

اخذ ايدي، اشفى جسمي المكطع، اخذني من الصحراء. خلي بالي يرتاح.



The Zagros Mountains rise in northeastern Iraq (top) and Iraqi children (bottom), photos from Iraq: *Enchantment of the World* by Byron Augustin and Jake Kubena.

Ukhuth eedee, ishfee gissmee ilmitgetta',
ikhithnee min il-sahraa'. Khelee bal-ee yirtahh.

*Take my hand, heal my severed body, take me
from the desert. Let my mind find peace.*

—Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo

About Us

CENTER THEATRE GROUP'S MISSION is to serve the diverse audiences of Los Angeles by producing and presenting theatre of the highest caliber, by nurturing new artists, by attracting new audiences, and by developing youth outreach and education programs. This mission is based on the belief that the art of theatre is a cultural force with the capacity to transform the lives of individuals and society at large.

Education and Engagement

THEATRE IS AN ENDURING and powerful tool for communicating ideas, stories, emotions and beliefs that fuel the intellect, imagination and creative spirit. Center Theatre Group believes that stimulating awareness, creativity, dialogue and an inquisitive mind is integral to the growth and well-being of the individual and the community; and that nurturing a life-long appreciation of the arts leads inextricably to an engaged and enlightened society.

Center Theatre Group's education and engagement programs advance the organization's mission in three key ways:

Audiences: Inspiring current and future audiences to discover theatre and its connection to their lives

Artists: Investing in the training, support and development of emerging, young artists and young arts professionals who are the future of our field; and

Leadership: Contributing to the community-wide efforts to improve the quality and scope of arts education in Los Angeles.

Performing for Los Angeles Youth (P.L.A.Y.)

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Funder Credits

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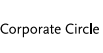
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Center Theatre Group Affiliates



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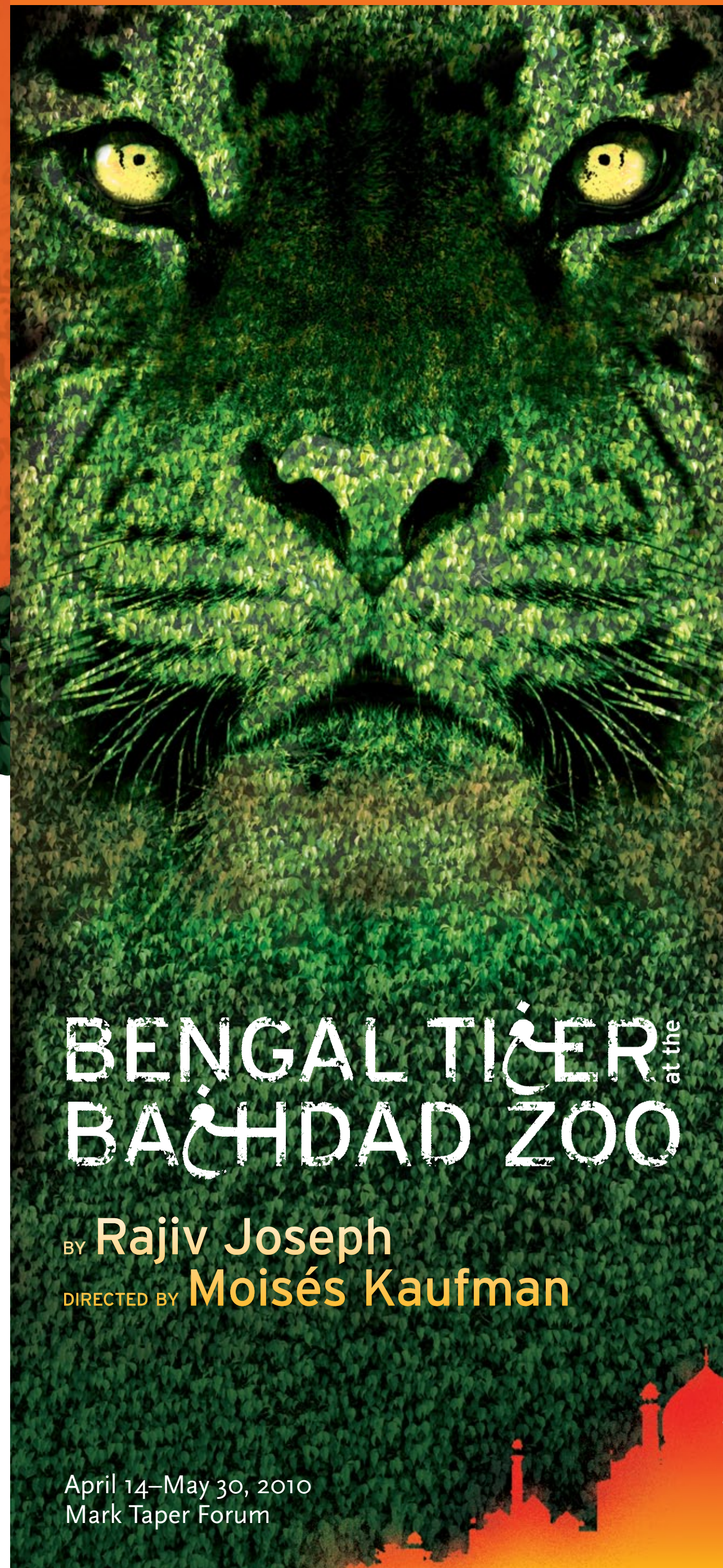
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L.A.'s Theatre Company

Discovery Guide

PERFORMING FOR LOS ANGELES YOUTH



Welcome to Center Theatre Group and Rajiv Joseph's *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo*.

Audience and critical acclaim brought national attention to this explosive world premiere at the Kirk Douglas Theatre last spring, directed by Tony-nominee Moisés Kaufman (Broadway sensations *I Am My Own Wife* and *33 Variations*). Now enhanced for the Taper stage, this remarkable play throws two homesick soldiers, a tormented Iraqi and a brooding tiger together and dares you not to look away from its honest and hauntingly theatrical depiction of the aftermath of war.

Before we tell you more, take a moment and imagine what might happen when the above characters meet. How will they interact? How will they communicate? Can you picture the city of Baghdad through the eyes of an American soldier serving in Iraq? Can you imagine the soldiers through the eyes of their Iraqi translator? What is the experience of war for a tiger caged in a zoo, 10 thousand miles from its original home?

Turn the page to explore *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo*: the setting, subject matter and theatrical style. Think about Iraq—its location, history and language. Read an interview with playwright Rajiv Joseph discussing the craft of playwriting and his inspiration for writing *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo*.

Reflect on violence onstage and in life. Why use theatre to explore the aftermath of violence? Why use theatre to explore war? How might theatre and imagination help us better understand incomprehensible real life events?

Theatre raises questions and challenges audience members to discover their own answers. See what questions this information raises for you and what questions and answers the performance provides. Thank you so much for joining us for *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo*. We look forward to seeing you at the theatre!

BENGAL TIGER at the BAGHDAD ZOO

BY **Rajiv Joseph**
DIRECTED BY **Moisés Kaufman**

April 14–May 30, 2010
Mark Taper Forum

“It makes you wonder what’s going on on the other side of the cage.”

—Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo

BENGAL TIGER at the BAGHDAD ZOO

A darkly comic and surreal story about Tom and Kev, two misguided young soldiers assigned to guard the Baghdad Zoo during the early days of the 2003 American invasion of Iraq. When Tom taunts the sole surviving Bengal Tiger with food, the Tiger bites off his hand, prompting Kev to shoot the animal. The gun he uses to kill the Tiger is not just any gun; it's a gold gun that Tom stole from Uday Hussein, son of dictator Saddam Hussein, during a raid. The ghost of the Tiger starts to wander the streets of war-torn Baghdad, caught in an existential haze. He begins to haunt his killer, Kev, until Kev breaks down and takes his life by severing his own hand. Like the Tiger, Kev becomes a ghost and proceeds to haunt his buddy Tom. Meanwhile, Musa, once Uday Hussein's gardener, is trying to adapt to his new job as interpreter for the occupying American forces. Musa is haunted by the ghost of Uday Hussein, the man who raped and killed his little sister, Hadia. The gold gun binds the men and the Tiger to Baghdad's brutal past and its confused, violent present. The city has transitioned from dictatorship to American occupation, the young soldiers have transformed from kids to killers, the interpreter has turned from gardener to traitor in his own land. No one can make sense of the inhuman acts surrounding him. Ghosts fill the streets of Baghdad, looking for answers in the midst of war, and the Bengal Tiger joins American and Iraqi voices in asking, "Why am I here?"

L TO R: Kevin Tighe and Glenn Davis in the world premiere production of *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo*. PHOTO BY CRAIG SCHWARTZ.

Heightened Theatricality

A tiger who speaks and contemplates the existence of God. A soldier who dies and returns a more intelligent ghost. The ghost of a tyrant's son who appears carrying his brother's head. In the world of this play, life and death intermingle in a state of constant unrest. Characters are haunted: by each other, by their past actions and by the violence of their present.

- Rajiv Joseph's play *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo* is based on real-life events, but he has used artistic license to spin a tale full of surreal elements. Why do you think the playwright chose a heightened, non-realistic style to tell the story? Does the theatricality give you a different perspective than if the story had been told in a more realistic way? How does it impact your experience as an audience member?

Search For Answers

More questions are posed than answers given in this play. "Where am I?" "Why am I still here?" "Why am I not gone?" "What happens now, God?" Characters are searching for meaning, trying to understand themselves, their actions and the violent world they find themselves in.

- How do humans try to make meaning of suffering and violence? Why do we ask questions and search for answers? What is the power of asking questions in the midst of violence? What happens when we cannot find an answer or when it seems like there are no answers?

"I'm not the kind of person who does this. It is not who I am." —*Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo*

Violence

In this play, the characters find themselves in cruel and violent situations. Characters are tortured and killed, people lose their limbs, their minds and their lives. The play explores what happens to people, places and animals in the aftermath of violence.

- What makes one capable of violence? Is it innate, or is it learned? Is it different when an animal commits a violent act than when a human does? What is the difference?
- What is the value of watching violence onstage? How might it help us reflect upon the violence in our own world? How does witnessing the violence in the play and its impact on the characters deepen your understanding of the consequences of violence and of war?

“What happens now, God? What happens now that I'm intelligent and aware and sensitive to the universe?”

—*Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo*



Gardens

According to the Bible's Book of Genesis, the Garden of Eden was located near four rivers, the Pishon, Gihon, Tigris and Euphrates in ancient Mesopotamia, which is modern Iraq. In the story of Genesis, God instructs Adam to tend to this beautiful garden, but commands him not to eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. A serpent in the tree asks Eve why she avoids eating the fruit, and Eve explains God's command, and that she will die if she eats it. The serpent persuades her to eat a piece of fruit, telling Eve that it will make her and Adam like gods, knowing good and evil. Eve eats the fruit, and when Adam realizes what she's done, he too eats the fruit so that he can remain with Eve. God casts them both out of the Garden. This story is often used as metaphor for the consequences of knowledge, good and evil.

- Why do you think that the playwright, Rajiv Joseph, includes references to gardens throughout his play? What is he saying about knowledge and good and evil?

The character Musa is proud of being a gardener because he is able to use his hands to create beauty and life rather than violence. Much of that beauty is destroyed during the play.

- Do you think beauty can exist in the midst of a violent world? Can beauty outlast violence? Where do you see beauty in your own world? Why is it important to continue to make or appreciate beauty in brutal times?

Topiary

Topiary is the art of trimming living trees and shrubs into decorative shapes. The best trees and shrubs for topiary art are box trees: cypress and yew, rosemary shrubs, holly and box honey-suckle. Topiary was practiced as early as the 1st century AD. The art is thought to have evolved from the natural and necessary trimming, pruning, and training of trees. The earliest topiary was probably the simple shaping of dwarf-box edging and the development of cones, columns, and spires of box trees to accent a garden scene. This architectural use gave way to more elaborate designs; shrubs were shaped into ships, huntsmen, and animals. In the 18th century, topiary was called the art of the tree barber, but its practitioners call it the art of the tree mason and leafage sculptor. Recently, topiary is making a comeback in Baghdad.

TOP: Kevin Tighe in the world premiere of *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo* at the Kirk Douglas Theatre. PHOTO BY CRAIG SCHWARTZ.
RIGHT: L TO R Arian Moayed and Kevin Tighe in the world premiere of *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo* at the Kirk Douglas Theatre. PHOTO BY CRAIG SCHWARTZ.

Interpreters

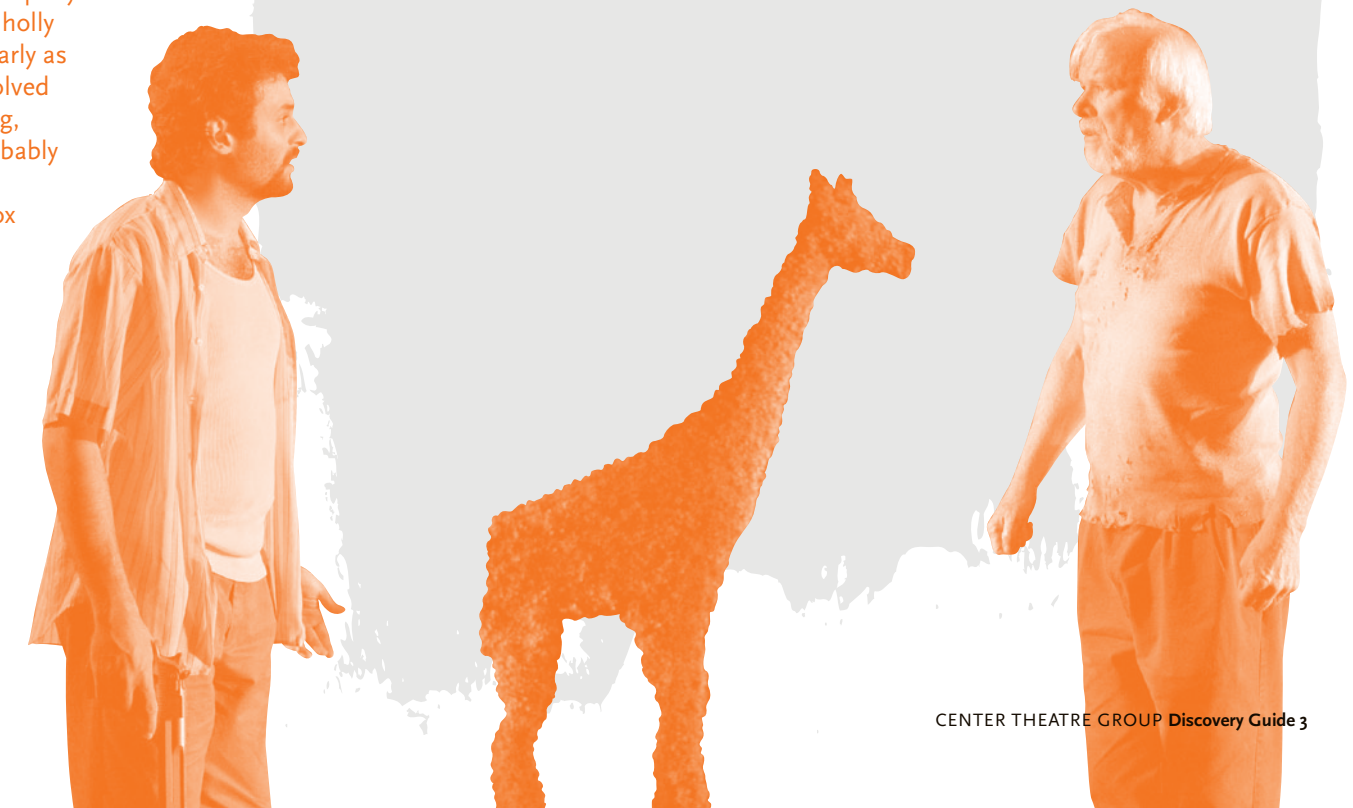
It is estimated that since the second Gulf War began in 2003, more than 20,000 Iraqis have worked as interpreters for the American military and private security firms. According to the Department of Defense, some 5,490 Iraqis were employed as interpreters. Their job is to create the important bridge between the military and the local community, paving the way for better communication in the hopes of a peaceful exchange between the two cultures. While an interpreter job provides new opportunities for Iraqis, the risks can often outweigh the gains of employment. Working for the United States government is viewed by the majority of the Iraqi people as working for the occupiers, and interpreters are often viewed as traitors. Many interpreters find their lives threatened. Recently across the United States, veterans of the wars in both Iraq and Afghanistan are taking up the cause of their interpreters. Veterans are creating a network of aid groups and becoming personally involved as advocates in the immigration process, a process that can often take more than a year to complete. At the beginning of 2008, nearly 2,000 interpreters in Iraq and Afghanistan had applied to the State Department for a Special Immigrant Visa, which would allow them to enter the United States. This visa was created specifically for those Iraqi and Afghan nationals whose lives have been threatened because of their work for United States forces. Since the special visa for interpreters was created, 1,735 of these cases have been approved, though it is unclear how many have actually come to the United States.

In the play, *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo*, the character of Musa is an interpreter who is trying to learn American slang so that he can better understand what the soldiers are saying around him, both for his own safety and that of his fellow Iraqis. Musa is caught between the two cultures, trying to use language as a bridge to understanding and clarity in an atmosphere of mistrust and violence.

- Have you ever had to be an interpreter in your life?
- What was it like to be the person between two languages, two cultures?
- How might our understanding of Iraq and other Arab countries deepen if we spoke their language? How can language be a bridge to bring different groups closer together?
- Have you ever managed to communicate with someone who did not speak the same language as you? How did you make your thoughts and feelings known?

“My hands belong to me. And my hands have their own memory. And when I put them on a plant, they create something. They will create something.”

—*Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo*



When you're this far from home, you know you're never getting back.

—Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo

Iraq

Iraq is a country rich in ancient history. It is believed to be the home of the Garden of Eden. It was Mesopotamia, the cradle of civilization, where writing, mathematics and the world's legal system began. About the size of California, Iraq is a triangle of mountains, desert, and a fertile river valley, bounded on the east by Iran, on the north by Turkey, on the west by Syria and Jordan, and on the south by Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. It sits between two rivers, the Tigris and the Euphrates. The country has arid desert land west of the Euphrates, a broad central valley between the Euphrates and the Tigris, and mountains in the northeast. Iraq is a land rich in oil, and it controls 10% of the world's oil reserves.



American soldiers on patrol in Iraq, photo from Iraq: Enchantment of the World by Byron Augustin and Jake Kubena.

Occupation

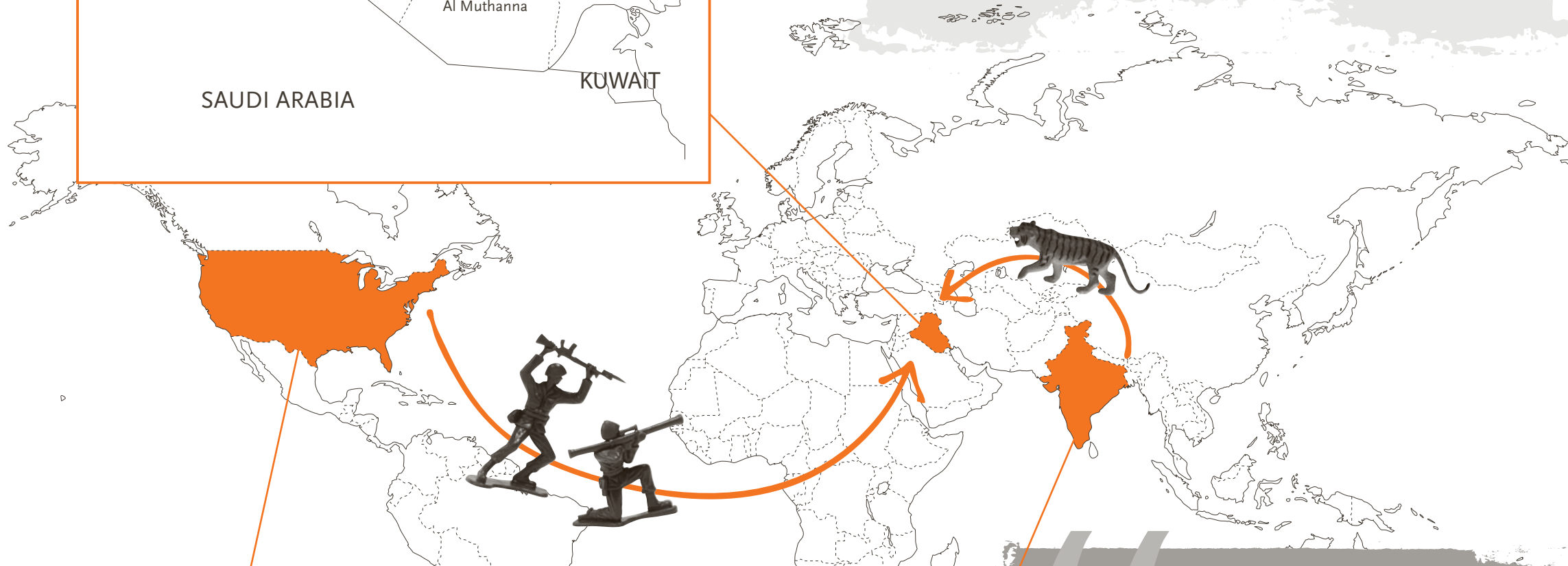
When the United States invaded Iraq in 2003, the U.S. government assumed we would be welcomed as liberators by the Iraqi people from the repression of Saddam Hussein. Instead, when the military overturned Saddam Hussein's government, the U.S. military gained control of the security of the country and became unwelcome occupiers. In the play, the characters Kev and Tom are being ordered to control the Iraqi people in the name of their own safety, but they do not speak Arabic, and know nothing about Iraqi culture. They care little for the place they are being ordered to protect.

- What does it mean to occupy a country?
- How do you imagine the Iraqi people view the American soldiers patrolling their country? How do you think the soldiers view the Iraqis?
- Imagine an occupation of the United States. How would it feel to have soldiers from a different country patrolling your home, your school, your neighborhood? What would you want to say to them if you were able to communicate?
- The American soldiers were given the responsibility of guarding a country very different than their own. Is it possible to truly care about and take care of places that we don't belong to?

Baghdad

Baghdad is the capital city of Iraq. Located on the Tigris River, it was once the heart of Mesopotamia, and one of the world's largest and wealthiest cities, as well as a center of Islamic culture, education, and civilization. Its name means "Given by God" in Persian, and it is also called "City of Peace". Many Muslims revere it as the center of the Arab and Islamic worlds when they were at the height of their grandeur. In the West, many know Baghdad as the mystic land told through *The Thousand and One Nights* adventures, a collection rich in Middle Eastern stories. In peaceful times, modern Baghdad has been a prosperous and sophisticated city, with a rich cultural life full of museums, universities, parks, gardens, and a zoo.

“Algebra was even invented here, you know? In Baghdad, by this dude, Abu Ja'far Muhammad ibn Musa al-Khwarizmi...And algebra comes from the Arabic word al-jabr which means 'a reunion of broken parts.' —Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo



War

“War is a grave affair of state; it is a place of life and death, a road to survival and extinction, a matter to be pondered carefully.” —Sun Tzu *The Art of War*

- Why do you think America went to war with Iraq? Do you think that the United States has a responsibility to Iraq and its people? What is that responsibility?
- Do you know anyone in the military who has fought in Iraq or another war? What, if anything, were they able to share about their experience with you?
- How is *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo* different from other images you have seen or stories you have heard about the war in Iraq? How is the play similar to those images and stories?

Assumptions

Iraq. It is a country that has been in the news for many years now. It is a country that thousands of American soldiers have been deployed to. And yet it remains a place that many people in the United States know very little about. Why do you think that is?

- Take a moment and picture Iraq. What do you know about this country? Where is it located? What images come to mind when you think of Iraq? Are your images primarily of war? Can you picture Iraq outside the realm of war or violence? Can you picture Iraq outside of a relationship to the United States?
- What do you think it is like to be a teenager in Iraq? What do you think life is like for women in Iraq? Can you imagine Iraqi food, music, language, sports or schools?
- What don't you know about Iraq? Is there something you are curious to know about this country and its people? If you could ask one question to one person in Iraq—who would you want to talk to and what would you want to know?
- What assumptions have you heard about Iraq and its people? Do you share these ideas? Do you think it is easier to go to war with a country that we know very little about? What might happen if Americans knew more about Iraq's culture and people?



“This tranquilizer dart comes out of nowhere, and I wake up in Baghdad.” —Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo

Far From Home

The characters of Kev and Tom are American soldiers serving in Iraq. The Tiger is from Bengal and was captured and brought to the Baghdad Zoo. These characters are far from their homes during this play.

- Have you ever been a stranger in a strange land?
- What do you remember most about being far from home? How did that experience change you?



Bengal

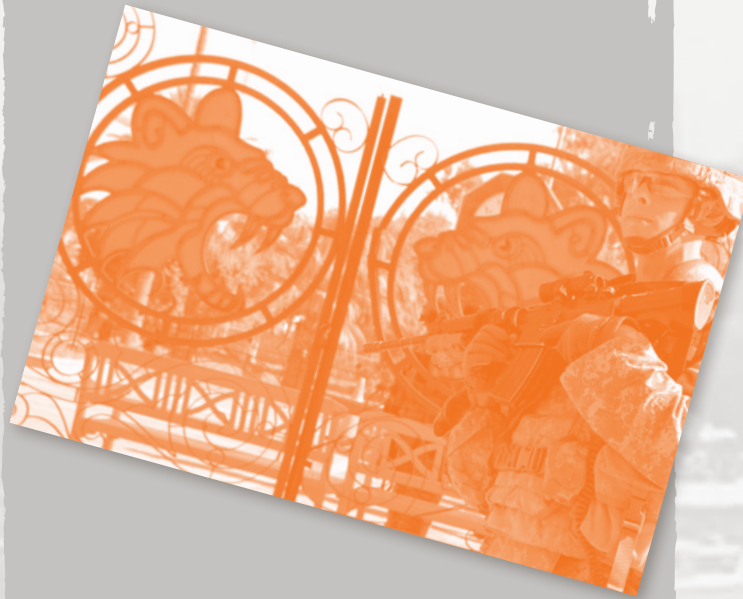
Much of Bengal is often referred today as West Bengal, a state of India located in the northeastern part of the country. Forests occupy more than one-tenth of the total land area of the state, and the region as a whole has a rich and varied plant life. The forests are inhabited by tigers, panthers, elephants, wild cattle, and rhinoceroses, as well as by other animals of the Indian plain.

“I'm from Michigan. It's shaped like a mitten. I was never supposed to die here.”

—Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo



ABOVE: Young Iraqis are accustomed to seeing military vehicles on the street, photo from Iraq: Enchantment of the World by Byron Augustin and Jake Kubena. LEFT: TOP TO BOTTOM Brad Fleischer and Glenn Davis in the world premiere of *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo* at the Kirk Douglas Theatre. PHOTO BY CRAIG SCHWARTZ.



TOP: An Iraqi man and his two sons arrive at the Baghdad Zoo for the unveiling of two Bengal tiger cubs, Aug. 8, photo from *NewsBlaze*. MIDDLE: U.S. Army. PHOTO BY SPC. CHARLES W. GILL. BOTTOM: Bengal tiger in the Baghdad Zoo, photo from *Los Angeles Times*. PHOTO BY SAAD KHALAF.

Baghdad Zoo

The Baghdad Zoo once contained 600 animals and was the largest zoo in the Middle East, occupying roughly 200 acres in central Baghdad. Saddam Hussein closed the zoo for renovation in 2002, intending to reopen it in April 2003 after a \$50 million improvement. However, on March 19, 2003 during fighting between the Iraqi and American forces in the area, heavy mortar rounds and tanks released or killed many of the animals. Out of the original 600 animals in the zoo, only 35 had survived by the eighth day of the invasion. Several lions escaped from the damaged zoo and were rounded up by American soldiers; however, three were shot when they would not return to their cages.

During the destruction of the grounds and absence of zoo staff, cages were torn open and hundreds of animals and exotic birds were released or stolen by looters. Zoo staff claimed many of the birds and game animals were taken for food as pre-war food shortages in Baghdad were intensified by the invasion. The remaining animals were found in critical condition, dying of thirst and starving. Many animals were found roaming the zoo grounds. In mid-April 2003, a conservationist from South Africa and two assistants from Kuwait arrived to help bring relief and stability to the damaged zoo. Working with the zoo directors and a few returning staff, they cared for and fed the remaining animals, restored hygiene standards, and made repairs. As of May 2003, there were about 50 animals, mostly big cats and carnivores, which were from private and public animal collections from around the city. American civil affairs soldiers and engineers helped rebuild the zoo, and many former zoo employees have since returned to their jobs.

The zoo reopened in July 2003, and now falls into what is known as the Green Zone in Baghdad, an area that contains most of Saddam Hussein's city palaces and government departments, and is under heavy U.S. security. Today, the zoo has almost 1,070 animals and has become a popular destination for families from all over Iraq. Animals at the zoo now include lions, tigers, monkeys, ostriches and an elephant. With the decline in overall violence and the withdrawal of U.S. and coalition forces from the city centers in June of 2009, some degree of normalcy has returned to the zoo. The risk of bombings is still a security concern and visitors are frisked for weapons before entry. Government security guards check bags and picnic baskets for explosives and patrol the zoo grounds.

- What memories do you have of a trip to a zoo in Los Angeles or another city?
- Have you ever imagined the world through the eyes of an animal living in a zoo?
- What can we learn about war by looking at it through an animal's perspective?

U.S. Soldier Kills Tiger in Baghdad Zoo

This article was published by REUTERS on September 21, 2003 in The New York Times and can be found online at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/09/21/world/the-struggle-for-iraq-us-soldier-kills-tiger-in-baghdad-zoo.html>.

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INTERVIEW WITH Rajiv Joseph

A conversation with playwright Rajiv Joseph and Center Theatre Group Teaching Artist Marcos Najera



Marcos Najera
The simple question is how did you get your start as a writer?

Rajiv Joseph
I had always wanted to write since high school. Or college. I think college is mainly when I started thinking about it seriously, as a possible career. But when I was in college, an undergraduate, I wanted to write fiction. Or journalism. But I was more concentrated on fiction. I took creative writing courses. That was my major. I didn't know exactly how to pursue it, you know, and I think the thing about becoming a writer is it's a combination of obviously working hard but also finding what medium or what type of writing not only appeals to you the most, but also that you have a knack for. So I think that writers are really varied. And I for one, I really struggled with fiction writing. Even though I wanted to do it. It was like my first ambition. It didn't come easily to me and everything I wrote, I just kind of didn't like. I was afraid to share with people and I had a really hard time motivating myself. I didn't have a lot of discipline, even though I had it in my head that I wanted to do this.

I traveled for a bit after college. I was in the Peace Corps for a couple of years. And I wrote a lot while I was there, but not really fiction—I just kind of wrote in my journal and was recording my thoughts about my experiences.

Came back to New York and my ambitions switched to screenwriting. And I wrote a screenplay and that got me into the Master's program at NYU (New York University). And when I was a student there, I was forced to take playwriting classes. And that's how I switched into playwriting. I came into playwriting very late and also, it was not something I had initially considered an option for myself. But once I found it, I realized I found the writing that kind of came easier for me and it was easier for me to motivate for and that I really took to in a very strong way. And I was lucky, you know, to be able to find that. And then to have plays produced right after I got out of grad school.

Marcos Najera
So it just so happened that the playwriting was a part of it. But had you gone to NYU and they didn't offer playwriting, you would have gone to it anyway, because of your interest in film?

Rajiv Joseph
Right, yeah. I did not imagine that I would end up as a playwright.

Marcos Najera
[Laughs] That's fantastic. So you knew you were eventually going to have to take [a playwriting] class. And when you went into this class for the first time, what was it like?

Rajiv Joseph
Well, at first it was very frustrating. And it was difficult, you know. But the great thing about NYU is that [for] students, there a lot of opportunities to go see plays for free or for really cheap. And so I started going to a lot of theatre for the first time in my life, the first time in New York, seeing off-Broadway shows that were really inspiring to me. And I started to realize that it's a totally different type of writing, playwriting compared to screenwriting. The craft of it is different.

But also, it just seemed to me, and I think this is true that you can have some pretty crazy and wild and original ideas as a playwright and that will get people excited.

And so, something like *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo*—it's a story about Iraq, but the main character is a tiger in a zoo, a lot of theatres when they heard that, I think were interested in it. But I don't, I can't imagine pitching that idea to a studio and them [saying] "Oh! This is great! This is gold! You know?" [Laughs]

Marcos Najera
Wow, talk about that. Why wouldn't Hollywood find that attractive, but [theatre] stages would?

Rajiv Joseph
The thing about *Bengal Tiger* is that it is really a theatrical piece that wouldn't translate very well on screen. Partly because the idea of a tiger being played by a guy who is not in a tiger suit and doesn't look anything like a tiger—but in theatre, you see that and you immediately accept he's a tiger. And for the rest of the play, you have no problem with that. Whereas in a film, that kind of suspension of belief is more difficult because film tends to be a lot more literal than theatre.

Marcos Najera
And for *Bengal Tiger*, you saw this article (see previous page) in the *New York Times* that inspired you to write this story?

Rajiv Joseph
Yes, I saw the article in the *New York Times*, one of the back pages. It was very deep within the paper. It wasn't a major article at all. I actually still have it. I had it cut out and pasted it into a notebook. It's three or four paragraphs long and it's about this event that happened at the Baghdad Zoo at the start of the war. Some bombs had blown open part of the zoo. Some animals had escaped. There's actually a documented story about a pride of lions that had escaped and were running through the streets in the middle of a firefight and were also shot and killed by Marines. And then of course there were also the people looting animals. And so all of this led to the military assigning some soldiers to guard the zoo. And one night, there were these two soldiers and one tried to feed a Bengal tiger and he had his hand bitten and the other soldier shot and killed the tiger. And that was kind of the end to the story. I was struck by it. And I started thinking about that. It seemed surreal to me. And as I continued to think about it, I decided to write a short little play about it—which of course turned into a longer thing! [Laughs]

When the war was starting, it was important for me to try and figure out what was going on. How to try to best understand what was going on and then being frustrated by the very fact that you can't. You can watch all the news you want, you can read all the newspapers, everything you can and still it's up to you to kind of imagine what's happening over there.

It's a war that unless you are engaged with the media, you can be totally oblivious as an American citizen because the fighting is not really touching here. We're at war, and yet we are going on with our lives. We're not in danger anymore than we normally were. As someone who was trying to figure it all out, I think that curiosity or that need to think about it in a different way, led the writing of that first scene.

During that time, there was a lot of anger in the air. The country seemed like a very different place than it is right now.

Marcos Najera
I wonder what else was on your mind at the time as you were trying to unravel all this happening in the world?

Rajiv Joseph
I was just trying to wrap my head around what was going on. I remember also at a certain point I had taken Classic Drama. A lecture course in grad school. We were studying the Persians by Aeschylus. Our teacher mentioned to us that *Persians* was written by a Greek playwright basically about the enemy. The Greeks were at war with the Persians. He said this was an example of a playwright who took this imaginative leap to imagine the lives of the enemy in the play. And he actually made the question, he said "What American playwright is going to write about Iraqis in that sense? This is a challenge to a playwright—to imagine a world outside of himself."

And that also spoke to what I was thinking about the war anyhow. How I was frustrated with the fact that as American citizens, if we believe in Democracy, we are complicit in this act of going to war. And in being complicit in it, it's a responsibility to pay attention to it and think about it.

I was frustrated about how little I understood about what was going on. And what it meant to be a U.S. soldier there, and what it meant to be an Iraqi whose country was under attack. All those feelings of having this desire to think about it or contemplate it led to the writing of *Bengal Tiger*.

Marcos Najera
Obviously, you are also coming from a love of the film world too and I wonder if any movies inspired you for *Bengal Tiger*?

Rajiv Joseph
Fast, Cheap and Out of Control by Errol Morris who is probably the finest of American makers of documentary film. This is a fascinating film that intersperses the four interviews of these four men. They all have very different jobs. The challenge for the viewer is to try and figure out why he made this movie. Why is he putting these people together? There's a lion tamer, a topiary artist, a robot engineer, and an expert on mole rats. They are never together, they are just these separate interviews and they are intertwined. And Morris, the filmmaker, makes no explanation as to why he is doing this. He just kind of allows you to watch. The images and the ideas are just fascinating to me. There was a moment in one of the drafts of *Bengal Tiger* where I was watching that film and thinking the ideas that I'm getting out of this film are the ideas that are now getting poured into *Bengal Tiger*. Which is to say that my interpretation of the movie was that these four men were basically four ideas of God. One is the God who tames the wild universe. And one is God the creator, the robot engineer who creates the universe and people and animals and watches them to see what happens. And one is God the topiary artist who takes the world and shapes it to his liking, and then one is God—the mole rat specialist who just watches and tries not to touch anything else. Those kind of theological notions are clearly a part of the Tiger's personality and quest.

Marcos Najera
That's fascinating; I've got to go watch this documentary now. I think it will prepare me to see *Bengal Tiger* on stage. Thank you. Speaking of preparation, I wonder if we can touch on the violence that will be on stage. How do you think we can prepare our students to watch the difficult scenes that they will see on stage in *Bengal Tiger*?

Rajiv Joseph
The easy answer is that when you are showing a story about war, it's hard to avoid bullets and blood. But there's also emotional violence and mental violence. To me, it ends up being very much about stakes. In drama, you want to create high stakes. And when you think realistically about this situation, the world of this play and what these characters are going through—it's very difficult to avoid violence. When the tiger that you killed at the zoo is whispering in your ear at the hospital, that puts you in a pretty bad state. It's also telling the truth about things. Soldiers do suffer from war. And it does drive them to suicide and Iraqis have a long history now of being tormented—not just by war, but by the rule of [Saddam] Hussein and his sons. And so when we see Musa [the main character] tormented by Uday [son of Saddam Hussein] and we understand what happened to his sister, these are things that are not exaggerations. And they are not there for shock value. They are a way of getting at what many people went through and are going through in Iraq.

And I think that imagination [on a stage] is a means to understand those things that might be impossible to quite understand.

BENGAL TIGER at the BAGHDAD ZOO

BY **Rajiv Joseph**
DIRECTED BY **Moisés Kaufman**

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Monologue Act 2 — Scene 7

The Tiger appears.

TIGER

This place is lousy with ghosts.
And the new ones are irritating. They're walking around,
wide eyed... What happened to me? Where am I? You're
dead and you're in Baghdad. Shut up.

Anyhow, the other day, I'm walking down the street. The
street is literally ON FIRE.

And I see this little girl. Her life is like a soap bubble, and
then pop! She's here, in the middle of the street, looking up
at me. And she says to me: What are you? And I tell her, I'm
a tiger. And she says why?

She says why.

I don't know, I tell her. I just am.
Which is true. I don't want to lie.
She asks me am I going to eat her.
And I say, no, I gave up eating children.
She says why?
And I say, I don't know, it's this philosophy I'm working out
about sin and redemption since God is apparently nuts.

And the girl just kind of looks at me.

And I'm like: think about it, if God's watching, why'd he
snuff you out? Why are you standing here, alone, in a
burning street, with a dead tiger?
Why are you dead?
Why is half your face gone?

And she says yeah, but why'd you give up eating children?

And I tell her the bit about the two kids in the forest, and
how I keep thinking about them and how I have all this guilt.

She doesn't understand that. The guilt thing. She doesn't
have any guilt. And I'm like, of course you don't. What did
you ever do? Nothing.

She tells me she's afraid.
I tell her I am too.
Which you'd think would be comforting, given the
circumstances, but somehow, being blown to bits and then
coming face to face with the likes of *me*...
Well the girl starts to cry, you know?
Her one eye, cries.

And I say, don't cry. But she cries harder. And so I say to her:
Hey do you want to see something amazing? And she stops
crying for a second. And she's like, what?
And I say it's a... I tell her it's a garden.
And she looks at me as if to say, big fucking deal, like I
haven't seen a garden before?
And I say, no it's a special garden.

Lights up on the topiary animals.

It's a special garden. And I don't know why I say this,
but I say, it's God's garden.
I tell her it's God's garden.
He likes gardens, see. He tests us in them, he tempts us in
them, he builds them up and tears them apart. It's like his
fucking hobby.
And she's skeptical, I can see that, but I bring her here and
she sees these plants, these animals, and she's never seen
anything like them before. And I nailed it because she's not
crying anymore. She's walking around the garden, pointing.
A lion! A camel! An elephant!

Fucking kids, you know?

And I mean, this whole time I'm talking out of my ass, this
business about God's garden, etcetera. Maybe she knows
I'm bullshitting, too. The girl is no dummy, even if she does
only have half a brain.
But for a second we both look up at these ruined shrubs and
think, okay Man: You work in Mysterious Ways. We get it.
And I feel this swell of hope.