

Review: "Ivan the Drunk and His Terrible Tale of Woe," Off-Leash Area—Five stars

by [Matthew A. Everett](#) | 6/4/09 • *"I know you. I'm strong. Let me carry you."*

Well, now I know what all the fuss is about.

Friends and artistic collaborators have been agog over [Off-Leash Area](#) for the last several years, but I'd never managed to catch one of their shows myself. Until now.

"[Ivan The Drunk & His Terrible Tale of Woe](#)" is spectacular – in the old school theatrical sense of the word spectacle. [Off-Leash Area](#) takes five actors and the basic building blocks of story-telling and carefully, very precisely, creates something amazing and funny and strange. Space, sound (and its opposite, silence), the human body (and inhuman props), light (and its opposite, darkness), music, voice, dance, and imagination – rarely have a seen them all better used, and even more rarely all in the same production.

Ivan (Paul Herwig) is a soldier back from the war (specifically Russia's involvement in World War II, but that's just a cover. It's more about what's going on today than a snapshot of the previous century). Ivan's assimilation back into society isn't going so well. Ivan, as the title says, is a drunk. On his back, he carries an enormous, faceless dark ragdoll in military garb who he addresses as "Burden." Here's another reason we're in Russia. With a big moustache and funny accent, Ivan can get away with saying something blatantly symbolic like that and not seem hopelessly pretentious. It's amusing, so we don't feel like we're being beaten over the head with the play's "message." Meanwhile, all the time, the message is getting through, literally and otherwise, loud and clear. It's a tricky balancing act, but Off-Leash Area pulls it off again and again. It's actually kind of breathtaking to see in action.

Four women – Karla Grotting, Judith Howard, Jennifer Ilse, and Kym Longhi – complete the ensemble, portraying all other characters. A whole world builds up around Ivan in their hands – homeless people, ill-fated soldiers, refugees, heavenly beings, demons, and all the women in Ivan's life – from the mother who died in childbirth, to the grandmother who raised him; from the sister and niece who gave up on him, to the fiancée who couldn't quite pull him back from the horrors of war into a normal life again.

The performance moves from relying heavily on words (text by Max Sparber) to wordlessness; from Russian-accented English, to actual Russian (demonstrating that meaning here has now transcended the language barrier) to unspoken sounds and silence. The set (by Herwig) undergoes a reverse transformation, from cramped and dark to seeming almost vast as each successive layer is peeled away, folded up, shoved aside, or carted off. Paul Epton's lights follow suit, moving from grim to sunlit and even heavenly as the environment around the characters continues to open up. The audience gets to see all the gears turning. We are complicit in the theatricality of each moment. Though the costumes (by Longhi and Stephanie Molstad) all seem very grounded in reality, the story itself never pretends to be anything but stylized. Each representative bit of the emotional fallout from war is distilled down to its essence – be it ridiculous or horrible, heartbreaking or hopeful. Ben Seims' incredible sound score ties it all together, always giving the audience a distinct sense of mood and place – everything from battlegrounds to beaches.

It's hard to put a production like "[Ivan the Drunk & His Terrible Tale of Woe](#)" into words (and I imagine this is a challenge with most Off-Leash Area offerings) because it defies the idea of a traditional narrative. There's story and character, but they are more felt than literally understood. You could ask every audience member to tell you what it was about, and they'd all be a little bit right, and a little bit wrong. "[Ivan the Drunk](#)" gets you on a gut level that is almost reduced by trying to speak it aloud, in a way. If it could be put into words, they probably wouldn't dance it.

Every time Burden the ragdoll is opened up and something pulled out from his innards, the story transforms. Long coats scattered around the stage become a field strewn with bodies, until someone bundles them up in a laundry basket and sets them aside. Waxen molds of hands and feet placed here and there on the floor represent – what? So many things. But they, too, are picked up, put in suitcase and carted away. A wire strung across the stage, draped in blue, accompanied by the sound of the ocean, sets the stage for the hopeful romance, then unraveling of Ivan's relationship with the woman he loves, told only in movement (choreographed, as everything throughout is, by Ilse). Demons lumber onstage, a disturbing mixture of trees crossed with the body parts of humans and animals sticking out at odd angles. A bolt of muslin with pictures scrawled on it in black and white rolls by, providing a moving landscape against which refugees and soldiers alike look for escape, or home.

The following doesn't take away from the fact that this was a dazzling, five-star experience, but I noticed just as most other people in the audience around me were being transported to another realm at the end of the production, and sniffing, and weeping, my mind went elsewhere. I found it a little unsettling that we were all sitting there, turning the suffering and sacrifice of soldiers into some kind of emotional fetish. We thought about it, we felt bad, and now we can all go home and forget about it, because we got it out of our systems. Anyone who followed my own work last fall knows I'm just as guilty as anyone of falling into this trap. But people are dying overseas, so we can sit in a theater and watch how our society (of which we're all a part) is failing the ones who manage to survive when they get back home. There's something kind of perverse about that.

Maybe all artists are required to do is just raise the subject, make some people cry and other people recoil. Maybe all they need to do is provide the incentive to action and it's up to the audience to do the rest. Maybe. When cornered, I often say my plays don't have any answers, but hopefully they phrase the question and present options in a way that allows for optimism, rather than a sense that things will never change or get better.

But since this is the internet, and links to more information are easy to come by... Since the problem is real and growing... Since it's a mess we made and shouldn't expect anyone else to clean up... and since volunteering of time and talent and money is always needed by such organizations... here's a list of just some of the places you can look for information on how to help the Ivans, so we can reduce the number of terrible tales of woe...

Meanwhile, "[Ivan the Drunk & His Terrible Tale of Woe](#)" is the kind of theater that reminds me why I still invest myself personally in theater, both onstage and off, so it comes... **Very Highly Recommended**