

The Body of an American

a play by Dan O'Brien

Representation:

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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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a Future Collaborations Grant from Theatre Communications Group,
a Sundance Institute Time Warner Storytelling Fellowship,
the 2010 PlayLabs at The Playwrights' Center, the 2011 New Harmony Project,
a workshop at Pioneer Theatre in 2011,
and the 2011 JAW Festival at Portland Center Stage

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

1: Fresh Air

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?
DAN: Where
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. *Image: white
light.*

PAUL: 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,
 PAUL: everything goes
 completely silent. And I hear a voice
 both in my head and out:
 CLEVELAND: If you do this,
 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.
 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

*Image: Paul Watson's
 full-length photograph
 of Staff Sgt. William
 David*

*Image: another
 from this series.*

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,

PAUL: somebody
named Paul, doing this crazy thing,

PAUL: shooting
pictures.

PAUL: Asking, Did I put the batteries
in?

PAUL: *Click.* *Image: another*
shot

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

PAUL: *Click.* *Image: another*
shot.

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

PAUL: *Click.* *Image: another*
shot.

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

PAUL: *Click. Click.* *Image: another*
shot.

PAUL: I will own you.

PAUL: *Click. Click. Click. Click.* *Image: another*
shot.

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

PAUL: a wobbling canoe years ago in *Moving image:*
water

PAUL: Sudan,
drifting downriver at dusk with

ANDREW: Andrew Stawicki,

PAUL: 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 *Image: Paul's full-*
body
askew, so you can just make out a piece *shot.*
of the dead man's scrotum.

PAUL: Open the door!

PAUL: Open it!

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

PAUL: A woman *Image: Paul's*
famous
slapping him with a flattened can. *half-body shot.*

PAUL: That boy
with the goggles shoveling his face through
the mob,

PAUL: 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!

PAUL: See? We're leaving for good! Thank you!
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.