

# The New York Times

THEATER REVIEW | 'DEAD SET #3'

## Videotaping the Apocalyptic Intersection of Abu Ghraib and Las Vegas

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Published: January 24, 2007

Imagine all the decadence, incoherence and insanity of Times Square jammed into a black-box theater and you get some sense of what you're in for with Big Art Group's "Dead Set #3," at the Kitchen as part of the Under the Radar festival.

Scenes of war and destruction shoot across video screens and are re-enacted by seven performers (some looking game, others awkward) who are sometimes naked and other times wearing glittery hoods, an absurd style that manages to locate the intersection between Abu Ghraib and Las Vegas. Themes of apocalypse and trauma echo throughout this flashy and shallow entry in the ever-expanding genre of high-tech theater.

Caden Manson, the director, melds a love of pop-culture detritus with an aesthetic that punishes its audience with an orgy of spectacle. The fractured script is a mix of dialogue snippets from movies like "Full Metal Jacket," borrowed online chats and obscure sources.

The actors videotape themselves onstage, and their images are edited and projected live onto four screens. The show, which can be an adrenaline rush, is best appreciated as a sort of overblown music video with stark lighting, billowing smoke and headache-inducing sound designs.

Repeated images of murder, war and cannibalism come and go faster than you have time to process them. It's a soulless production, which may be the point.

Live theater itself seems under assault as the actors are dwarfed by the swirling technology around them. Eventually they are even pushed offstage by a giant, ballooning bubble, a showstopping effect (in two senses) that grows and grows until there is no choice but to end the play — with no curtain call.

But the most disturbing scene may be earlier, when the cast members strip down to skin-hugging black leather suits that cover their entire heads, making them resemble sadomasochistic superheroes. (You have to see it to believe it.)

The actors look vaguely ridiculous in these get-ups, but move your eyes to the screens, and the dark lighting, tight close-ups and crooked, jaunty angles are positively frightening. Your eye darts from one scene to the other, unsure which to concentrate on. It's a jarring juxtaposition that helps explain why horror is one of the most popular genres at the multiplex, but rarely works at the theater.

*"Dead Set #3" runs through Saturday at the Kitchen, 512 West 19th Street, Chelsea.*

*Time Out New York* / Issue 591: January 25–31, 2007