two theater companies are complementary, rather than competitive. Pleiades produces published works, while Looking for Lilith creates original shows based on events in women's history.

Reporter Judith Egerton can be reached at (502) 582-4503.