Loneliness of the long-distance killer

THEATRE
Grounded
Public Theater, New York

Brendan Leneen

Earlier this month, Anne Hathaway made a high-energy appearance on the US television show *Top Gear*, moulding along to Milly Cyrus. The musical tastes of Hathaway’s nameless fighter pilot in George Brant’s monologue *Grounded*, now playing at the Public Theater’s Anspacher space, tend more to AC/DC, but Hathaway’s fierce commitment to performance remains evident. Her work, and that of Julie Taymor, who has staged an ever-morphing, high-tech production, make this 85-minute evening impressive.

The participation of two such high-profile talents was essential for the continued life of Brant’s project. The play received US productions in 2012 and an acclaimed UK version in 2013 as well as a New York outing in 2014, at Walker’s Space. But none of those previous productions were able to draw on the calibre of Taymor’s direction or Hathaway’s pilot — the former’s sense of fighter-pilot swagger met with movie-star glamour, perhaps too much so in Brant’s story, which contains less flag-waving than those films, while retaining the latter’s examination of the challenges women face in the military.

Brant’s play is determined not to be accepted as one of the beer-swigging, pool-playing lads, which means that the actor’s physical movement is much less graceful than we are used to from her movies. She spends the evening in a chair, to her targets, swinging around at home, or racing through the desert landscape in a state of fury.

In *Grounded*, the pilot has her ego deflated when, after becoming pregnant, she is reassigned to the dreaded “Chair Force”. She, her husband and baby daughter move to Los Vegas where she becomes a drone operator, spending 12 hours a day striking targets halfway around the world. The blood-free emptiness of the Nevada desert contrasts with the blood-filled heart of the Middle Eastern deserts in which her targets roam.

Clad in a green flight suit, she not only takes on targets but also learns to mend the drone. With the aid of her daughter Seljee, she is able to transform her drone into a missile. The stage may be bare except for an area where the projector is located, but the audience is not. The presence of Hathaway imbues the world of the play with a sense of violence and danger.

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The play was written by Brant, who has a background in writing for the United States military. He was inspired to write the play after reading about a pilot who had been reassigned to an administrative position after becoming pregnant.

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