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## Theater Review: *The Birthday Boys*

At the height of the Vietnam War, Robert Altman's *M.A.S.H.* ignored that war is hell, lampooned office politics and celebrated camaraderie. Since the Iraq War has yet to receive the definitive dark comedy treatment, *The Birthday Boys*, the latest play to open off-Broadway, at the Access Theater, if adapted for the big screen, could fill that void.

Aaron Kozak's story of three young Marines blindfolded and held hostage, tortured, forced by their Iraqi captors to give filmed messages calling for the unilateral withdrawal of U.S. troops in Iraq, is surprisingly hilarious.

Suspense and violence are confronted with dogged one-liners. Private First Class Lance Tyler, played by chameleon Walker Hare, braces himself for the inevitable torture by practicing Braveheart's oft parodied cry of "Freedom!" for his two fellow bound and blindfolded Marines. Later, in a heated exchange with his kidnappers as his face is pushed into the floor, the lead terrorist demands to know exactly what Tyler guarded at a U.S. military base. Tyler responds, deadpan, "George Bush's nut sac." He insists: "They keep it in a jar over here because, turns out, and I certainly was surprised to learn this tidbit, every single American military vehicle runs on President Bush's nut sac ball sweat." After his kidnapper asks a third time what he guarded, Tyler lets rip, "Freedom!"

Using the warehouse dungeon set and the fact that the three main characters spend the 95 minutes running time writhing on the floor, blindfolded, hands tied behind their backs, director Montserrat Mendez breathtakingly captures the tumble into madness. The crude humor is clearly their greatest survival skill. So they obsess over placing bets: will their attempt at escape work, who will be the last to piss their pants and who will be the first to cry. These diversions thin as jabs turn into cascades of abuse from Tyler, losing his mind, an inevitable event kept out of the betting for obvious reasons.

Tyler's unabashed meathead is contrasted by the enthusiastic nerd next door, the victim of his madness, Private First Class Colin Carney, played by Zach McCoy, who provides intellectual respite from the locker room banter of Tyler and the stoic "old-man," Private First Class Chester Gulette, (Lowell Byers), held back as a private, as he tersely explains, for "political reasons." As Tyler sleeps, Carney ruminates on the science fiction aspects of their predicament, to Gulette's growing irritation. (As the Bogart of the group, Gulette is often as irritated with the others as he is longing for his pregnant idealized wife.) "I know this is a total big brother-ish idea," says Carney, talking a mile a minute. "But don't you think we should get computer chips implanted to track us by satellite?" He goes on, justifying the miracles of innovation the military can afford. And that's the missing part of *The Birthday Boys*; this horrific idea of brain chips does not get smacked down. The hardboiled Gulette at first objects then shrugs his acceptance at it only to shut the kid up, because all he can think about, besides his wife back home, is how badly he needs to piss his pants, even though it would mean losing a bet to Tyler.

There are no messages. (Did *M.A.S.H.* have a message other than to thumb its nose at the women's lib movement?) *The Birthday Boys* is unapologetic entertainment. The scenes of torture and AK-47s held against the back of heads and the back of mouths conjure up images of DiCaprio's Middle-East thriller *Body of Lies* while most of the dialogue smacks of Judd Apatow.

A stunning ending puts you through seven stages of shock over how you feel about all that came before and what should come after. It is a wild ride, one that speeds by proving that the ancient art of theater can hold its own in the age of [Funny or Die](#).