

Blood and Gifts

a new play by J T Rogers

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Further production details
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The National's production

This production of *Blood and Gifts* opened
in the National's Lyttelton Theatre on 7 September

In order of speaking

Dmitri Gromov	Matthew Marsh
James Warnock	Lloyd Owen
Colonel Afridi	Gerald Kyd
Military Clerk	Danny Ashok
Simon Craig	Adam James
Abdullah Khan	Demosthenes Chrysan
Saeed	Philip Arditti
Soldier	Craige Els
Mujahideen	Kammy Darweish
	Robert Gilbert
	Nabil Stuart
Political Speechwriter	Mark Healy
Administrative Aide	Ian Drysdale
Staffer	Jessica Regan
Walter Barnes	Simon Kunz
CIA Analyst	Nick Barber
Senator Jefferson Birch	Duncan Bell
Ensemble	Katie Lightfoot

Director	Howard Davies
Designer	Uitz
Lighting Designer	Paul Anderson
Music	Marc Teitler
Sound Designer	Paul Arditti
Company Voice Work	Kate Godfrey
	Jeannette Nelson
Dialect Coach	Penny Dyer
Staff Director	Dan Bird

Synopsis

Act One

December 1981. CIA agent Jim Warnock arrives in Islamabad, Pakistan, to begin covert financial and armament support of the Afghan mujihadeen fighting the invading Russian army. He is unexpectedly met by his Soviet counterpart, Dimitri Gromov, who threateningly warns him of the dangers his new posting may bring. He continues to the headquarters of the ISI, Pakistan's security services, and meets with the intransigent Colonel Afridi and his MI6 opposite, Simon Craig. They discuss their plans for the future of the campaign and it becomes clear that Afridi and Simon differ greatly in their ideologies and approaches. Jim then travels via Peshawar to the mountains near the Afghanistan-Pakistan border to meet a mujihadeen contact Simon has connected him with – Abdullah Khan. Abdullah and his right-hand-man Saeed negotiate with Jim for support and Jim inspires them to trust

him and work together, Abdullah giving Jim information on the ISI. On returning to Peshawar he is again greeted by Gromov who tries to form as trusting a relationship as possible with Jim, based on their connection of being two husbands away from their homes and families, and trying to do what they see as right.

Two and a half years later Jim's relationship with Abdullah has progressed and he arms his mujihadeen with sniper rifles, codedly instructing them how to assassinate Soviet officers. Jim discovers that the ISI have cut off their support from Abdullah because he is fighting a secular war for his country and will not accept Pakistan's Islamist-led agenda. Later that night Saeed secretly contacts Jim offering him more information in return for American pop records and a ghettoblaster. The following day Jim, Simon and Afridi meet to discuss the continuing operation and Afridi's increased Islamisation causes concern to the American and Brit. When the three of them meet, along with Gromov, that evening at a party at the Irish Embassy the tension increases and Jim strikes a deal to offer support to Saudi fighters as Afridi wishes, in return for re-establishing support for Abdullah Khan. As Jim is about to leave, Gromov confronts him about his distribution of sniper rifles and makes a direct retaliatory threat on Jim's life. Jim then travels to the mountains to meet Abdullah after receiving a note requesting urgent help. He arrives to discover Saeed in Abdullah's place, but his immediate distrust is abated when he discovers that Abdullah has been badly wounded.



Jim (Lloyd Owen) and Abdullah (Demosthenes Chrysan)

Synopsis (continued)

Act Two

Two years later, Jim now works back in America but has brought Abdullah and Saeed to Washington to speak to a Senate committee who are about to vote to continue or discontinue funding for the Afghan campaign. Abdullah is reluctant to lie about the success of the operation and blackmails Jim, offering to give the misleading speech in return for recently developed Stinger missiles. Jim meets with his superior, Walter Barnes who explains that the entire issue of funding is unstable, both from the Senate but also unofficially from the CIA. Simon phones from Islamabad to tell Jim that he's had twins and we discover that after a lot of trying, Jim's wife is also due to give birth. Later that day the key voter in the funding issue, Senator Birch, meets Abdullah and challenges him to justify why funding should be increased. Abdullah tells the Senator of how his wife was burned to death by the Soviet army and successfully persuades him. Barnes authorises full deployment of weapons, including the Stingers but offers Jim an ultimatum – if Abdullah is to get weapons, Jim must return to Pakistan. It transpires that Abdullah invented the story for the benefit of the funding, and Jim reveals that his wife miscarried two days ago.

Two years later Jim has returned to Pakistan and their campaign is succeeding. As the Soviet army is retreating, Gromov desperately pleads with Jim to allow them to leave without a bloodbath. Jim then meets with Afridi and Simon to discuss an offensive manoeuvre to be led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, an Islamist extremist, to which Simon reacts explosively.

Another Two years later, the final remaining Russians are leaving Afghanistan on New Year's Eve 1988. Simon gives a speech at the US embassy in which he drunkenly accuses the Americans of imperialism. Later he reveals that his wife has left him and discovers that Jim is returning home. Jim leaves Simon to say goodbye to Gromov at the airport. Two years pass, and having been back in America with the conflict considered to be concluded, Jim eventually visits Afghanistan to meet with Abdullah. Jim finally has a son and he and Abdullah share in the victories they achieved. However Abdullah reveals that Saeed was actually his son and has now been killed by the Afghan army led by the Soviet's puppet leader, Najibullah. Shocked by this information Jim sees that Abdullah has become increasingly embittered by the struggle, has sold his remaining Stinger missiles to Iran, and has joined forces with Hekmatyar to wage jihad to "cleanse his country and then cross oceans".



Jim (Lloyd Owen) and Walter Barnes (Simon Kunz)

Afghanistan timeline

A timeline compiled by J T Rogers before writing the play

1973

Coup instals Mohammed Daud Khan as president. Republic declared. Daud accepts extensive aid from the Soviets, but fails to build a modern state.

1978

Daud overthrown in a bloody coup.

1979

September: Moscow instals Amin as President; the Kremlin draws up plans for military support. KGB troops land in Kabul, kill Amin, and replace him with Babrak Karmal
December 31: there are 80,000 Soviet troops in Afghanistan.

1980

General Zia of Pakistan goes from evil dictator to US friend, fighting against the communists. A million Afghan refugees flee into Pakistan, threatening civil unrest. US direct aid to rebel groups is \$30 million.

Zia and the ISI (the military intelligence wing of the Pakistan armed forces) allow mujahideen to establish base camps in the “lawless Northwest Frontier Province bordering Afghanistan.”

1981

New President Ronald Reagan reauthorises President Carter’s top-secret presidential funding to ship weapons secretly to the mujahideen.

May: Station Chief Howard Hart arrives in Pakistan to run the CIA’s clandestine funding of anti-Soviet guerrillas. Meets with secular Pashtun rebel commander Abdul Haq. First batch of weapons sent. Sadat (President of Egypt) enthusiastically supplies arms to Afghan rebels.

To try and stop the ambushes on their southbound convoys, the Soviets scorch the earth with tanks and grenades. Villagers abducted, those accused of being extremists doused with fuel and burned alive, but attacks keep coming. The roads are littered with the carcasses of tanks, armoured personnel carriers, and trucks.

ISI chief Akhtar enforces strict controls over the CIA’s contact with the mujahideen.

Soviet tanks and troops kill hundreds of civilians to stop demonstrations. Intellectuals, civil servants, athletes defect to the mujahideen.

Rebel attacks keep escalating.

1982

US has to negotiate access to Afghan frontier through Pakistan in order to keep pumping in weapons.

ISI pushes plan on CIA of recruiting Muslim radicals from around the world to fight with the mujahideen. Nationalist mujahideen warlords, aware of ISI manipulation, become hostile to the Pakistanis. Jalalabad is now a mujahideen stronghold.

August: Soviet units attack the valley floor in Panjshir, decimating the population.

Soviets make Mohammad Najibullah chief of the KhAD (main security and intelligence agency of Afghanistan). Torture and executions start penetrating the mujahideen groups. People beaten, sodomised, fingernails removed, starved – then shot.

End of year: war intensifies. But Soviets unable to neutralize the resistance. More than 2 million Afghans, mostly Pashtuns, have fled to Pakistan, while Tajiks and Dari-speakers escape West to Iran.

1983

So much cash going through the system it’s hard for the CIA to keep track. Officers in the ISI are getting rich by selling the mujahideen arms bought by Washington and Saudi Arabia; some rebels resell them to make their own profit.



Nuristani mujahideen, 1985 © Reza/Webistan/Corbis

Afghanistan timeline (continued)

CIA plan: get communist weapons through the global arms market and into anti-communist mujahideen hands. Dissident Polish officers sell weapons to the CIA. Chinese too. Egyptians sell old weapons, sold to them by the Soviets. Turks sell rifles, machine-guns, pistols – all c1940.

1984

In the four years since first batch of rifles arrived, mujahideen have killed or wounded 17,000 Soviet soldiers, 10,000 tanks and other vehicles have been destroyed, at cost of \$200 million US taxpayer money and \$200 million from Prince Turki, Head of Saudi Arabia's General Intelligence Directorate.

Funding surge: Congress increases CIA's Afghan program budget from \$30 million in 1981 to \$200 million, overwhelming the CIA. Saudi middle classes flood money into the struggle.

Near civil war between military leader Ahmad Shah Massoud and rebel leader Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, in the fight against the Soviets.

Late in year: Soviets start to get the upper hand in war.

1985

January: Soviet and Afghan armies begin major offensives aimed at crushing mujahideen. KGB increases its *spetsnaz* [special purpose regiments] operations.

After spring thaw, the Soviets use newly developed cluster bombs in assaults. Carpet-bombing of the Panjshir Valley.

Drought makes it harder and harder for mujahideen to live off the land.

For the first time, foreign fighters start streaming into Afghanistan to fight alongside the mujahideen.

KGB work with Afghan intelligence, become deeply involved in counterinsurgency. Under Najibullah, torture of civilians to get info on mujahideen becomes widespread. Russian Special Forces try to seal Pakistani border, wreaking havoc. New Soviet Mi-24D helicopters kill a great many mujahideen.

March: Gorbachev becomes General Secretary of the Soviet Communist Party. War is reaching its peak in Afghanistan just as Perestroika takes hold in the USSR.

April: The decision is made in White House/CIA to "pump it up and give it one last shot" to force Soviet withdrawal.

National Security Decision Directive 166 passed, retroactive plan for huge increase in funds for the CIA covert operation. CIA start supplying "dual use" weapon systems: could be used against "legitimate targets" but also for terrorism and assassination. CIA agents fight the slide into dirty war.

Gorbachev tells Reagan at Geneva summit: USSR wants to pull out within four years.

1986

\$500 million from US alone into the war this year.

US State Department wants to give Stingers to the mujahideen but many in CIA object: these will be actual US-built weapons – public relations coup for Soviets.

CIA, MI6, and ISI fund and coordinate guerrilla attacks into Soviet republics of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Hekmatyar chosen to lead these attacks.

Senator Gordon Humphrey and others question where US funds to mujahideen are going. CIA commits support to long-standing ISI drive to recruit radical Muslims from around the world to come to Pakistan and fight with the Afghan mujahideen.

Summer: Stingers start being distributed and US-trained ISI officers teach mujahideen units to operate them in training camps near the Afghan border.

September 26: first Stinger missile used to destroy Soviet helicopters. Stingers have drastic effect on the war. Immediately, results are remarkable: somewhere between 40% (CIA estimate) and 75% (mujahideen estimate) success rate at defeating the Soviets.

Rebel factions are fighting amongst themselves in the field just as much as against the Soviets.

November: Mohammad Najibullah installed as president of Afghanistan.

December: Withdrawing Soviet forces from Afghanistan is now official Soviet policy.

1987

January: From now, the Soviet's Fortieth Army is to fight solely to defend against mujahideen attack. Big push by CIA/ISI-backed forces is underway and

Afghanistan timeline (continued)

the Soviets knocked back.

Soviets ask US to stop backing rebels so they can withdraw without a bloodbath.

March: Small units cross the Amu Darya River from bases in Afghanistan and launch first rocket attacks against villages in Tajikistan.

1988

Two big debates for CIA and US officials in region: Are the Soviets really leaving (CIA thinks they are bluffing), and what will happen to communist government of former secret police chief Najibullah if they do? CIA convinced that if the Soviet Fortieth Army leaves, Najibullah will be gone, as he is just a puppet. But French and British disagree, saying people of Kabul don't want to live under Islamist rule of Hekmatyar.

April 14: Peace deal finally reached in Geneva – Soviets agree to pull out in nine months. They will continue to give billions of dollars in aid to Afghan government, but US and Pakistan are to stop supporting the rebels.

May 16: Soviet Sixty Sixth Separate Motorized Rifle Brigade leaves its base in Jalalabad. Within hours, it's stripped of everything – air conditioners, radios, even doors and window frames. All sold in Jalalabad shops.

August 17: General Zia's plane shot down. Also killed are US Ambassador to Pakistan and General Akhtar, chief of the ISI during most of the Afghanistan War. Some blame Soviet sabotage, others the CIA.

The mujahideen and the Red Army are fighting less and less, cutting deals.

Winter: desire for vengeance triumphs over politics and mujahideen start attacking retreating Soviet army.



Mujahideen cleaning assault rifles, 1983 © Reza/Webistan/Corbis

End of year: Hekmatyar, backed by the ISI, starts clandestine assassinations of rival mujahideen commanders, trying to establish an Islamic Party as the national force in Afghanistan.

1989

January: Soviets unleash Operation Typhoon to beat back mujahideen so they can get the rest of their forces safely out of Afghanistan. Fierce fighting. Soviet corpses litter the road out. CIA sees the mission as the most successful in agency history. US support for the rebels plummets back down to \$40 million.

January 31: US embassy in Kabul shut for security reasons.

1.3 million Afghans are dead. A third of the pre-war population of 5.5 million have fled abroad and 2 million are internally displaced.

But Najibullah's army fights back: he puts 20,000 mullahs on his payroll to counter rebels' religious message. His government does not fall as he fights off the mujahideen. [Civil war will rage for three years.]

November: fall of the Berlin Wall. Soviets no longer interested in propping up Kabul government.

1990

Soviet Union dissolving, Germany reuniting – US covert action policy is now on autopilot as Afghanistan becomes a "third-tier" foreign policy issue.

US government fears remaining Stingers will be used against US. Highly classified program for CIA to buy them back. Going rate is \$80,000 to \$150,000 a missile.

1991

Lavish aid to Afghanistan stops when USSR and US agree to stop funding either side before the end of the year.

Christmas Day: Gorbachev resigns, the USSR formally disbands – the Republic of Afghanistan is left to fend for itself. USSR and US agree to stop funding their sides in the Afghan conflict as of 1 January 1992 (12 years of support).

31 December: CIA authority to conduct covert action in Afghanistan ends. On New Year's Eve US funding shuts down. There is no CIA/US policy for the country for the next few years. And as fighting continues, the countryside begins to revert to medieval warlordism. Through lawless Pakistani-Afghan borders and out of Karachi's ports hundreds of tons of refined heroin is now flowing.

JT Rogers interview

What was the starting point for *Blood and Gifts*?

Last year I wrote a short play for the Tricycle that was presented as part of *The Great Game: Afghanistan*, and it was a real struggle. I was amazed at how hard it was to write a twenty-minute play about this particular part of Afghan history. At first I thought it was because I don't really write short plays, but then I realised the real issue was that I was trying to cram a three-hour story into twenty minutes. The more I learned about the Soviet-Afghan war the more fascinated I got with all sorts of characters and stories that were tangential to the short play. And now what was a twenty-minute stand-alone piece is a vastly larger, completely different work. The play was originally three snapshots of a relationship between a CIA operative and an Afghan warlord, and those scenes in slightly different variations are in *Blood and Gifts*, but they're 20 pages out of 100. In fact their relationship and who they are as people has been changed by the transformation of the play to the point where you would now cast different people to play those roles.

What's your approach to research when writing about such a specific situation?

I read voluminously – for months, five or six hours a day, until I have a basic, deep knowledge. And I create what I call Rogers Notes, for myself. If I can verbally and on paper explain the book I just read, I actually know it. Then I'll start interviewing people. One of the great things about having now climbed up the playwrighting ladder a bit is that I can get to almost anybody I want to because of the contacts I've made in politics and journalism. But I don't talk to those people until I really know a lot. Often it's not historical facts

that I'm looking for, it's the small details that you're going to use in a play – the kind of things people drink, the clothing, the odd expressions they use. It's the incidentals that authenticate something on stage.

And the other thing is the constraint. For me I have to draw a box that a play takes place in. In this case it was that all the scenes had to take place between '81 and '91 and be in rooms where people are negotiating. As a writer you have to have imagination; but there comes a point if you're writing a play which has some historical accuracy where you say to yourself, I know I can evoke this room even though I was never there, but I can't have a scene take place in 'x' because then I would be completely making it up and it wouldn't have the same vibrancy.

What are your responsibilities to the history and people that are the play's starting point?

Everyone in the play is completely created by me, but all of the 'plot point people' talked about in the story are real. I don't have a problem with people writing plays where they take history and then make



Gerald Kyd (Colonel Afridi) and Lloyd Owen (Jim) in rehearsal

J T Rogers interview (continued)

things up or change it. Who knows, I might write a play like that someday. But with *Blood and Gifts* I'm trying to create an original, invented story that I can also give to the people who were actually there, and have them say, "You got it". In terms of responsibility, if I can evoke characters as three-dimensional, complicated people then I find it eliminates all of this business about "Have you been respectful?" and "Do you know what you're doing?" Because if I have created such characters the audience intuitively understands they're not being toyed with; this is being taken seriously, but it's also going to be entertaining. Being respectful means having a character who's non-white be as obnoxious and complicated and surprisingly charming as a white character.

How do you negotiate the balance between drama and history?

If the play works, it's because there's a tension between learning something new and being entertained. For me it's never about wanting to lecture the audience, it's more: "Wow, this is so fascinating, let me share this with you". It's about looking at dark and difficult scenes and figuring out where the jokes need to be. Because that's what life is, really serious and really funny—at the same time. I think if we're not entertaining then everything else is moot. It has to be sexy and funny and surprising – What's going to happen next? You need a gun, you need a fart joke, you need a girl, and then you can talk about politics.

How does your relationship to the characters and the actors change once rehearsals start?

This is the first time for a premiere of a play of mine when I've not been in rehearsal for the entire period. I've always been there every day. Not out of a sense of fear or protectiveness, but because I always make changes as the play gets up on its feet and because I just love being in the rehearsal room. But in this case it was too long to be away from home, so I left for a while and then came back. The luxury of working in a place like this is that everyone is top-shelf. I've been watching Howard's productions since I was a kid; the cast is top-notch, as is the stage management. If you're working with people like this, there's nothing to stress out about. I'm very precise about punctuation, about the lines, about stage directions. So when you're working with a director and actors who are, too, then when we hit a snag in terms of clarifying the story or when an actor has trouble making sense of a line, the problem is clearly in the writing and I'll fix it. And there's nothing more exciting than being in rehearsal and seeing a choice made about how to play a line or an entire scene that was better than how'd I'd originally envisioned. It validates that the play has a life of its own, that it's something larger me.

Howard Davies interview

How did your journey with the play start?

We were looking for something which was a contemporary political play. Something which commented on the politics of the day, either nationally or internationally, and we had done a play of JT's at the National about Rwanda called *The Overwhelming*, and we were very proud when we put that on. He had written a short play for the Tricycle Theatre as part of their collection of short plays about Afghanistan, and had then been commissioned by the Lincoln Center [a major producing theatre in New York] to expand that short play which he readily grabbed. It came in our direction because we asked to see it, and we said we would be really thrilled if we could put it on, and the Lincoln Centre said that was fine.

I remember in a meeting with Nick Hytner where everybody assumed it would be done in the Cottesloe, and I said we should put our money where our mouth is – if we really believe in these plays, if this is something that the National Theatre should be doing, then let's not do it in the Cottesloe which will earn for itself a relatively modest audience, let's try and put it on in the Lyttleton where it can reach a wider audience and a much more disparate audience. I think it's true to say that the Cottesloe has a loyal, left-leaning audience who will come to see everything out of their passionate interest, and so we'd be playing a play like this to the converted. We wanted to open that out to an audience who were not necessarily persuaded by the politics of the left regarding the invasion of Afghanistan in the 80s. Because the play is so ambiguously rich in the way

that it treats the politics of the period, we decided to put it on in the Lyttleton.

Are there any considerations or concessions to be made putting this on in the Lyttleton?

We have a £10 season in the Olivier which means that people can buy large numbers of those seats for £10 which is a real bargain. However, in the Lyttleton it's full price, so the tendency is to put on classic, well-made plays or plays which will reap that kind of audience who are prepared to pay £30 plus. So yes it's a risk putting on something like this. The other pressure from certain people was that we needed a star to be able to sell tickets. Now, Lloyd Owen is a bit of a star, but he's not necessarily a household name. I felt like we had to go for the best actor, who I had worked with before and was exactly right to play that central American character who never leaves the stage.

And in terms of design?

In the Cottesloe you can have people just emerging and the crew or cast just bringing on tables and chairs – that's the vocabulary of a fringe theatre: you do things in a rough and ready, deconstructed way. It's very unusual in that sense because you concentrate on the language and the characters of the play. The Lyttleton Theatre is a huge proscenium arch, it's like cinema-scope, and you do need a visual impact. You can't have two people on an empty stage standing there in darkness, it becomes visually un-interesting. It's very hard to get a sense of the scale of a human being in a space that big. You have to provide a set, something to put the characters in context, something which is realistic or naturalistic or

Howard Davies interview (continued)

expressionistic or whatever, but it's got to have a visual dynamic to it.

The other problem that we faced is that essentially the play is talking heads; it's like a spy thriller. That would work very well if you were doing a film, but two or three people just talking on a stage is hard to pull off. So again the necessity to have something that the actors can relate to means you can make the scene work in a dynamic fashion. So for example, the first time Jim Warnock meets the mujihadeen leader, originally in the script it was only meeting the mujihadeen leader and his sidekick Saeed, but we decided in rehearsal to fill it out, to make sure that the audience understood the danger of him conducting such a meeting by surrounding him with mujihadeen, silent, stern, carrying rifles, being ultimately rather dangerous and threatening. So by making it slightly bigger, by upping the social scale of what you're watching, I hope that's what makes it more interesting.

What is the play?

I think it's an examination of a period in time which moved from the oppositional posturing of the Soviet forces and America during the Cold War, and the beginning of something which we now identify with what the Americans at one stage called the 'War on Terror'. What has emerged is factionalism, tribalism, regionalism and the politics of sectarianism. It's no longer the big powers that really dominate our attention any longer, it is these small, urgent demands for local control, for the ability for people to run their own lives in small

countries throughout the world, and not be responsive to the big international businesses or pressures from the West. The beginning also of the current struggle between the Christian West and Islam really started in this period of the 1980s. The waging of a jihad against the West, which was fuelled ironically by a covert operation by the CIA. It's a fantastically interesting period where the play examines in a very lucid and unjudgemental way, the way that the politics of the world shifted from huge Cold War positioning to sectarianism, and also religion starting to come back into politics.



Adam James (playing Simon) in rehearsal

Howard Davies interview (continued)

What research do you do before staging a play like this?

Afghanistan is a complicated, uncharted location which everyone is fighting over but nobody really seems to understand, so the research was a matter of reading books. I would normally have got on a plane to Kabul and travelled around to see what that territory was like and to meet people. I spoke to the ambassador over there who said 'You are not to come under any circumstances', and so I had to rely on research material – history books, political books; also the meetings I conducted with various MI6 officers who were prepared to talk to me about their experience in Afghanistan in the 80s when they were supporting the CIA in their covert war against the Soviets. And the spin-off was that you'd meet one person and they'd say 'Actually the person you should really meet is this person' and so on, and it just mushroomed. So eventually I'd interviewed an incredible number of people who all had different takes on it, be it militarily, or to do with the spying of MI6 and the CIA, or to do with being a historian, or having a much more global-political picture. So it was very interesting measuring their experience and their retrospective judgement against the books that I was reading and realising that none of this necessarily tallied, but all of it made a fascinating picture.

How do you use that research in the rehearsal room to make it accessible and useful for the actors?

You never know when the question will come up. If for example you've covered a hundred topics, you never know whether the actors are going to

ask about number nine or twenty five or ninety eight, or whether they're going to ask fifty questions scattered all over it, or whether they going to ask a hundred questions. You have to cover the ground, and what usually happens in the first two weeks of rehearsal is that people ask questions about their character, their background, the world they come from, how they would behave, and hopefully as a director you can provide them with an answer. You can also provide them with the books you've read and let them get on with it themselves. In the course of this rehearsal we gave them research projects of their own – we divided the group into twos and threes and gave them specific research subjects that they would then deliver to the rest of the group. We also had the writer in the rehearsal for the first week. His degree of knowledge about Afghanistan – because he's been working on this for many years – meant he was invaluable to the cast in that he was able to provide really detailed observations about the politics of the period and the characters that he'd drawn in the play – who those characters were based upon, or who those characters represented in the argument about Afghanistan. But it's not just a documentary – JT has provided a rich array of really comic, interesting, flawed characters. I think we wouldn't have got such a good cast were it not for the fact that everybody thought 'Yes, I'd love to play him or her', because they're so juicy and original and their voice is so unique – he's got a great ear. For example, American though he is, in writing the English MI6 officer he's written somebody who is so quintessentially English of a particular

Howard Davies interview (continued)

period I find it unnervingly accurate.

Why are the National Theatre staging this play now?

The whole question of Afghanistan is not going to go away. If he did a play about Afghanistan now, I think the writer would never get to write it because it's changing so fast – our attitude towards it is changing so fast, let alone what's happening on the ground – that you'd never get to a satisfying play without it seeming to be obsolete within six months. But by taking this absolutely pivotal moment in the recent history of Afghanistan and the relationship between the east and the west, by putting that in front of an audience and examining it, it shows us now that we cocked up, that we made a massive mistake. The irony is that people of good will on both sides tried their best in Afghanistan and made a terrible mess of it. The play packs a punch and should make us believe that we have to examine very carefully even our immediate past to understand how we are likely to be able to proceed in the judgements we make about our future relationships with other countries. So I think a play like this which has politics at its centre makes people debate about the way that we make judgements – I think it's very important that we conduct that debate with ourselves and do these kind of plays regularly.



Abdullah Khan (Demosthenes Chrysan)

Uitz interview

What was the start of your journey with *Blood and Gifts*?

Howard and I read it a lot and read round the subject – I read all the books on the reading list that JT had sent. We started by trying to show the plains of Afghanistan and close-ups in offices. Then I saw the film *Charlie Wilson's War*. After seeing that I realised that we couldn't - on that stage, with this sort of budget - ever go into a naturalistically told large mountain scene, and we can't do close-ups like a film can do. It was then we identified a cumulative image of men making deals in offices, and that even what had seemed to be a mountainside in Afghanistan could actually be a safe house, which is another kind of office really, just rural. I'd done a lot of research by the time we made that decision and I knew already what the British consulate in Islamabad looked like, and what the American embassy looked like inside and outside. But we turned a corner when we decided that it was all going to be close to the audience, person-sized and we didn't have a responsibility to tell it filmically. Interestingly, although we talked about it, I don't think Howard and I ever considered using projections to tell the story because often that stops the actor being the centre of it. We thought, trucks can come from the back and we can mask changes or play corridor scenes right at the front, and that mechanism can come from the sides. At that point we had whole trucks with walls on them coming up and down stage but that got cut later – as an aesthetic choice really,

not a money choice. It seemed we'd be more deft if just furniture and flags could move down and the wall could slide in behind.

How did you use such a wealth of research and distill it into the design?

In this case it was tied up with the idea that in the 80s offices in Islamabad and Washington were very similar, and that what the audience should remember is the shaking of hands in very similar looking offices in different parts of the world. Sometimes too much knowledge gets in the way of theatrical choices. I knew that Howard very early on wanted to have a bold wall and a manic sound picture from a street in Islamabad, and I knew that in the section of Islamabad where the embassies and the ISI are is huge wide roads with hedges, and the kind of image Howard had would be more likely to be found in Peshawar. But he knew that he wanted to assault the senses in the jump back from Washington to Pakistan. So sometimes however much knowledge you have on a subject has to take second place to what the theatrical logic of it is. Also 80s beige is very similar to Afghan dust so it could be inside and outside.

What was your approach to costume?

The thing that's weird in this show is that it's nearly all men, so you could see from the beginning that it was going to be an endless amount of men in suits. In Pakistan they call the

Ultz interview (continued)

salwar kameez a suit, and we also had European style suits worn by Pakistani men. It was really interesting to think that the audience could enjoy the difference between Russian, Pakistani, European, American, and British suits. We found images of men working in the Senate building at the time which helped the choice of table and chairs, but there were also lots of thinktank meetings of script associates and CIA analysts all in their shirtsleeves, which seemed like a very good way of starting act two. We got an Afghan tailor to make the salwar kameez because we didn't want to be copying someone else's discipline and we needed help on how different they were in the early 80s – very wide trousers, the short shirt and big 70s collars – we needed expert help on that. We got a lot of suits from America for the Americans. We found the classic local pieces from a collector who has a shop in Islington selling high-end women's Afghan fashion, but she also had some low-end stuff and some men's stuff and that's how we found the Nuristani coat for Abdullah. She also found us a guy to tie the turbans – on specialist stuff you go to the experts, but actually on this we

treated American suits from the 80s as a specialist subject.

How did you create the fluid energy for the play?

We first of all thought about whether we should have signs for the audience displaying different years, because that's written very clearly in the text. When JT arrived he was surprised at first that we weren't going to do that but he totally embraced that we wanted to take it away from being a didactic, Brechtian style play. When we first started, we were going to have departures and arrivals in Urdu and English on the wall of the airport but that felt like we were being a bit obvious; by announcing a plane you knew it was a departure lounge. We turned a big corner when we realised that Jim never left the stage which meant he had to be in the same costume throughout the whole of the first act and the whole of the second act, but we also wanted it to be that he would step out of one location and he would be hurled into another one immediately – that totally set a course for the kind of energy the production would have.

Jim (Lloyd Owen) and Gromov (Matthew Marsh)



Further reading

J. T. Rogers' suggested short reading list for those interested in learning more about the events *Blood and Gifts* takes place against.

Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 11, 2001, by Steve Coll.

— Grippingly well written; the first half is the most complete and nuanced account in print of the secret war behind the Afghan Soviet conflict. The book to read.

The Hidden War: A Russian Journalist's Account of the Soviet War in Afghanistan, by Artyom Borovik

— Borovik, killed while covering the Russian war in Chechnya in 2000, was called the best journalist in Russian in the 1990s. This book caused a sensation when it was published at home during the final years of the USSR.

The Great Gamble: The Soviet War in Afghanistan, by Gregory Feifer

— American journalist Feifer was able to use hitherto sealed documents to write the first complete picture of the war from the Soviet side. A treasure of information—most of it unknown before this book's publication.

Legacy of Ashes: The History of the CIA, by Tim Weiner.

— A no-one-could-make-this-stuff-up, award-winning, scrupulously researched book that turns much of what is thought about the CIA on its head. Part Five, "Victory Without Joy," is an excellent companion to Coll's reporting on the same extraordinary events.

A Case of Exploding Mangoes, by Mohammed Hanif.

— A novel about members of Pakistan's ISI intelligence service, which features prominently in *Blood and Gifts*. Wickedly funny in parts, with brilliant details.