

*Ivan the Drunk and His Terrible Tale of Woe*  
Through June 20  
Open Eye Figure Theatre, 506 E. 24th, Mpls.  
(612) 724-7372  
[www.offleasharea.org](http://www.offleasharea.org)

Seldom will you see such epic and imaginative stagecraft in such a small physical space as you do in Off-Leash Area theater troupe's *Ivan the Drunk and His Terrible Tale of Woe* at the intimate Open Eye Figure Theatre facility. A visionary powerhouse, this collaboration chronicles life's ravages fated upon a Russian soldier in war and peacetime. That said, even during peace, the war rages on in his mangled psyche.

That mangled dimension is embodied with extraordinary visceral force by the marvelous Paul Herwig as Ivan. He bursts at the seams as we witness how his very consciousness has been reconfigured to be a nearly mindless attack dog periodically spooked by human feeling, to be more specific: his own seriously submerged capacity for human feeling. We see this Soviet cog of a man strapped with a stuffed dummy on his back throughout which he calls 'Burden'. It brings to mind Eckhart Tolle's concept of 'The Pain Body' or one of the Phillip Pullman's (*The Golden Compass*) daemon's after they've been cruelly ripped from their human lifesource.

Though the context is Soviet, the production, co-directed by Herwig and Jennifer Ilse, evokes a timeless void that could apply anywhere at anytime. The set seems transient just as life and time themselves are transient and of course, war always ramps up that already awful inevitable transient feeling. Americans in the shadows of Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan will tend to categorize Ivan's derision as post-traumatic stress, which it surely is. But text writer Max Sparber's miraculous and moving use of language comes from the depths of the soul and not once from psychobabble. Every single word is connected directly to the heart and/or the gut. You will be confronted wherever you're coming from.

Additionally, this production's imagery is some of the most arresting on any area stage in recent years. Lighting designer Paul Epton employs silhouette to signify a barbed wire fence on which a fallen soldier's corpse is fixed. A hysterical Ivan makes light of it, obviously camouflaging the horrendous pain he feels over even his dead enemy. Yes, soldiers do mourn those they kill. What had been programmed into him as subhuman he realizes alas, at last, is in fact, human.

Kym Longhi's costumes are perfectly drab in the Eastern European sense, just as they should be. But in contrast in one scene her costumes turn grotesque and seem to have come right out of a decaying forest graveyard between seasons as the female supporting ensemble circles Ivan menacingly with a leafless bush coming out of the head of an actress oinking with a pig snout seamlessly attached. What looks like bark serves as clothing for some; a disembodied hand reaches over the throat of another actress as if growing out of her collar; gray misshapen breasts attach to another. And in the breathtaking numinous conclusion Longhi hearkens to Eastern Orthodox ritual with glistening luminosity from Epton.

Ben Siems's dreamlike soundscape penetrates the subconscious and suits choreographer Ilse's scrupulous use of slow motion throughout. That slowness, executed sublimely by the superb acting ensemble, is splendidly juxtaposed with Ivan's blunt, abrupt, and robust volatility.

However, perhaps the production's most ingenious scenic element is the inventive use of the set. A simple, vivid medieval door is center stage at the beginning. Later on, simple partitions make one feel as if they've actually been transported to a Russian peasant home. An old fashioned long pictorial scroll about the height of two large television sets is rolled manually to effect Ivan trudging in place on the stage floor through war horrors that are simultaneously degrading his spirit. And there's more which should simply be seen.

One crucial myth *Ivan the Drunk* puts to rest is that war builds character. If for no other reason, this show should be seen by everyone. Though the play does not come off as a feminist statement, it implicitly has built into it how war is always destructive to women. In this play's context men are the victims of bloody military violence and women of physical violence foisted on them by men in their own families and in one scene what I took to be soldierly men who have conquered a given village. In that beguiling scene Ivan actually rapes a woman as if she doesn't even exist in the presence of other women as if they, the female watchers on, didn't exist.

There's an ingenious scene that is replayed over and again with varying twists where Ivan mistreats the women of his family after he has returned home. Tragically, each time he tries to communicate his joyous feelings for having returned he reflexively succumbs to violence against them. It's as if his consciousness has been totally reconfigured because of the war. Of course, this is common. And isn't it ironic that those who cheer on war who have daughters who are presumably heterosexual, would see war experience as a desirable quality in a potential husband for those daughters, when it actually tends to tear down civility, engenders physical violence and crude verbal incapacity, and leads innocent, often sweet, young men not toward the vulnerability and flexibility necessary for a committed relationship, but toward a nihilistic sense of personal anarchy and antisocial behavior, which ironically again, cannot be described as patriotic. *Ivan the Drunk and His Terrible Tale of Woe* is a much needed piece as we now pick up the pieces of so many years of war post-Bush Family. That said, the jury is still out on whether or not Obama will handle it any better. Off-Leash should be commanded to perform at the White House. And as harsh as this play's commentary is about soldiers, active duty soldiers and veterans will love this show and cherish it in their hearts.