

Between the Lines

Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo
by Rajiv Joseph
Directed by Moises Kaufman
Kirk Douglas Theatre
World Premiere May 10–June 7, 2009

 Center
Theatre
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Between the Lines

Ann Anderson
Writer

Rachel Fain
Editorial Manager

Jean Kling
Proofreader

Christopher Komuro
Graphic Designer

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Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo, which has its world premiere at CTG's Kirk Douglas Theatre this May, is set in the aftermath of the U.S. invasion of Iraq. In the play, a neglected tiger collides with a pair of hapless U.S. soldiers. An Iraqi translator confronts the ghost of Uday Hussein. Danger lurks everywhere, but ultimately, each person is his own worst enemy. ●

Synopsis



Let's get one thing straight right off the bat: I'm not haunting anyone. I'm just here. We're all just here.

—Tiger in *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo*

The time is 2003, and Saddam Hussein's regime has fallen to the coalition forces. In the fog of war, things are seldom what they seem, and so it is for Tom and Kev, two U.S. soldiers on duty in the Green Zone. A tiger caged in the remnants of the Baghdad Zoo mauls Tom and is shot dead by Kev. An Iraqi translator is bewildered by the Americans and tormented by the ghost of Uday Hussein, the man who killed his sister.

Confusion overcomes good intentions, and everything goes south in playwright Rajiv Joseph's sad yet comedic meditation on the madness of war. Tigers talk, dead men walk, much depends on the location of a stolen toilet seat, and even in death, there's no way out of Baghdad. ●

Cast of Characters



PHOTO BY CRAIG SCHWARTZ.

L TO R: (TOP) Glenn Davis, Necar Zadehan and Hrach Titizian; (SEATED) Sheila Vand, Kevin Tighe, Brad Fleischer and Arian Moayed.

Tiger	KEVIN TIGHE
Resident of the Baghdad Zoo	
Kev	BRAD FLEISCHER
U.S. soldier, stationed in the Green Zone	
Tom	GLENN DAVIS
Another U.S. soldier	
Musa	ARIAN MOAYED
Iraqi translator working for the U.S. armed forces	
Uday	HRACH TITIZIAN
Saddam's son, now a ghost	
Hadia	SHEILA VAND
Musa's sister	
Iraqi Woman	NECAR ZADEGAN



When a man wants to murder a tiger, he calls it sport;
when the tiger wants to murder him, he calls it ferocity.
The distinction between crime and justice is no greater.

—George Bernard Shaw
British playwright [1856-1950]



Ripped From the Headlines

The Baghdad Zoo was the largest in the Middle East until the 3rd Infantry Division of the U.S. Army invaded the city in 2003. Mortar rounds leveled the park's walls, and roughly 550 of the zoo's 600 animals were killed in the chaos. The zoo's lions ran through the streets and died in the crossfire between U.S. forces and the Iraqi Republican Guard. Other animals were stolen and killed for food or sold in the exotic pet trade.

Two tigers remained in their cages, under-fed but relatively safe, until September 15, 2003, when a group of U.S. Marines with too much beer under their belts decided to mess with the big cats. A soldier attempted to feed one of the animals, and according to Head Keeper, Adil Salman Musa, "The tiger bit his finger off and clawed his arm. So his colleague took a gun and shot the tiger."

The tiger incident was reported in news outlets world-wide. Editorial writers and bloggers who were critical of the U.S. invasion pounced on the item, using it as a metaphor for

Talk About...

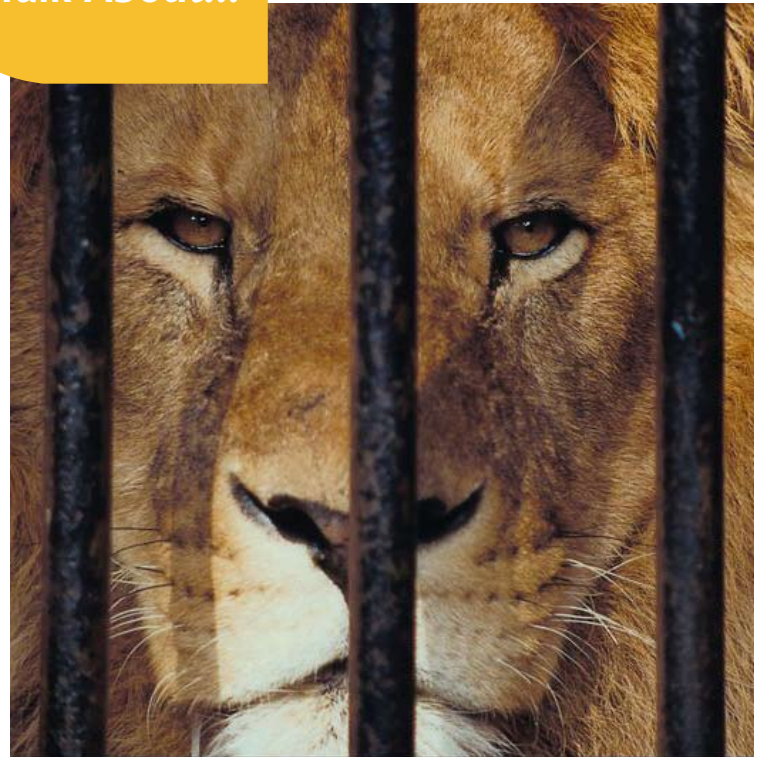
an unjustified use of force. Playwright Rajiv Joseph read about the unfortunate animal and was moved to write a play. *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo* began its theatrical life as a 10-minute play that Joseph eventually developed into this full-length piece.

The Baghdad Zoo is open again. The zoo is an oasis of calm and abundant life in a city that's seen more than its share of chaos and death. In a city that's been so beaten down, the zoo is a powerful symbol of renewal.

The zoo's administrators struggled to replenish their stock in the immediate aftermath of the invasion. Among the first acquisitions were the [lions](#) that used to live at Saddam and Uday's palaces. The lions were in rough shape when they first arrived, but have since regained their health.

The [U.S. Army](#) sent a construction crew to rebuild the enclosures. Several wildlife groups, including the American Zoo and Aquarium Association and the South African branch of the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW) sent consultants to assist with the rebuilding and modernization of the zoo, which languished under Saddam. Veterinarians from all over the world have contributed their expertise. Vets at the Baghdad Zoo regularly participate in teleconferences with their colleagues at the North Carolina State College of Veterinary Medicine.

In 2008, the Conservators' Center of North Carolina sent two [tiger cubs](#) to the zoo. The zoo spent a year preparing for the cubs' arrival, training staff and creating a habitat that includes a wading pool. Hope and Riley, the two cubs, were shipped to Baghdad via DHL and given a military escort to their new home. They're now part of the zoo's exhibits, which attract thousands of Iraqis per week. And as for that second adult tiger, the one who wasn't shot? He died of old age in 2005. ●



What's your feeling about zoos in general?

Do you agree with certain animal activists who regard zoos as concentration camps for animals? Why or why not? What, if anything, makes a "good" zoo?

.....

If I Could:

Would you rather be a zookeeper or an animal in the zoo? Why?

Setting & Context



And all of a sudden, you come across \$850 million? Do you think you're not gonna try to get some of that home to your family? How is anything wrong with that? I need somebody to explain that to me.

—Earl B. Coffey,
former private, U.S. Army

Greenbacks in the Green Zone, or the Spoils of War

The looting of Iraq by its own citizens was well publicized, but members of the U.S. Armed Services also participated in the free-for-all that followed the fall of Baghdad. The action in *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo* involves items that were taken from Uday Hussein's residence by a U.S. soldier. The Uniform Code of Military Justice Article 103 forbids "looting or pillaging" in "enemy or occupied territory," but like everything that followed the invasion, much was handled — or mishandled — on the fly.

Soldiers on the winning side have always helped themselves to the spoils of war, but the troops who secured Baghdad's Palace Row discovered loot on a unique order of magnitude. Saddam's mansion and those of his sons, Uday and Qusay, as well as the homes of favored generals and Baath Party big wigs, contained gold plated guns and bathroom fixtures, collections of crystal, Cuban cigars, Dom Pérignon champagne — every imaginable luxury was present in multiples. For some of the soldiers who were assigned to patrol the area, the opulence was *irresistible*, and they stripped the buildings clean. But when a Bradley Fighting Vehicle rammed through a concrete bunker wall at Saddam's compound, the \$850 million that poured out made the dictator's household furnishings look like Cracker Jack prizes.



Uday Saddam Hussein al Tikriti

Lord Acton said that “Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” If he had met [Uday Hussein](#), Saddam’s first-born son, he might have added, “and it makes you as mad as a hatter.” Uday Hussein’s overweening sense of entitlement, fed by the ability to have whatever he wanted whenever he wanted it, metastasized into raving sadism. A member of Saddam’s rubber-stamp parliament, Uday also controlled Iraqi media and carried out a campaign of rape, torture and assassination that terrified the populace.

Uday suborned his brothers-in-law to defect from the regime, then lured them back to Baghdad and killed them. When his most trusted food-taster disrupted a party, Uday clubbed him to death in the presence of witnesses. Uday didn’t seduce women; he abducted them, sometimes at their own weddings. When he was finished with them, he left them mutilated, bleeding and often dead. When the Iraqi Olympic soccer team underperformed, he had the athletes arrested and tortured. Uday kept lions at his residence, and occasionally fed them with the live bodies of his enemies. The list of atrocities goes on.

A 1996 assassination attempt left Uday partially paralyzed and in poor health. He met his demise in 2003 in a shoot-out with American forces. He was the Ace of Hearts in the U.S. Army’s high-value target playing card deck. ●



U.S. ARMY/PHOTO BY SGT. GUSTAVO BAHENA, CJTF-7 PUBLIC AFFAIRS OFFICE

[Pvt. Earl Coffey](#) saw the cash come tumbling down and watched black-clad military personnel scoop it up and spirit it away. He never thought he’d lay hands on any of the regime’s ill-gotten stash, until the day he walked through Uday’s plundered palace with his buddy, John Getz. They discovered several locked safes that had been overlooked. A few cracks with a metal bar revealed a half-million, give or take, in U.S. dollars, British pounds and Jordanian dinars. They were alone. You can picture the rest.

In another part of the Green Zone, supply sergeant [Matt Novak](#) and Specialist Jamal Mann explored any building they could enter with the big bolt cutters they called “the master key.” They were under orders to take anything the army could use: air conditioners, wiring, Intel computers, office furniture. It was understood that any useful item was fair game. “The Iraqis called us Ali Baba,” Novak says. “We protected the Oil Ministry while the city was looted. We took what we wanted.” If Novak and Mann experienced some ethical confusion, it was understandable given that their superiors had instructed them to take other people’s stuff. Imagine their reaction when they found several buildings stuffed with boxes of new \$100 bills totaling over \$12 million.

Nothing triggers greed and stupidity like humongous piles of “free” cash, and the young people who enlisted to fight in Iraq — many of them from humble backgrounds — were especially vulnerable to the allure of easy money. Coffey, Novak and others who stumbled upon Saddam’s rainy day dough went predictably haywire. They jammed money in treetops, stuffed wads of it in their gear, buried it all over town and spent like they’d won the lottery. Some of the cash made it out of the country and into the hands of relatives, but before long, the messy, barely concealed green trail led to the men who took it. Dishonorable discharges ensued, followed by criminal indictments. The men would have been better off contenting themselves with a crystal light fixture or a gold picture frame from one of the palaces. That kind of pilferage is technically illegal, but few army brass seemed to care about Saddam’s personal property. Swiping stacks of United States currency, however, was an affront not to Saddam, but to Uncle Sam.

Talk About...

If you found millions of dollars in ill-gotten U.S. currency, what would you do? If you found money of unknown provenance, what would you do? If you could steal a bad guy's stuff without getting caught, would you?

- Does absolute power corrupt absolutely? If you were given absolute control of an entire country, how would you rule? What do you imagine your detractors would say about you?

- If you were stuck on a desert island, what gold-plated item would you bring from your palace?

- If you were stuck on a desert island, who would you rather have for company — a person who spoke your language, but with whom you had little in common, or someone similar to you who didn't speak a word in your tongue?

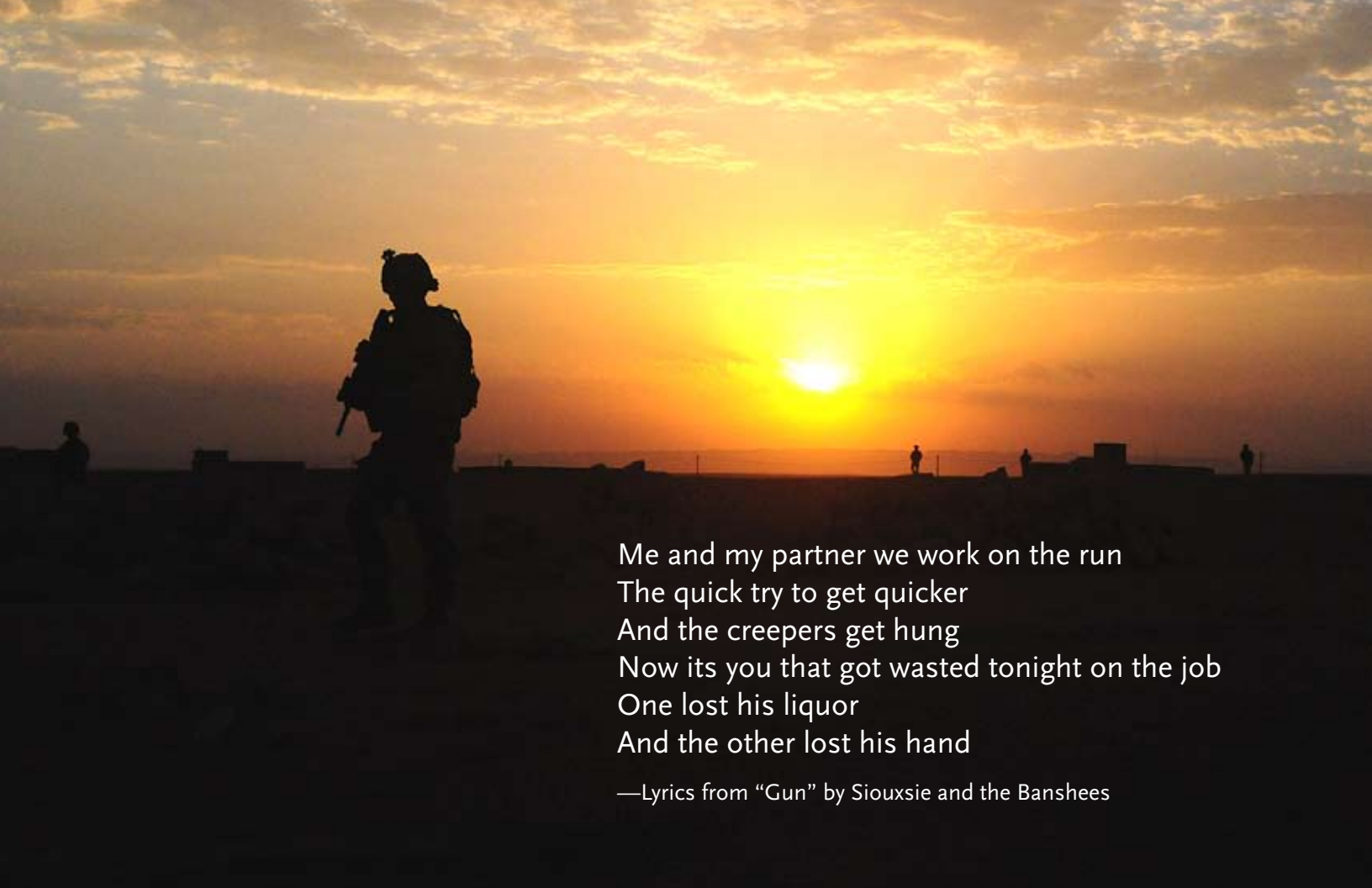


PHOTO © MENAVISTA

The enlisted men who indulged in thievery tended toward impulsive crimes of opportunity, but they were hardly the only military personnel involved in the ransacking of Iraq. Some of their superiors were even bigger players in the carnival of larceny that was post-invasion Baghdad. Crimes committed by the big brass were pre-meditated and well-coordinated.

Col. Curtis G. Whiteford was the highest ranking military officer in the [Coalition Provisional Authority](#) (CPA). He, along with co-defendant Lt. Col. Michael B. Wheeler and others, were convicted in federal court of conspiracy to commit bribery and fraud. Essentially, they rigged reconstruction contracts awarded by the CPA and received kickbacks totaling over \$1 million in cash plus a bonanza of other fungible goodies. Lee W. Dubois, a former army captain, was convicted of siphoning \$40 million worth of fuel from the army's Camp Liberty base in Baghdad. The scheme was simple: He falsified paperwork that enabled him and his co-conspirators to drive trucks to the depot and take 10 million gallons of jet and diesel fuel.

The wheels of justice grind slowly, and the pace of military justice is glacial. At this date, it's difficult to determine how many soldiers have been charged with stealing from Iraqis and U.S. taxpayers. Brigadier General Rodney L. Johnson, Commanding General of the [Criminal Investigation Command](#), says, "Regrettably, even at a time when this country is fighting terrorism ... there are those who will forsake their duty ... in an attempt to enrich themselves through corrupt activity. Our Special Agents work around the clock worldwide to ensure that suspicions and allegations of criminality are investigated fully, and those who commit crime will be brought to justice." ●



Me and my partner we work on the run
 The quick try to get quicker
 And the creepers get hung
 Now its you that got wasted tonight on the job
 One lost his liquor
 And the other lost his hand

—Lyrics from “Gun” by Siouxsie and the Banshees

U.S. ARMY/PHOTO BY SGT. RICHARD RZEPKA

Playlist

At the Zoo

by Simon and Garfunkel
 (written by Paul Simon)

Radio Baghdad

by Patti Smith
 (Oliver Tompkins Ray, Patti Smith)

Bombs Over Baghdad

by OutKast
 (Andre Benjamin, Antwan Patton,
 David A. Sheats)

Gold

by Prince
 (Prince)

Gun Crazy

by Rob Zombie
 (Rob Zombie)

Gun

by Siouxsie & the Banshees
 (John Cale)

Night in Baghdad

by Laurie Anderson
 (Laurie Anderson)

Midnight at the Oasis

by Maria Muldaur
 (David Nichtern)

Tiger Tiger

by Duran Duran
 (Duran Duran)



U.S. Central Command Air Forces band “Live Round.”
 U.S. AIR FORCE/PHOTO BY CHIEF MASTER SGT. JOHN A. ZINCONE

Talking Tigers and Magical Realism

The title character in *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo* is just that — a tiger. He's played by a man, but he is nevertheless, a large, feline beast. That he can stand on two legs and ruminate about life, death and the whole shebang is what puts the play into the category of magical realism — a type of story in which miracles are mundane, and the mundane is miraculous.

Magical realism is the sort of jargon one encounters in graduate seminars and magazines with no pictures. Frankly, the concept is easier to recognize than explain. The term was first coined by German art critic Franz Roh [1890-1965]. He thought of magical realism as a pictorial way of responding to life's mysteries. He applied the term to paintings of ordinary objects that made the viewer see them anew.

In literature, the phrase is often misused to mean well-written fantasy and science fiction, which differ from magical realism in their speculative nature. Sci-fi and fantasy authors pose the question "What if ... ?" and answer it by creating a whole new universe. Authors employing magical realism, on the other hand, inject fantastic elements into the real

world, and their characters accept unusual occurrences as commonplace. The novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel García Márquez is often cited as the quintessence of the style. *Like Water for Chocolate*, by Laura Esquivel, is another good example. Latin American novelists have a special affinity for magical realism. This may have something to do with the influence of the native cultures of those countries, which view time as circular rather than linear, and see dreams as just another dimension of reality. In Márquez's stories, for example, past, present and future are unified. Miracles abound because the world is enchanted and the laws of the universe are mutable and subjective.

The ghost in *Hamlet* does not fit the definition of magical realism because audiences in Shakespeare's day thought the appearance of a talking phantom was perfectly reasonable. The ghosts in *Bengal Tiger* are examples of magical realism not because *we* believe they exist, but because the *characters* do. In the universe of the play, it's logical that a tiger can talk. "The tiger is not a metaphor," playwright Rajiv Joseph says. "He should be taken at face value." ●

Lost in Translation



U.S. AIR FORCE/PHOTO BY STAFF SGT. SAMUEL BENDET

Some of the characters in *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo* speak Arabic. It's important to playwright Rajiv Joseph that the actors speak Iraqi Arabic, a discrete dialect also known as Mesopotamian Arabic. For the benefit of the production, Iraqi language consultants have transliterated the Arabic dialog so that it's authentically Iraqi, and so non-Arabic-speaking actors can pronounce the words properly.

Most Arab speakers know two forms of the language: the one used in everyday conversation and the formal form, Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), used in written communication and in broadcast media. MSA is no one's native language, but it serves as a common denominator across the Arab world. It's based on the Qur'an (Islam's Holy Book) in terms of its syntax and phonetics.

Arab dialects vary widely, and speakers from different parts of the Arab world may not understand each other. Iraqi language consultant Raida Fahmi, one of the translators for the production, explains some of the differences between Iraqi Arabic and other dialects. "Iraqi is considered a rough language," Fahmi says, "not easy-flowing like the Lebanese or Egyptian." There are several variations of Iraqi Arabic. Each city within the country has its own dialect, and there are additional differences along social and economic divisions. The Iraqi dialect, according to Fahmi, is very hard to understand in other parts of the Arab world, owing to "special nouns and cultural influences." Fahmi says that Levantine Arabic, the dialect of Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Palestine and Israel, is the most understood dialect in the Middle East because it's "the language of most popular movies and songs."

In *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo*, terrified Iraqis and a U.S. soldier struggle to understand each other. In the early days of the U.S. invasion, the language barrier created numerous such problems. To remedy the situation, the U.S. Army developed a computer game in 2005 to teach conversational Iraqi Arabic to the troops. It's a role-play game in which proper responses and good behavior are rewarded. In one scenario, for example, a group of soldiers enter a café seeking information. If they do not remove their helmets and address the locals with the proper greetings, the situation deteriorates rapidly and adjustments are in order. The program is not much different from any other computerized crash course in language, but the computer game format is ideal for soldiers who don't want to feel like they're in a classroom.

Iraqi interpreters, or "terps," who work for the U.S. Army do their best to translate gestures and customs as well as words. National Public Radio reporter Jamie Tarabay says, "The intricacies of social etiquette can flummox the most seasoned officer." For example, for Iraqi men, holding hands is simply an indicator of friendship — very different from the connotations of the gesture in American culture. Iraqi interpreters **risk their lives** to help American servicemen. Nine of them were murdered between September 2006 and February 2007. The U.S. State Department is working on issuing special visas to Iraqi interpreters who wish to emigrate from Iraq to the United States. ●

Talk About...

Have you ever had difficulty communicating with a person who was supposedly speaking the same language as you? Where were you? What were you trying to do?

Is it important for Americans to speak Arabic? Should it be offered in California public schools? Why or why not?

Magical Reality:

When you hear about magical or miraculous events, do you accept or doubt them? When seemingly "magical" things — odd coincidences or lucky breaks — have happened in your own life, how did you account for them? The playwright says that the tiger should be taken at face value. How did seeing a talking tiger inform your overall understanding of the play?

Websites:

www.justanothersoldier.com/blog040521.htm

A U.S. soldier's photos of Baghdad's Palace Row

www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1005197,00.html

A *Time* magazine story about vandalism and looting of airplanes at the Baghdad airport

www.viceland.com/int/v14n3/htdocs/uday.php?country=us

A brief article by the man who was forced to be Uday Hussein's double

www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=7445123

NPR story: "Translators in Iraq Work with More Than Words"

Books:

[*Babylon's Ark: The Incredible Wartime Rescue of the Baghdad Zoo*](#)

by Lawrence Anthony and Graham Spence (St. Martin's Griffin, 2008)

The remarkable rehabilitation of the city's zoo after the 2003 invasion

[*Pride of Baghdad*](#)

by Brian K. Vaughan and Niko Henrichon (Vertigo, 2006)

A graphic novel about life in a war zone from the perspective of the Baghdad Zoo lions

[*Naked in Baghdad: The Iraq War and the Aftermath as Seen by NPR'S Correspondent Anne Garrels*](#)

by Anne Garrels and Vint Lawrence (Picador, 2004)

The intrepid NPR reporter compiles her observations.

[*The Black Hole: The Real Story of the Man Who Was Forced to Become the Double of Saddam Hussein's Sadistic Son*](#)

by Latif Yahia (Arcanum, 2006)

The full, harrowing tale of the man forced to impersonate Uday Hussein

Film & Video:

[*Three Kings*](#)

directed by David O. Russell (Warner Bros., 1999)

Three U.S. soldiers try to recover loot hidden during the first Gulf War.

[*Rendition*](#)

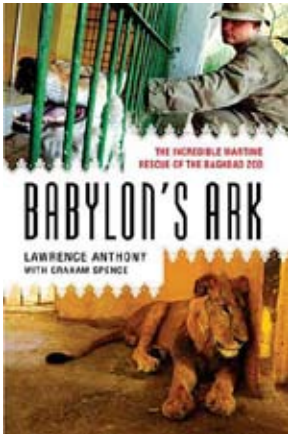
directed by Gavin Hood (New Line Cinema, 2007)

A CIA agent questions his mission after witnessing torture at a secret detention center.

[*Fahrenheit 9/11*](#)

directed by Michael Moore (Lions Gate Films, 2004)

The agit-prop filmmaker questions the rationale for the Iraq war.



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