



Andrew Steggall,  
Iraq, 2005.  
Courtesy of  
Georgia Oetker

ANDREW STEGGALL

## ARTIST'S JOURNAL

### *Directing Stravinsky's The Soldier's Tale*

I'm afraid I had, since I was a boy, been rather suspicious of foreigners, especially dark ones. And Arabs, despite a powerfully romantic association with Omar Sharif in *Lawrence of Arabia*, had always seemed particularly frightening. It was hardly surprising to me then that Osama bin Laden should turn up jabbering accusations while bracing a Kalashnikov.

Between 2001 and 2003 I tried to think of ways that I could improve both the situation and my attitude toward it. Perhaps if I read the Koran I could get to the bottom of the problem. Perhaps if I met Osama I could talk him out of this stubborn impasse. Perhaps I could assassinate him. I thought that if someone didn't do something we would end up in another world war.

The First World War and its horrors had been present in my mind more than usual during 2003. The conductor Robin O'Neill and I had been working on a production of Igor Stravinsky's *The Soldier's Tale* in Bristol [U.K.]. The piece, written by Stravinsky and Swiss writer Charles Ferdinand Ramuz in Switzerland, was first presented in 1918. It is the story, spoken and played, of a young soldier who, in return for a book promising wealth and fortune, hands over his precious violin (his soul, of course) to a stranger he meets while on leave. Our program included the poem "Dulce et decorum est" by Wilfred Owen, and in the production, our soldier was dressed in the uniform of the period, the narrator wore a dark suit and stood at a lectern, and, as the *Independent* (November 2003) described it, the devil was "an exuberantly satanic John Telfer, black as hell in a disheveled, unbuttoned cassock."

To be honest, I am not quite certain of the order of events that led to my being in Iraq in 2005. The production in Bristol was a success, particularly so because of our new translation by Jeremy Sams, and we wanted to try and stage it in London. The success had also been dependent on what our producer, Jonathan Stracey, described as a sketched quality, pricking the imagination of the audience, not dictating but suggesting. In 2004 all eyes were on the news about Iraq, the supposed home of Al-Qaeda and an arsenal of weapons of mass destruction. I had marched in London with hundreds

of thousands of others to denounce the invasion, and despite the fact that I felt a bit of a fraud knowing so little about the situation, and harboring within myself a latent hostility to this amorphous and threatening thing, the Middle East, I was struck—as so many were—by the curious irrelevance and impotence of our protestations.

Tony Blair hedged his bets that we didn't really mean it. Just as I don't expect the God I don't believe in to answer my occasional prayers, so too it seems that the government didn't think we really meant it. Perhaps we didn't. You cannot fight against conflict with conflict, but the peace marches all over the world were organized to the point of ineffectiveness. "Listen to our chants, we're having a lovely day out."

Most people wanted Saddam gone, but I doubt many really knew there weren't WMDs. And anyway, I wonder if the thinking really went: Look at the way these people treat their women. Their country is dirty and ugly and the people untrustworthy. Sure we don't like war. It's frightening. Eating Big Macs, watching television, and not voting is much safer. But stopping a war? That's hard, especially when you are not sure that would be the right thing to do.

As it turns out the war was a disaster—can a war not be?—and the politicians didn't really know what they were talking about. It was a game of poker, and all sides were bluffing. The fact that we accused the government of being wrong and that, by and large, they were, is perhaps a coincidence more than anything else.

But in 2004 we had no idea how bad it was going to get. I felt impotent and waited to be found out as one of those on the peace march who hadn't believed enough and thus ruined the effect of the whole.

Then one day, rather randomly, an actor who had been asked to play the Narrator in a production of *The Soldier's Tale* in Istanbul asked me if the slated staging was my production. "No," I replied, "but I am thinking of doing it in Baghdad." This seemed like the answer. I could address my ignorance, undermine my obviously unreasonable suspicion of the Middle East and along the way set a precedent for cultural synergy and mutuality. If we could do plays together, then there would be no more wars. Whatever lessons I learnt along the

way would be distilled in the play and shared with the audience who watched it. The word would spread.

The constitution of the production became clear within the first few days of thinking about it and people asking what the idea was. The thoughts came with the answers. The production would be bilingual, with Iraqi and British actors and musicians. We would rehearse in Baghdad, open there, and then transfer to London. Critically, we would not be "taking" *The Soldier's Tale* to Iraq. We would create it . . . together. *The Soldier's Tale*, a fable of lost innocence and moral corruption, was perfect in its universality. I thought very little in the coming months—too little, perhaps—about how the play would be told in this new context. I simply submerged myself in the task



*The Soldier's Tale*,  
2005. Courtesy of  
Adam Broomberg  
and Oliver Chanarin

of producing the circumstances for the work to take place.

Collaboration would be key, of course, and from the very start I began to talk to people much more clever than myself, people I thought could help me raise money as well as teach me about the Middle East, Islam, the war in Iraq, security and culture issues there, how to get the necessary visas, etc. Most people told me I was mad, some thought I was exploiting Iraq, some thought I was brilliant. Everyone had something to say, and mostly it was useful—even the criticism.

I tried to keep a journal while developing the project, but I found that I was both more inspired, and more at liberty to attend to the task, while I was in Iraq. The following are extracts from my journal during this period; they have been edited and annotated for publication here.

—A.S.

*Tuesday, 24 May 9 a.m., Kuwait*

Kuwait, sitting in air-conditioned military tents, in two opposing lines, waiting to board the Royal Air Force (RAF) Hercules flight to Baghdad. Hollywood blockbusters play on a television at one end of the tent, and at the other end is a tall fridge with bottles of water. People—soldiers, United Nations employees, and diplomatic staff—sit beside their armored flak jackets and helmets, either reading or staring at the TV screen. A motley group of Chinese, Dutch, Americans, and British. Most are wearing boots, but a few, like me, are wearing leather-soled shoes. Stuart [Brocklehurst, an adviser to the project] had advised me to wear something I could run in. I am beginning to regret the more formal shoes I thought would be suitable for meetings.

Outside the tent the heat is stifling beyond any expectation. And it is only morning. When I got to the Kuwait headquarters of ArmorGroup[, the international security firm,] at about six this morning, I was told that my seat on the helicopter from Baghdad International Airport (BIAP) to the helipad in the center of Baghdad had been taken by someone else. Making that journey by road is daunting but might be necessary: where others will follow, I must lead. Before I can board the RAF flight to the BIAP, U.S. personnel check my bullet-proof plates and the contents of my bags. *Arid* is the only word really. Dust and heat stifle movement and dull your thoughts to a crawl. Despite the ugly immovability of the Hercules slumbering on the tarmac, we are soon airborne and heading toward Baghdad, surrounded by a deafening roar. We are strapped into the cargo hold, in rows. Our bags and cases are on pallets that were lifted in through the large ramp at the back.



Working in Iraq, 2005. Courtesy of Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin



Working in Iraq,  
2005. Courtesy of  
Adam Broomberg  
and Oliver Chanarin

Sweat pours out of us. Earplugs mute everything, even your fear. A meager light is admitted through the small, circular windows that silhouette the mostly bald or shaved heads of the passengers onboard. The light glints on shiny, sweating temples. The sweat of men fills the hold. It is not fanciful to believe we are all soldiers. To my left and right are the profiles of middle-aged men, beads of sweat trickling down glazed cheeks onto necks, inclined back against the mesh of straps that line the hold.

*Wednesday, September 7, 2005, London*

My mind churns with anxiety. I feel utterly unqualified to direct this production. Tasks stick in my head and stick in time because I cannot act on them, because seeing them through to fruition would demand being able to envisage how to direct the actors in the room. How can I set up castings when I don't know how to hold the auditions, and how do I keep moving this production forward, nearer and nearer to the rehearsal period, when I'm truly uncertain of how to lead this company and how to direct the work?

That first trip to Baghdad had been such a success. I stayed at the Palestine Hotel, not in the safety of the Green Zone, had met with the minsiter of culture and teachers from the Academy of Fine Arts with whom I chatted about Brook and Brecht and of course this project. I had made it to the National Theatre, met over forty actors, and made a good and valuable friendship with Hayder Daffer, a young film director who pledged his support to the production. But soon after my return, the Palestine was devastated by a huge explosion, and now Baghdad seems like a no-go for the production. The Palestine Hotel—reasonably safe though not ensconced in the “American” Green Zone—had seemed like a brilliant place to bring the British company and to rehearse the production in moderate safety. Now it was not.

I am terrified: we don't have the funds, we don't have the infrastructure to carry this off, we don't really even have a “we.” My Arabic lessons have stalled because I have been too busy, or too distracted, or too undisciplined, and I am falling behind every day as uncertainty and fear clutch at my heels. Somebody should stop this whole thing.

*Thursday, September 15, 2005, Baghdad*

Over the whirring of the air-conditioning unit and the occasional rat-a-tat-tat of distant gunfire I hear a pigeon cooing. I can see him from my window. He is perched on the point of a telegraph pole, looking out at the early morning. Waiting. Wondering what today will bring. Between waking and nine-thirty we will find out what the day holds. Yesterday was one of the worst days in a long time, I gather. The press reported a dozen coordinated suicide attacks killing 163 and injuring over 500. The first and worst

bomb of the day was detonated in the Kazimiyah district, alongside the bomber's van, where a crowd had gathered. Now I hear sirens.

We arrived yesterday in spite of attempts by the British Embassy to remove us from the Hercules flight from Kuwait. The journey was long and slow: first the waiting, then the sleepless night on the British Airways flight from London to Kuwait, then the thundering few hours in the hull of the Hercules, surrounded this time by young, anxious-looking Estonian soldiers embarking on their first tour. Sweat beaded on the pale lips of one boy as the plane made its swooping, lurching, missile-dodging descent until he finally caved in and vomited into a carrier bag.

Our PSD [personal security detail] had been delayed by an attack during their journey to collect us but was nonetheless waiting for us at BIAP. But, instead of being taken by them to the Palestine Hotel in the Red Zone, we were unexpectedly picked up by helicopter and taken to the helipad in Baghdad from where, without the expected PSD unit waiting, we hitched a lift to the embassy in the Green Zone, and this was where our trouble started.

Robin and I took advantage of the embassy canteen, where a pastiche of Chinese and British food was served. There we met and chatted with a reasonably senior member of the embassy staff. He was fascinated by our project, and after finishing his meal he went upstairs to tell the ambassador that we would like to meet him. Unfortunately, the new ambassador didn't know anything about the project, didn't think we should be in Baghdad, and sent instructions that we should leave the country the next day.

It had been a bad day for the embassy: a rise in violence as well as a shift in the focus toward civilians and contractors, like ArmorGroup. Moments before the ambassador was told about us, he apparently had received news of a kidnapping. I now suspect, though, that the kidnapping was a fiction added for our benefit, to encourage us to leave posthaste. As I am writing, the sound of gunfire has become more frequent, joined by sirens blaring, car horns honking, and traffic humming. A few moments ago there was the low crump of what sounded like a large bomb.

ArmorGroup, which has an office in the embassy, is made up of a sanguine and pragmatic bunch of guys who don't take risks lightly. It will be awful for us if there are recriminations against them from the embassy for assisting us in this project.

Robin and I are grounded here at the ArmorGroup compound while the situation is assessed. My layman's ears are scanning the distance for sounds of a repeat or escalation of yesterday's unrest, in the hope that the prediction of the special operations room manager is right and that the insurgents will pause for a day to gather more willing recruits and strap them with explosives. If this is the case, there is the possibility of our going to the Palestine Hotel and setting up meetings with the musicians. In addition to the problems posed by the uncontrollable, violent city we are in, we find ourselves faced with more subtle and emotional hurdles. Tim Torlot, the ambassador's second in command, sensing one of our own long-held anxieties, stresses the danger we pose for the Iraqi musicians we are to meet with. This is a difficult question to grapple with. Once we return from Iraq and the show is over, what are the ongoing implications for the

Iraqis we worked with? What are the possible repercussions for them and their families? And what happens to them as they leave the largely Western Palestine Hotel after meeting us? Along with the responsibility I feel as a Westerner to engage in the region and to collaborate with fellow artists here, should I not also feel a responsibility not to, if doing so would put them in danger?

Robin is seriously troubled by the idea of our going to the Palestine Hotel. He is a father, and his circumstances are wildly different from mine. It could certainly be said that he is here because of me. He has asserted that he believes in the project and in our shared objectives, but he indicated last night that it is my courage that has brought us this far. At this stage, and governed by greater ties to life than I have, his courage is flagging.

An e-mail arrives from Hayder Daffer, a friend here in Baghdad who makes films. He says he won't be working in the Palestine Hotel this week because his mother died yesterday morning.

Stuck in the compound. We haven't met any musicians, the purpose of this trip. No nearer to our goal. I have had a forewarning, though, of the emotional demands that will affect the different members of the company and how their lives and priorities will affect their choices.

Thrown into this is Robin's persistent skepticism about the abilities of the Iraqi players. He is convinced that we will not find players with sufficient skill to play the Stravinsky. I'm prepared to accept this but only once we have met them and proved this to be the case. Until then it is hypothetical, and I am not content to sacrifice our ambition to demonstrate solidarity with the Iraqi artists here. First we must face all the challenges thrown at us.

One option is to work with artists from the Iraqi diaspora—but finding them isn't easy. Another is to have a full European ensemble but with an Iraqi percussionist and an *oud* player. At the moment this last option seems the easiest, but it feels like too much of a compromise.

Perhaps being prevented from entering the center of Baghdad to meet with the musicians is a sign we should acknowledge, recognizing that our objective is not fulfillable. When can you nobly change direction?

We have six weeks: the whole play to cast, a huge amount of money to raise, and a company to establish with the infrastructure to carry this ridiculous project off. The whole thing will be held together by tape and string—which might hold against the buffets of a delayed Tube, or a sick player, or a missing prop. But will it hold against the cold of Sulaymāniyah (the current planned location for our rehearsals), the fear of an anxious company, a government whose offered support may not materialize, a country that is tipping into civil war, and a director who doesn't actually speak Arabic or know how to direct a company of actors and musicians through a devising process? This we have yet to see.



*Friday, September 16, 2005, Kuwait*

The embassy has made us withdraw to Kuwait, and as it dawns on me how little we have accomplished, I am finding it hard not to blame Robin. The temperature here is sweltering, and it is evening. Even the wind is hot. Occasionally there is a wisp of cooler air trapped in the wall of heat, perhaps some lost eddy of air blown over the sea.

Yesterday evening the possibility of achieving something in Baghdad was frustratingly snatched from us by the embassy. At about 6 p.m. the embassy confirmed that we could not get on the AirBridge or the Hercules until Saturday. We thought this would give us Friday to execute the plan that Robin and I had cooked up: I would go to the Palestine, meet musicians, and record them with a camcorder so that Robin could later assess their abilities. This seemed like the best use of our time.

Robin and I were back in the compound when Andy French, ArmorGroup senior manager, knocked on our door. We were testing the playback quality of Robin's camcorder when he told us that the embassy had called and said they found us places on the aircraft and that we had to go.

The company goes over the script, 2005. Courtesy of Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin



The Red House,  
Iraq, 2005. Courtesy  
of Adam Broomberg  
and Oliver Chanarin

If Armor Group had originally collected us at the BIAP or the helipad in Baghdad and we had not been taken as a kind of default to the embassy, the staff there would not have had an opportunity to get involved. They couldn't force us out of the country, but they did succeed in putting enough wind up Robin's sails to convince him that he would be at great personal risk if he went to the Palestine Hotel.

As we went to bed last night, another resounding *crump* made the windows shudder and my gut lurch. Robin headed to the basement, following the instructions we had been given, but I ran up to the roof, expecting to see a neighboring building in flames. There was nothing except for the languid air and a flurry of gunfire seemingly in response to the explosion. Nervous about being within sight of potential snipers, I moved around the corner of the door. There was a burst of noise behind me. It wasn't until my heart had left my throat that I realized I'd disturbed a pigeon roosting among the air-conditioning vents. I'm going to have to be a lot cooler if I'm going to be able to act out my frequently imagined hostage escape plans.

As I lay in bed afterward, I had unshakable dreams of the opera company being captured and tortured, of heroically rescuing them but then having to escape through

miles of land and city in which everyone was a sympathizer with those who had captured us.

Now I am sitting outside Starbucks in Kuwait, surrounded by smartly dressed Arabs and trendy young couples. Matt, our production assistant, is back in London, trying to grapple with the challenges of producing the show. As many people back out—put off either by fear of “Iraq” or our lack of credentials—just as many are fascinated and excited by the project.

Tom Hardy is interested in working on the show. He’s a brilliant actor and physically very strong. Given the tone of Rebecca Lenkiewicz’s translation, I think he would make an excellent part of the company.

*Monday, September 19, 2005, London*

Iraq is tipping further into turmoil. Today two British soldiers were arrested by the Iraqi police in the south. Their apparent actions, and the British army’s attempt to free them, caused huge civil unrest in the region.

I am going to try and reenter Baghdad next week, but I am truly scared. Thank god this is all so difficult. If it were easy, if we had the money in place, and if people didn’t raise so many barriers, then I wouldn’t be able to trust the purpose and value of our plan. Or maybe the challenge itself and the determination to climb each fence blind me to the fact that the wall in the distance is not surmountable.

*Wednesday, September 21, 2005, London*

For the first time yesterday, I awoke to nausea. Normally it only kicks in at the end of the day when I am unable to sleep. Do I reenter Baghdad next week to try and complete the casting? The idea frightens me, and an odd superstition lurks in my mind that third-time-lucky might not be so. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) called to say that they had discussed my proposed trip with the ambassador and that, given the current, increased risk, they would no longer negotiate a place with the RAF for me.

If I do not go into Baghdad I will have to find a way of meeting the actors and musicians elsewhere, possibly in Amman, Jordan, or else by video conference. Either way I will need Hayder Daffer’s support in this, and I think he is still in Cairo. Or, I can go in via the commercial route, which is perfectly doable but represents a kind of triumphant stubbornness on my part that may mask genuine foolishness and a fatal error of judgment.

In a conversation on Sunday with David Lan, another crucial advisor and board member of The Motion Group (TMG), he urged me to hear “the voice inside you which is saying ‘stop.’” Amid all the other voices, he asked, do you have the wit to recognize the voice that tells the truth? His instinct, he said, is that there are two things going on. He understood one of them, putting on the play. But the other one, the one perhaps

fueling my determination and seeming courage, he didn't understand and didn't trust. I assumed he thought I was pursuing glory. No, he said, it's something darker. "That I'm trying to kill myself?" I asked. "I think, maybe, yes," he said.

*Tuesday, October 11, 2005, London*

A difficult week. I met with David Liddiment and Kate Pakenham of the Old Vic on Monday to alert them to the fact that having raised all the development funding we now are struggling to raise funds to underwrite the actual production. Also, on the Friday before, ArmorGroup came to me with the news that they did not feel sufficiently able to predict the level of stability in Sulaymānīyah in eastern Kurdistan during the buildup to the elections. Now plan B is looking unachievable.

This news means we either have to carry on with rehearsals in the current time frame, emphasizing the collaboration of people but working in London, or reschedule the production to the spring. My instinct, in an effort to preserve aspects of the project that are achievable only by actually working in Iraq, is to delay.

I put this to David and Kate on Monday and am still waiting for their response. I'm stuck in a horrible limbo—uncertain of whether we start rehearsals in five weeks—or five months—or, indeed, if they will pull the show altogether because we are being so flaky. Not only do we not have the underwriting, but there is no reason to believe that the situation in Iraq will allow us to work there in the spring anyway.

Castings are proceeding well in London.

*Thursday, October 20, 2005, Sulaymānīyah*

I feel exceptionally tired. Persistently groggy and dehydrated. I am in Sulaymānīyah, in the Kurdish north of Iraq. I am here to meet a smaller group of actors that Hayder has chosen and to audition them. The lull in the traffic around four o'clock has given way to a ceaseless drone. The fast of Ramadan has broken, and even though there are very few mosques and the call to prayer at five is only barely audible, the difference between the activity around the "break-fast" and the return to activity at eight is noticeable.

The Iraqi actors who have traveled up from Baghdad are all pretty irreverent about Ramadan and lightly mock the youngest, Ala, who seems to be the lone Muslim and has thus to refrain from the Arak and beer and cigarettes that the rest of the group indulge in at any hour of the day.

Today was not long, and I realized that my tiredness must be traced back to an earlier moment, in London before I left, when my brother Paul and Stuart called to express anxiety about the lack of security, even here. Stuart's position was clear: Ignore his advice and I will find myself, in an orange boiler suit, beheaded on webcam by Christmas.

My position angers and frustrates some of my advisers; if I relent and stay in Amman, I will fail, or at least delay progress on, *The Soldier's Tale*. I spent the night in

the airport, trying to connect to my e-mails via the many wireless signals that linger uselessly at the airport. I felt a growing sense of panic throughout the night, induced mainly by the sleeplessness and waiting. What if they're right?

On the other hand, ArmorGroup is being strongly dissuaded from assisting us with our visits to Iraq. I don't think there is anything cynical in ArmorGroup's choices, but I know that the FCO is their main client, and I know that they would be under great pressure not to support an initiative that the embassy was against.



The plane thumped down in Sulaymānīyah after a terrifying flight on Iraqi Airways to Baghdad and then the connecting flight here, finally touching down on a brand-new, unblemished runway devoid of the normal accumulation of black rubber streaks. The terminal is a small, shiny bunker with a sweeping steel roof. You step down from the plane and walk across the tarmac to the building with the Kurdish mountains, brown and immovable, sweeping up behind you. I was reminded of some distant fantasy or a scene from an old film where commercial flights landed at brand-new airports and passengers embarked upon the brave new world of flight and travel. As I walked away from the plane it was easy to imagine that a zeppelin hovered behind me.

Company member  
Falah Ibraheem  
Fleeh, 2005.  
Courtesy of  
Andrew Steggall



National Theatre  
of Baghdad, 2005.  
Courtesy of Andrew  
Steggall

I was adopted at the airport by a Kurdish family who were waiting for their son. They followed me through immigration. The father called my contact, Delshad, to confirm whether he or his driver were waiting at the outer perimeter. They escorted me and a Kurdish gentleman I had met earlier while looking for a telephone in the Baghdad airport to the perimeter and waited with me until I noticed a vehicle with an envelope in the window with the words ANDREE LEONART STEJALL. The owner of the vehicle, Kadir, shook my hand and apologized for the overcast weather. With assurances from my adoptive family that I had any help I might need while in Sulaymānīyah, I

pulled away from the airport with Kadir. We felt our way through a conversation: me in pidgin Arabic and English, he in Arabic, pidgin English, and Kurdish when his Arabic failed. I was keen to call London to confirm that I had been picked up and was safe and so turned down his first invitation to go to his house. Also, it occurred to me that he might be planning to kidnap me. He repeated the offer again as we approached the turn to his house but rather more firmly this time. It seemed absurd to say, but if he did kidnap me, I would later have to explain—if I had the opportunity—that I went with him because I thought it would have been rude to say no a second time.

As we pulled up to his house, I instinctively looked back down the road to see if other cars had pulled up or were hovering. Naively satisfied that I had done all I could, I went inside and sat among the plastic flowers and gilded tissue boxes. We spent the afternoon sitting around the kitchen table learning words in Kurdish and English and talking about the war and the elections. Kadir's finger was stained purple. His daughter wants to go to London to train to be a doctor. They gave me rice with lemon and meat. and apologized over and over again for not having more food or better food. His wife was teaching and would not be home until it was time to break the fast. I complimented him on his house and the kitchen units. He said he had built it himself.

*Friday, October, 21, 2005, Sulaymānīyah*

On Thursday I decided that rather than try and make contact with Jalal Talabani, head of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, I would go and explore the Red House, or Amna Suraka, the former Ba'athist barracks where thousands of Kurdish rebels were tortured and killed by Saddam's security forces. For a dollar the driver took me the short distance to the walled enclosure where the Red House sits, opposite plush houses with walled gardens and garages. Vengeful hands and sledgehammers have knocked out not only the windows and doors, but also the frames and the surrounding masonry. The two main buildings look like blocks of honeycomb, bleeding slightly. I looked thoroughly in every room and on every floor: partly because the entropy was endlessly fascinating in its variety but mainly because each room contained the possibility of the horrible truth of why it was called the Red House. I wanted evidence that this was the Ba'ath headquarters, home of the secret police. I wanted to see the ghosts of those executed and tortured and to share in their ultimate triumph, as shown by the bullet-

riddled walls and the violently liberated windows and lights and fixtures.

In the gap between the two main buildings and a kind of bunker was a kind of dusty car park for disused tanks and rocket launchers. Beside the bunker was a pile of mortar shells and larger missile carcasses. The ruins were both artful and chaotic. Rooms inside a high, windowless bunker had been replastered and painted; cables poked out of neat, new holes, waiting to be attached to new lights. These rooms could become gallery spaces.

I knew I wanted to bring the Iraqi actors here, to the Red House, to audition when they arrived. I moved from room to room. I began to notice, though, in the corridors and above the window cavities, the occasional light socket, newly hung with red light bulbs. In one of the rooms on the second floor a layer of earth had been laid down, piled up in places to form graves. Other rooms were strewn with leaves. Some were covered in mud, hard and cracked like a riverbed.

In the white-tiled cubicle that had once been a toilet for Ba'athist members and policemen there was a sea of white, plaster-cast arms and hands stretching up from the

*The Soldier's Tale*,  
London, 2005.  
Courtesy of  
Andrew Steggall





*The Soldier's Tale*,  
London, 2005.  
Courtesy of  
Andrew Steggall

floor. Along the staircases and in some of the rooms of the second building there were drawings and paintings on the walls: sometimes words and phrases and sometimes just faces and scrawl. Recurring throughout were images of an eagle claspng a snake in its talons, scratched into the blackened walls or smeared in red paint. Is the eagle America? Is the snake Saddam?

After a few hours I headed back to the hotel. I had wanted to bring the British members of the company to rehearse in the Red House. But I am unsure of what the building can give us. At four the actors arrived. They were in good spirits, and the journey, though long, had been mostly uneventful.

There was some very un-Ramadan drinking of Arak and music-making until late. The next day we all went to the Red House. The guards were lounging about on the grass smoking, and now that I had arrived with five Iraqi actors, a cameraman, and an *oud* player, they seemed pretty adamant that we could not go in. I explained that I was a friend of the president's wife, Hero Talabani. They were unable to verify that this

was in fact not true, so we wandered in and started to warm up among the silent tanks and mortars. Hayder translated and filmed, and I had my first taste of the challenges that lie ahead.

The film material will provide the designer, Jon Bausor, with inspiration and visual reference. Whether we take the Red House as a setting for our story or not, it is fascinating, a bullet-riddled skeleton in which doves have taken to roosting among the fire-gutted sockets and caverns. The Red House: red because of its paintwork and red because of its history as the bloody regional headquarters of the secret police.

It was unwise for the actors to travel back to Baghdad so late in the day, so they stayed the night and left early this morning. I decided which actors to work with, and I will meet with the U.K. and U.S. consulates in Amman on Monday to get the ball rolling to procure their visas. The acting style of the Iraqis is rather different from ours—far more declamatory and stylized. In the work we did I moved them toward a more naturalistic approach, though I was looking more for internal sincerity than external style. I think I found this in Ala'a, Dyaa, and Falah.

Later Hayder brought me a message from the Iraqi actors to say that they were conscious of the difference in styles and that perhaps we have different ways. I am keen to make the right decision about how far to “teach” them our methods. It is important to celebrate differences, and the production will be the richer for it, but I am equally concerned that the audience will identify less with them because of the language difference. I don't want to further alienate the audience from the Iraqi performers by allowing them to appear stilted to Western perceptions of acting.

*Sunday, October 23, 2005, Sulaymānīyah*

Another bloody nose this morning, and I decided not to risk one last walk to the Palace Hotel to connect with London via Internet. Instead I came early to the airport. Out of the window the tarmac stretches away to the steep, sweeping incline of the mountains.

I had a long [Web-based] Skype™ chat with Jon Bausor yesterday to discuss the London staging. He is nervous about my desire to have an empty space with the back walls of the Old Vic providing the main perimeter and structure. I cannot think of a single design I have ever liked more than the raw walls of a theater. People love to hang black curtains or impose legs and flats to hide the theater and show what is in and out of a room. But why? Jon's instinct is that otherwise the space becomes unfocused and confusing. “You can't just cover the floor in sand and leave it at that,” he says. I'm not so sure. In reality there would be more—objects, markers in the sand, the dock and side walls of the theater perhaps painted like the inside of the Red House, and actors of course. I passed a shipping container dumped alongside the road between Sulaymānīyah and the airport. A box big enough to be a room. A store, a locked store. Perhaps the musical instruments could be locked inside something like this, and they would have to use an angle grinder to cut a hole in one side. This would give us a second horizontal level which would be useful.

I have been trying to find a way—indeed I have always assumed that this was the point, to make some feature of the company consisting half of Iraq and half of British artists. But perhaps the only way to tell the story is to ignore this. The challenge of finding a context in which the story could be told was what excited me in the first place. What dramatic, contemporary, and relevant setting can we find to place these people who are telling the story? We have considered various solutions. The first was the idea of a bus journey.

The scenario went as follows: A bus carrying a mixture of Iraqi and Western passengers is traveling toward Baghdad. It breaks down in the Sunni Triangle, outside Baghdad. Curfew is approaching. The stage is empty, but the beams of the bus headlights swing across the space, then stop. An Iraqi man enters tentatively, looking around. He is followed by another. They talk in hushed whispers that grow into an argument. A Westerner enters, and they shout at him to go back to the bus. They seem afraid. They don't want any insurgents to spot the Westerners and attack the vehicle. The Westerners begin to enter the stage anyway. They want the Iraqis to return the vehicle because they don't want to be attacked by the American planes that are flying above. They shouldn't stop there, and it is near the curfew.

Gradually they all accept that they are safer away from the vehicle and carry their bags onto the stage. Some of them are musicians (percussion!). Perhaps they build a fire. They tell stories. They take turns, adding their own twists and interpretations. The space transforms into a theater space, and gradually they are brought together, linguistically and emotionally, until they are telling the same story. Still scared about the possibility of attack, they put out the fire when they hear planes overhead. The DEVIL tells them not to relight the fire or else the Americans will spot them and attack. The PRINCESS begs the SOLDIER to light the fire again, and the SOLDIER relents. The DEVIL appears, and from out of the darkness missiles fly in, sending them all to a literal hell of fire and death.

In thinking hypothetically about the Red House before I had visited it—and with the plan at that stage being to rehearse in the building—I imagined that the building should be part of the story. Perhaps the reason the Westerners come in is to liberate the building. The “prisoners” they find there do not want to be liberated. They argue. Suddenly the building is attacked again by a third party, and they find themselves stuck together, trying to escape. They are trapped. They begin to tell stories. The border that the DEVIL tells them not to cross is the exit of the building. Eventually they decide to face the outside and leave the building, walking out into the gunfire and destruction that await.

The core conceit that has always driven this production, however, is the idea that all the actors and musicians onstage will come to represent the SOLDIER (the DEVIL and the NARRATOR too). The roles flow between the players and the languages. In this way, the fate of the SOLDIER is the fate of everyone. But the casting process in London made it clear that we were looking for a SOLDIER, a DEVIL, and a NARRATOR, and the same



holds true for the Iraqi actors to be cast. Nonetheless, I am convinced that the way forward lies in balancing the audience's identification with both an Iraqi and a British actor as the SOLDIER (as well as with the DEVIL and the NARRATOR) and with the awareness of a larger ensemble self-consciously playing parts.

Now, though, I begin to doubt the necessity for this context. Why do we need to make sense of the Britishness of the British and the Iraqiness of the Iraqis? Perhaps they should just be seen onstage as people. People who have two different languages and two different cultures. But since they are on the stage, they are first and foremost actors.

Last night, as I lay in bed thinking about the conversation I had with Jon Bausor, and about my work with the Iraqi actors, my thoughts moved to resisting my own temptation to preconceive some guiding structure and to resist the urging of the artistic team to have some notion of a concept.

After all, we have done a great deal of that work already. We have laid the foundations already. The context is set. We are a group of Iraqi and Western artists working together. We have a story. The production must derive from the circumstances of the work. These are unusual circumstances, and therefore the outcome will probably be unusual too. If we are not careful, we will have set ourselves on a railroad toward a conventional model of theater—something botched together from our remembered repertoire of Western theater productions. But there must be direction, there must be momentum. If the actors feel lost or uncertain, they will not act well and will not have the confidence to contribute their valuable energy and inspiration.

I must be like a scientist. If this is to be an experiment, I cannot guide the process toward a preordained result. That is bad science, and our work would be bad theater.

Ala'a Hussein  
Rashid in the  
Red House, 2005.  
Courtesy of Adam  
Broomberg and  
Oliver Chanarin

It will take courage not to preempt. And it will demand steady nerves. I cannot erase my ideas about what the play might be, and it is important to keep the ideas coming. They are, after all, responses to the circumstances as they already stand. I must be open. I must find a process that allows the company to provide me with the story and the common language with which to tell it.

*Monday, October 24, 2005, Amman*

I am on my way back to London. Amid the dirt and bustle of downtown Amman, I wonder if the answer is to set the story at a different time. When it was written? After World War I, when we drew a border around Iraq and said, “This is yours; don’t cross over”? Or maybe during the Second World War?

The red bulbs of the Red House continue to interest me. Could we use the boxes in the auditorium, and then the back walls of the stage and docks, to create the Red House, blackened, gray, and dusty, with occasional red bulbs hanging like some kind of tragic fair?

In Amman the children scamper and flit after one another like the numerous cats. Sometimes they pounce on each other between the cars, and sometimes they crouch and eye you curiously as you pass. Cats.

If you enter the search word “failure” into Google, the first result you get is the official George W. Bush biography page from the White House Web site. But this is not the view of many Iraqis I met in Baghdad who seem to take a much more pragmatic view than we do. Perhaps they cannot afford to be so moral about the means of their liberation. Perhaps they count the cost as low.

We will see.



*The Soldier's Tale,*  
London, 2005.  
Courtesy of  
Andrew Steggall

*Sunday, October 30, 2005, London*

I now have a strong instinct that the production should be emphatically theatrical. Magical and dramatic. The politics are latent, in the context of the work, and the issues are dealt with to the extent that we have the answers.

Alive in my head is the idea of the broken-down bus carrying a group of Western and Iraqi passengers on a journey through Iraq, stranded somehow in the Sunni Triangle after the curfew, leaving everyone together and scared. In Sulaymānīyah last week the Iraqi actors thought this was really interesting.

*Monday, November 28, 2005, London.*

Yesterday afternoon I greeted Hayder and Falah, Ala'a, and Dyaa as they landed at Heathrow's Terminal 3. They had spent the last two days in Amman. Their pleasure at leaving Amman, a place much hated by the Iraqis, added to their excitement at being in London for the first time. Apart from Hayder, who has been to New York, this was their first time anywhere in the West. Our greeting was like that of old friends. Perhaps because I had been to Iraq and had met them once in Baghdad and twice in Sulaymānīyah their feelings were like those of brothers. Perhaps it is just the Iraqi way. Their enthusiasm and hunger for contact and creative engagement are huge. Once you are trusted, they love you like family. They embrace and greet you as *baba* or "brother."

Today we met at the rehearsal rooms in Camden Town amid the goth shops and market stalls. The room is beside train tracks and above a kickboxing school. Neighborhood sounds interfere with the work at the moment, and I think we will have to move.

Name games. Arabic lessons. Group exercises. Trust games and much hurling around. Today was, of course, a challenge. But the work starts tomorrow. Do I just make a decision about the text and direct the play according to the ambitious plan in my head? A merging of the languages according to my will and in order to make manifest my dimly imagined conceit? Or do I try to creep forward, devising and exploring the languages? Rehearsing separately and together. Pushing the texts together in different ways to explore the possibilities. Much failure this way but perhaps more ambitious. The *mumithil* (actors) say, "We are waiting to see what you want to do with us and this play." Our ambition always was to go on an exploratory journey. But that journey must be planned. With steps and directions that may take you somewhere you don't expect but which are nonetheless sculpted according to a grand plan. I am now scared that my grand plan is too vague. Keeping the actors confident and interested is vital. Once they drift, it is deadly. It is only the quality of the director's focus that will reassure and draw them forward toward the goal.

The musicians have a great deal of work to do to be independent of the written score so that they can play and move, and then there are the Iraqi musicians, Sattar Al-Saadi and Shakir Hussan: How do they play their instruments, which demand that they sit, when I want them to be equally part of the action?

The games we played today were fun, but we need to focus on games that will give the group a common dynamic. And a physical confidence in the space.

Ahmed told us today of being imprisoned in Iraq for being a musician and what happened to his friend who refused to sleep with [Saddam's son] Uday Hussein. Uday hung her upside down while she was menstruating and then set four starved rottweilers on her.

For all, theater and music have been their savior and their cross.

*Tuesday, December 6, 2005, London*

Mud—thick, cloying, and stuck. Days now spent in turmoil. A loose and frail patchwork of discoveries. A West End theater and a West End actor. No reconciliation of the huge impact of Iraq and the Iraqi presence in the company. The English actors just bugger off at the end of each day, leaving the Iraqi actors alone. They cannot reconcile the tepidity of their lives with the dawning horror of the existence endured by the Iraqis.

Artistic questions persist: To be metaphorical or literal? Abstract or straight? Contextualized or timeless?

Rebecca is back in rehearsals and is pretty unbudging in her adaptation of the original. We are not journalists. We do not have to be brilliant. But have we done this work, gone on this journey, and engaged such dangers in order to be vague? Please, God, don't let all this work happen only to result in a bilingual staging of *The Soldier's Tale*. More than this. Surely?

Jon and I are way over budget on the design.

I feel utterly disillusioned by the lack of progress being made and by the lack of any emerging clarity or understanding.

*Thursday, December 8, 2005, London*

I worked only with British actors today, lulled into confidence by the sheer simplicity of working in just one language and the contentment of Rebecca facing only her own text, unadulterated by the Arabic spoken simultaneously.

A good day, though, and clearly it's appropriate to focus some solo time with the different actors. The horrible reality, though, is that both the Arabic- and the English-speaking actors would rather do the play on their own, without the incomprehensible and seemingly subordinate jumble of words spouted by their foreign counterparts. If I can't build peace in the rehearsal room, how can I do so in the whole of the Middle East?

Interesting to observe the different results of the work with the English and the Iraqi actors over the past two days. How much is the result of differing styles and skill levels, and how much is the result of my limited ability to direct across the language gap? Metaphors, abstraction, and wandering allusions do not work well when translated. Actions speak louder. And the resulting work is more formal and stage-y without the psychological intensity and realism of the English actors. But then Dyaa and Ala'a

are dancers. Mainly, though, I think the problem is that I have to draw the scene more crudely in order to present their intentions and the increments of action.

At this point my journal ends. Mental energy became too scarce and the horror of the situation became overwhelming. With press engagements taking place every day and increasing requests to observe and record rehearsals, our press representative was bound to her desk answering calls. The work, where is the work?

Our resumption of rehearsals in January was eclipsed by the now-urgent deadline of the opening. I worked hard with Karim to develop the Arabic text and to converge it



with the English version so that the story was exchanged between the two languages. Adamant that neither the Arabic- nor the English-speaking audience be left without any element of the story in their language, I had now created an overly long play in danger of losing *both* halves of the audience.

Each subsegment of the play—for instance, the DEVIL meeting the SOLDIER in the bar—would be told in Arabic and then repeated in English. As a scene built to a climax, the monolingual sections grew shorter. The story passed in ever-decreasing

*The Soldier's Tale*,  
London, 2005.  
Courtesy of  
Andrew Steggall

sections between languages until, by the end, even sentences were shared. These were the most exciting moments, when the rhythm of the play seemed capable of incorporating both languages without losing momentum.

Meanwhile, mine and Jon's shared vision of a desolate and blasted visual environment, based on the Red House, was becoming a reality onstage. Jon had mixed the tons of sand covering the stage with a composite gardening product which threw up a fine dust when the actors walked on it. This proved atmospheric but was a challenge (for the musicians particularly). The drum had to be moistened regularly for fear of cracking.

The ensemble's dynamic was now strong, but a hidden tension was waiting to erupt. We had decided to use most of the Stravinsky score, to be played by European musicians, and to incorporate Arabic compositions based mainly on old Arabic or Iraqi songs, to be played by four Iraqi musicians gathered from around the world by Ahmed Muhktar, the *oud* player Robin O'Neill and I met at the Purcell Rooms and had invited to lead the Iraqi music. I had imagined that this convergence of music might be a triumphant synthesis and thus provide an artistic core for the whole production. But ultimately the Stravinsky score proved perhaps too intransigent.

The British teams had failed to notice a developing tension between the "cultivated" and "civilized" Mukhtar and the Iraqi actors I had brought from Baghdad, whom he described as "savage." Muhktar wanted to fire a *ney* player who had come from Amsterdam, but the musician was firmly absorbed into the company, and neither the Iraqi nor the British actors wanted him to leave. Muhktar, who had engaged all the Iraqi musicians, played his card the day before the dress rehearsal: he simply stayed home with the remaining Iraqi musicians. The move was monstrous and left the company reeling. My power as director, such as it was, was shaken. The rest of the ensemble felt betrayed and distraught. Muhktar was seen as the enemy, but of course the situation was more complicated than that. He had been trading insults with the Iraqi actors with increasing ugliness: they accused each other of being cowards for leaving Iraq or Baathi sympathizers for remaining. The tension between those Iraqis who had lived through the wars of the last three decades and those who had escaped or been exiled exploded. Even the mild-mannered and wise Abdul Karim Kasid recognized the challenging presence of these sometimes cavalier and irreverent Baghdadi actors.

We began the dress rehearsal and performance week in this poisoned atmosphere. At one of the final run-throughs an important adviser, the director and producer David Lan, came to see the work. His response was deadly. "It's boring," he said. You need super-titles." David did not share our fascination with the musicality of the Arabic language, the convergence of both texts, or the drift from Western music to Arabic. He did not accept our central intellectual conceit: not needing super-titles was supposed to be the point. We had transcended the need for clumsy and distracting super-titles because we were telling the story clearly—hadn't we? If we needed super-

titles, then we had failed to share our languages with each other and with the audience. I was stubborn in my refusal, both on principle and for the flawed reason that I simply couldn't imagine how to implement that change. At this final hour, I was too stressed and had been pulled in too many directions. The compromises I had made to make the show possible had left me feeling emasculated and artistically bound. I had responsibility but no power, and the anxiety was crippling. I could no longer see the show clearly.

There is so much else to say: about the extraordinary work of Paule Constance and Chris Shutt, our light and sound designers; about the bewildering and perhaps excessive press exposure; about the work of the photographers Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin, who accompanied me to Sulaymānīyah on a second trip to the region to workshop scenes of the play with the three Iraqi actors; about our hair-raising road trip from Erbil; about the generous support given by Vernon Ellis, who rescued the production at the last minute by underwriting it; about Eric Abraham, Lousie T Blouin, and others; about the praise and criticism that followed the opening (criticism far outweighing praise). We had strayed far from our original hopes for the project. It would not inspire peace in our time. But we might have set a precedent for collaboration and mutuality, if only in our attempt.