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The Eyes of Babylon reveal the thoughts of a gay marine in Iraq.

By [Juliet Wittman](#)

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At the very beginning of his one-man piece, Jeff Key appears in his underwear, so the first thing you find yourself focusing on is his beautifully toned body, an image to which your mind returns periodically – and pleurably – throughout the course of this very serious and soul-searching exploration. At first I didn't know quite how to respond to *The Eyes of Babylon*. Is it supposed to be a significant play about one man's experience in Iraq, or is it intended as some kind of wink-wink come-on? But eventually, I realized that ambiguity was part of the point. Key is an ex-Marine – a man devoted to the idea of patriotism and service to his country – whose homosexuality represents a deep part of his psyche. He left the service in part because of the military's "Don't ask, don't tell" policy, but also because he had come to see the entire invasion as immoral and dishonest. How was it, he wondered on his return, that everyone in the States seemed to know there were no weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, yet his buddies were still risking their lives in the desert searching for them?



Jeff Key wrote about his time in Iraq – and stars in the play.

Details:

Presented by Theatre on Broadway and American Junction Productions through September 14, 721 Santa Fe Drive, 303-309-3773.

www.theatregroup.org,
www.theeyesofbabylon.com

A true-blue Marine who knew nothing about the world at large but did know he disliked French people and hated Michael Moore, Key learned about 9/11 through a phone call from his mother. He knew she was wishing she could protect him from the coming war, even as she relied on his soldierly protection of her and his family. This notion of protection runs deep in Key. The first image of his piece shows his mother – who could be Everymother – tenderly cradling him as an infant. Once in Iraq, he takes very seriously his

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responsibilities toward his fellow Marines. He fears for Iraqi civilians, and even worries about the starving dog he sees foraging for food for her pups. He knows the dog won't make it if she's noticed by certain of his fellow soldiers, men he's nicknamed the Cruels, and indeed she doesn't. (Whenever you encounter a dog in a war chronicle, you can be pretty sure the outcome will be ugly. I'm thinking of the pup Tobias Wolf adopted in *In Pharoah's Army*, which ended up as stew meat. When I interviewed Wolf about his book soon after it came out, he commented cynically that many readers seemed more concerned about the dog's death than the human deaths he had described. But by the tone of his writing, it seemed to me he wasn't entirely unmoved himself.)

The Eyes of Babylon isn't war porn; you don't get a slew of blood and horror stories, though there are some distressing images. Key spent only a couple of months in Iraq before being flown back to the States because of a non-combat-related medical crisis. But he has a keen eye and a poet's sensibility, as well as an ironic sense of humor, and he saw a great deal. He also kept a diary. He relates his observations with a quiet honesty that's very compelling. He tells us about desert heat, daily discomfort, Army food, loneliness and companionship. He grieves for the death of a fellow soldier. He describes the Iraqis he met and attempted to communicate with — peasant farmers, hungry children, the little boy who brought him a Pepsi and refused to accept money for it, the handsome young gay man with whom he exchanged a symbolic kiss through a shared tube of lip balm. One night, standing watch, he revealed his homosexuality to his companion and was astounded by the man's friendly, matter-of-fact response. Even in a war zone, he looked for and found beauty and transcendence, in birdsong or a slant of morning light. But he also discovered a bloodlust within himself and the potential for mindless killing: "I want Haji to take a shot at me. I want to blow Haji to hell."

On his return, Key sank into a deep depression. At some point, he appeared on Paula Zahn's show to discuss the death of American soldiers in Iraq; this clip is part of the performance. Key looks older on the video, and his reactions are muted and slow. Asked a question, he pauses and seriously considers his reply instead of spouting the usual instant platitudes. He also reveals his homosexuality. Zahn doesn't seem pleased by this turn in the story, and she gets him off the air as soon as possible.

Through Key we realize what we should have already known: that beneath the cliches we associate with the word Marine — the tough guy who loves to kill; the scared kid pretending to be tough — are a group of people as individual as any other. Also, that war changes people irreparably, and it should never be undertaken without the deepest soul-searching and the cleanest of motives.

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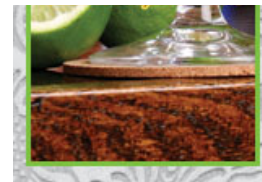
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