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***Closer Than They Appear* Probes the Cutting Edges of Virtual Reality, the Military, and PTSD Treatment**

By Byron Woods

CLOSER THAN THEY APPEAR



Through Sunday, Oct. 1
UNC's Swain Hall, Chapel Hill

As my family gathered to mourn my uncle's death, cable news was stuck in a loop. An endless procession of commercial aircraft crashed into waiting skyscrapers. It was September 12, 2001, and the trauma was being permanently burned into American psyches on seemingly every channel. As playwright Christine Evans notes, research shows that visual reiterations of traumatic events can significantly reduce post-traumatic stress. But the therapeutic dosage is much lower than what we experienced after 9/11: a deadening overdose whose toxicity worsened the effects.

One thing I was struck most by in director Joseph Megel's thought-provoking StreetsSigns Center production of Evans's compelling drama, *Closer Than They Appear*, was the quiet desperation with which Hannah (stage veteran Elisabeth Lewis Corley), a doctor using virtual reality to treat Iraqi veterans, uses the technology to pursue her own ghosts, including her enigmatic daughter, Marian, supposedly a soldier. But when sessions, text messages, and voicemails don't make her manifest, we sense a digital dead end lurking in this virtual labyrinth.

The same goes for Zayneb (a luminous Smita Misra), a young woman who sends out YouTube dispatches on the deteriorating conditions in her hometown, Fallujah. When help does not arrive, Zayneb asks the world to bear witness: "Tell them people lived here."

The virtual sessions, hauntingly realized by Jared Mezzocchi and Christopher Baine, do help Michael (an authoritative Trevor Johnson) with his PTSD. But we cannot share in his optimism at the last. In a military setting, effective treatment means a soldier's going back into battle. Researchers are now developing this same technology not to treat existing trauma, but, chillingly, to rehearse and desensitize soldiers in advance of trauma to come. Michael's mid-show prophesy is already coming to pass: "What's done is done/ will be done/ and done again and again."