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# 'Snake Eaters' saved by some fine performances

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Pat Nolan and Lesley Conroy in Snake Eaters  
*Al Craig*

## Snake Eaters by Stewart Roche

Rating: ★★★★★

Jazz, Jim Beam and endless pots of coffee. Obvious American clichés abound in Stewart Roche's latest play, "Snake Eaters." As do some stereotypical characters and a plot taken from a straight to video, 1980's action movie. With its well worn story of a broken hero trying to save the girl, save his friend, save the day and save himself in small town, Midwest America, "Snake Eaters" tale is tediously told in a disappointing, lackluster production saved only by some strong performances.

Set in the Nebraskan town of Bellevue, Roche's problematic play follows returning war hero Hillis, damaged from his experiences in Afghanistan, as he tries to adjust to civilian life in a world that has changed almost as much as he has. His loving father Don can no longer connect with him, with only his stoner friend Joey seeming to establish any sense of connection. But Joey is in deep

with local drug dealer and bad boy Austin. As is Austin's abused girlfriend Ashley, the mandatory good girl at heart in a bad situation. Sparks predictably fly between the tough Ashley and the angry Hillis, incurring the wrath of Austin and forcing Hillis to reveal his dangerous side. But Austin is merely the henchman for sophisticated drug lord, Kruger, and Hillis must enlist the help of his old army buddy, Glock, to help protect his loved ones and take down the villain in an effort to find salvation.

Running at two hours, "Snake Eaters" takes a long time to get anywhere and rarely gets anywhere truly interesting or surprising. Structurally, Roche positions "Snake Eaters" as an action thriller, but with little real action and very few real thrills. Attempts to engage with the plight of returning veterans in any meaningful way are thin on the ground. Post Traumatic Stress Disorder is duly mentioned, but serves as little more than an obvious plot device. Roche's script works best in its evocation of ordinary exchanges, with sequences such as those discussing Cluedo and Belinda Carlisle carrying far more impact than those that strive for obvious substance, such as the labored debriefing session.

Direction by Caroline Fitzgerald was not all it could have been. Pace dragged in places and transitions between scenes were often slow and sloppy, sometimes with music and sound, sometimes without. The obligatory fight scene, though well choreographed by Bryan Burroughs, was poorly and unconvincingly executed, as were the intermittent angry outbursts, whose default position was explosively loud without any subtlety. A clever set design, steeped in grey, by Martin Cahill succeeded in maximizing the possibilities of the space as well as adding atmosphere. Against which a hard working cast strove valiantly to elevate "Snake Eaters" into something engaging.

Patrick O'Donnell played Hillis with conviction, even if physically he looked miscast as a returning U.S. Marine. Lesley Conroy elevated Ashley above a merely token female presence into something genuinely credible and engaging. John Morton as the menacing Austin, and Niall Bruton as Glock, squeezed everything they could from their essentially supporting roles with two fine performances. Cillian Roche, doubling as Kruger and Joey, was excellent throughout, as was the consummate Pat Nolan as Don, whose wonderful ease and attention to detail generated some much needed nuance.

Billed as "a powerful, honest, haunting play, which serves as a stark reminder of the lasting impact of war," "Snake Eaters" is none of the above. Unlike Cat Jones' excellent "Glory Dazed," "Snake Eaters" fails to grapple with the themes and issues surrounding returning veterans and the impact of war in any meaningful or powerful way. Nor is it an honest to goodness, rollercoaster action ride. Neither the "Hurt Locker" nor a Van Damme movie, "Snake Eaters" falls somewhere into a no mans land. Given both Roche's and Fitzgerald's pedigree, this is uncharacteristic and surprising. One can only hope that their next production sees a return to form, for both have much more to offer.

"Snake Eaters" by Stewart Roche runs at The New Theatre until December 19th

Show begins 7.30 p.m. Tickets €16/ €12.50

For further information visit [The New Theatre](#)



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