The Body of an American

a play by Dan O’Brien

Draft 2/22/13
The Body of an American is winner of the inaugural Edward M. Kennedy Prize for Drama, shared with Robert Schenkkan’s All the Way

The play is also recipient of the 2011 L. Arnold Weissberger Award and premiered in 2012 at Portland Center Stage, directed by Bill Rauch

The play was commissioned and developed with support from The Playwrights’ Center’s 2009-2010 McKnight Commission and Residency Program, Minneapolis, MN

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Characters:

Two actors play all the roles here—ideally one actor in his 30s, who plays Dan most of the time, and an actor in his 50s to mostly play Paul.

The older of these two actors has the first line of the play, and with each new character-heading the actors alternate.

In the right hand column of the script are suggestions of photographs, maps, moving images, etc., to be projected somewhere prominent onstage; as well as suggestions for occasional sound design. All of the photographs listed are by Paul Watson or the playwright or unknown, except where noted.

Some of these photographs have been placed at the end of the script, along with a few photographs of the 2012 premiere production at Portland Center Stage.

Place & Time:

Scenes 1-7: various.

Scenes 8-10: the Arctic, the present.
I do want to hear this because you’re another person in this story. Um, and each, each person in this story ends up telling his own story of what I call—the working title for the book I’m writing is *Where War Lives*. From a quote of Albert Camus when he was keeping his notebooks pre-World War Two. And a friend wrote to him saying, you know, I’m grappling with this philosophical question, Where does this vile thing, war, live? And Camus said, he’s in Algiers at the time and he says,

I look at the bright blue sky and I think of the guilt that I feel from not being in a position where I, I can die with them, while at the same time wanting to be as far away as I can from it.

—Paul Watson in conversation with Dr. Joseph LeDoux, January 2006
PAUL: My name’s Paul Watson.

PAUL: I’m Paul Watson.

TERRY GROSS: This is Fresh Air,

TERRY GROSS: I’m Terry Gross. Remember that famous 1993 photo?

PAUL: I was a reporter who happened to—

DAN: Dear Mr. Watson. I don’t usually email strangers like this.

TERRY GROSS: This is Fresh Air.

DAN: I was leaving Princeton.

PAUL: New Jersey? Where

DAN: I had this fellowship.

PAUL: You had a what?

DAN: A residency—

PAUL: Which means you do what?

DAN: Well I was supposed to write a play.

PAUL: A play.

DAN: Yes.

PAUL: About what?

DAN: Ghosts.

PAUL: Ghosts?

DAN: Yeah. Ghosts.

PAUL: What kind of ghosts?

DAN: Historical, ghosts.

PAUL: And they pay you for this?

DAN: Sort of. Definitely. I’m really grateful to them—

PAUL: Is it scary?

DAN: My play?

I don’t know. I hope so. To me it was.

TERRY GROSS: This is Fresh Air,

TERRY GROSS: I’m Terry Gross. Let’s start with a description of that now famous Pulitzer prize-winning photo:

PAUL: I was a reporter who happened to carry a camera, a 35 mm Nikon I bought because my editors wouldn’t buy me one.

PAUL: We were on the roof of the Sahafi, where the journalists were staying,

PAUL: if they were staying.

PAUL: You could count
on one hand who was still there.

PAUL: I’d have to count on one hand because my other hand isn’t really a hand at all.

PAUL: I was born this way.

PAUL: A bunch of us were drinking beer.

PAUL: Did you see that light?

REPORTER: What light?

PAUL: Behind that chopper there. It just went down behind that hill.

DAN: Chaos ensues.

A 16-hour battle raged through the night between US Army rangers, special ops, Delta Force and Somali militias. It started as an arrest operation trying to abduct commanders in Mohamed Aideed’s militia. They were trying to track down Aideed and arrest him for allegedly organizing attacks on UN peacekeepers.

PAUL: When I woke up on the hotel floor, still dressed, hung over, 18 American soldiers had been killed and 75 wounded.

PAUL: Clouds of smoke billowing up from burning tire barricades, dead bodies in the street.

PAUL: American troops were trying to get the rest of their force back alive, and in so doing they’d killed more than 600 Somalis so far, including women and children, huddled in the darkness as bullets or shrapnel pierced the tin walls of their shacks.

PAUL: Gutale’s my translator. He hurries through the gate:

GUTALE: They are shooting everything that moves now, even donkeys!

PAUL: He gets 30 dollars a day.

PAUL: My driver and bodyguard get a hundred.

PAUL: That’s always been the hardest part of my job: convincing good people who get none of a byline’s ego boost...
to risk their lives because I’ve decided a story’s worth dying for.

GUTALE: They’re shooting people on sight! Even people with no weapons!

PAUL: Mogadishu was beautiful once, white-painted Italianate villas in the capitol of the most stable state in Africa.

PAUL: Now you see women grocery shopping with militias firing machine guns up and down the avenue,

PAUL: children playing on the front lines, running water and bullets beside their mothers to keep the gunmen supplied.

GUTALE: They shot down a Black Hawk! They are taking a soldier with them from street to street, perhaps alive, perhaps dead!

PAUL: They threw me in the back seat of the car,

PAUL: a Toyota Cressida that nobody outside of the safe zone would recognize,

PAUL: and made me hide my face between Gutale and my body guard Mohamed.

PAUL: With another Mohamed driving, and a gunman in front cradling an AK-47,

PAUL: we drove through the gates and crawled from street to street. Passing the corpse-collectors, men carrying bodies by their hands and feet, glaring at us through the filthy windshield.

GUTALE: Has anyone seen a captured American soldier?

PAUL: Some said,

GUTALE: They’ve seen him. He says he’s alive, tied up in a wheelbarrow.

PAUL: A wheelbarrow?

GUTALE: No, this man says he’s dead. He’s most definitely dead.

PAUL: I took a few pictures of some kids bouncing up and down on a rotor blade in the smoldering tail section of that downed Black Hawk.

GUTALE: Have you seen the American soldier?

PAUL: The entire crowd pointed,
GUTALE: This way.
PAUL: Each time a Black Hawk thundered past people would shake their fists and curse at it.

PAUL: We drove all over the city for two hours and were about to give up,

PAUL: when the driver makes a u-turn.

GUTALE: He sees something.

PAUL: A mob of 200 Somalis, moving down an alleyway.

GUTALE: What is it?

MOHAMED: This is bad, too dangerous.

GUTALE: Go slowly.

PAUL: What’s he saying?

GUTALE: He’s a coward. He’s worried about his car.

MOHAMED: This guy’s going to get us killed!

GUTALE: Shut up!

PAUL: Gutale gets out:

GUTALE: Gamay’s in the car, you know Gamay!

PAUL: Gamay is local slang for cripple.

GUTALE: Little man! No hand! He’s not American, he’s Canadian! You know Gamay. He just wants to take some pictures. Can he?

PAUL: The crowd parts around me.

PAUL: I look down at the street:

PAUL: and I meet Staff Sgt. William David Cleveland.

GUTALE: Take the picture quickly.

PAUL: I’ve taken pictures of corpses before, many of them much more fucked up than this man.

GUTALE: Hurry, Paul!

PAUL: I bend over, shoulders stiff.

GUTALE: Take it now!

PAUL: With a camera in front of your eye, you cover your face and you focus only on the good shot.

PAUL: You shut everything else out.

PAUL: Everything goes quiet.

PAUL: Despite the noise of the crowd
and the helicopters, everything goes completely silent. And I hear a voice both in my head and out:

CLEVELAND: If you do this,

PAUL: I will own you forever.

PAUL: I’m sorry but I have to.

CLEVELAND: If you do this, I will own you.

PAUL: I’ve sought psychiatric treatment in subsequent years. And my psychiatrist says it’s my superego. I believe it was William David Cleveland speaking to me.

TERRY GROSS: And what did he mean?

PAUL: Well, Terry, I took it as a warning.

TERRY GROSS: A warning of what exactly?

PAUL: I have to do this.

PAUL: I don’t want to do this.

PAUL: I don’t want to desecrate your body.

CLEVELAND: If you do this I will own you forever.

PAUL: I took his picture.

PAUL: While they were beating his body and cheering. Some spitting. Cleveland.

PAUL: Some kid wearing a chopper crewman’s goggles shoves his way into the frame. His face is all screwed up in rapturous glee while giving the dead man the finger.

PAUL: An old man’s raising his cane shot like a club and thudding it down against the dead flesh. Cleveland.

PAUL: Wind’s blowing dirt and the stench is making me gag.

PAUL: For weeks I’d hated UN peacekeepers like this man, who killed from the sky with impunity.

PAUL: But now it was us against them.

GUTALE: Get in the car, Gamay!

PAUL: The men holding the ropes that bind the soldier’s wrists are stretching his arms out.
over his head.

PAUL: They’re rolling his body back and forth in the hammering morning light.

PAUL: I feel like I’m standing beside myself.

PAUL: I feel like I’m somebody else watching myself take these photographs, somebody named Paul, doing this crazy thing, shooting pictures.

PAUL: Asking, Did I put the batteries in?

PAUL: Click.

PAUL: The bullet wounds are in his legs: did they shoot him in the street, did he die before he crashed?

PAUL: Click.

PAUL: His body’s so limp he must have just died.

PAUL: Click.

PAUL: Maybe he’s still alive? Is that why I can hear his voice? If you do this,

PAUL: Click. Click.

PAUL: I will own you.

PAUL: Click. Click. Click. Click.

PAUL: You poor man. Who are you?

GUTALE: We must go. Let’s go. They don’t want us here anymore.

PAUL: The car door’s shut.

PAUL: Soft idling of the engine. The muffled mob.

PAUL: It’s like I’ve stepped out of Mogadishu into a wobbling canoe years ago in Sudan, at dusk.

PAUL: drifting downriver at dusk with Andrew Stawicki, a Polish émigré photographer who snaps a picture of boys running naked like a snake along the river’s blood-red spine. That’s going to be a great picture.

ANDREW: They won’t print it.

PAUL: Why not?
ANDREW: The kid’s dick was showing!

PAUL: In my mind’s eye I see Sgt. Cleveland’s army issued green underwear, the only clothing left on his body.

PAUL: The underwear’s slightly askew, so you can just make out a piece of the dead man’s scrotum.

PAUL: Open the door!

PAUL: This time I framed it better: the body from the waist up.

PAUL: A woman famous slapping him with a flattened can.

PAUL: That boy with the goggles shoveling his face through the mob, laughing at us.

PAUL: Men with bloodshot eyes notice me.

PAUL: It would be like squashing a cockroach to kill me, this infidel who can’t take a hint.

GUTALE: Look, he’s leaving now! See? We’re leaving for good! Thank you!

PAUL: The squeak of the hotel gate always let me breathe easier. As if a few sleepy guards could actually keep us safe from everything happening out there.

PAUL: I take the service stairs two at a time to my room, stuff the roll of film between the mattress and box spring, switch on the broken AC,

PAUL: and collapse on my bed with my eyes closed and I cry for a very long time.

TERRY GROSS: This is Fresh Air. The AP printed it, and so did Time Magazine.

PAUL: That’s right. AP moved the half-body shots, which appeared in newspapers all over the world. What Time Magazine did, which I find fascinating, is they digitally altered the underwear so you can’t see any genitals. But you do see horrific desecration of an American soldier.

TERRY GROSS: This picture
had incredible impact.

PAUL: Yes, Terry, that’s right. Because immediately the heat was on President Bill Clinton to do something. And that something was to announce the immediate withdrawal of American troops. Then, when it became time to decide whether or not the United States should lead an intervention in Rwanda, where 800,000 people were killed in a hundred days, President Clinton decided not to use the word genocide so we wouldn’t be forced to intervene. And we know without a doubt Al-Qaeda was there in Mogadishu. It says so on indictments in US Federal Court, bin Laden’s bragged about it, his minions have bragged about it. But what disturbs me the most is that Al-Qaeda learned a lot from the propaganda impact of that photograph. 18 American soldiers were killed that day. Which is nothing compared to what used to happen on a bad day in Vietnam. And it’s only relatively bad compared to what’s still happening these days in Iraq, or Afghanistan. I think it’s safe to say, take all of the events that happened, but remove the photograph, and Al-Qaeda would not have chased us out of Somalia, bin Laden would not have been able to say to his followers, Look we’re able to do this, we only need small victories to defeat history’s greatest military. After my photograph: 9/11, and this never-ending war on terror.

TERRY GROSS: My guest today has been journalist Paul Watson. His new memoir about reporting from war zones is called *Where War Lives*.

TERRY GROSS: We’ll talk more after a break.