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THEATER: WORLD WAR I, 'JOHNNY GOT HIS GUN'

By MEL GUSSOW

Dalton Trumbo's 1939 antiwar novel, "Johnny Got His Gun," is a most unlikely candidate for dramatization. As Bradley Rand Smith affirms about his adaptation, a play for one actor, which opened last night at the Circle Repertory Company, everything takes place in "the mind of Joe Bonham." All that remains of Bonham is his mind; he is a limbless, totally helpless veteran of World War I, kept alive more as an object than as a person. The only sense he retains is that of touch; he can feel a nurse's fingers tracing letters on his chest and he can respond by banging his head in Morse code.

As undramatic as this may sound, there are possibilities here for theater. One need only consider Beckett's terse but dramatically inexhaustible monologues (such as "Not I" and "Rockaby") to see what can be done with soliloquized stasis, or Beckett's novel "The Unnamable," to see what can be done with life at the protozoan level.

Mr. Smith has not come up with an adequate stage equivalent of Bonham's interior monologue. At times, the effect is that of hearing the book spoken aloud. The play veers from a detailed discussion of the invalid's inability to function to a stream of moonlit memories about a once-active youth - fishing, first love, first loss. There is far too much recapitulation of his incapacities and there is too little irony - as in one cynical moment when Bonham says that by studying his body people would not learn much about anatomy but they would learn about war.

What makes this an occasionally engrossing evening is the performance by Jeff Daniels, who lends variety as well as conviction to his horrific role. He is aided by his director, Elinor Renfield, who is an expert at the art of enlivening stage monologues. Among her previous successes in this field were Jean-Claude van Itallie's "Bag Lady" and Rochelle Owens's "Chucky's Hunch." In contrast to those monodramas, Bonham, except for his disability, is not a very interesting character.

Mr. Daniels, who was exemplary in the role of Jed Jenkins in "Fifth of July," is especially adept at conveying quiet heroism. In "Johnny Got His Gun," he begins on a conversational level - we are at his bedside - and his frustration increases as he realizes the extent of his injuries, that he is the "nearest thing to a dead man on earth."

He uses acting rather than makeup or masks to portray his victim; he acts out his rage, racing across the stage - designed as a cage by Kert Lundell - smashing headlong into wire fences as if trying to

plunge back into life. In the center of the stage is a tall sculptured assemblage that looks like a tree encased in barbed wire, conjuring a vision of a prison camp or no man's land. As further compensation for the limited landscape of the text, Chuck London has created an evocative sound design - battle noises, background whispers and heartbeats.

Though it deals with timeless questions about valor, patriotism and euthanasia - and it has an intelligent performance by Mr. Daniels - as a work of theater, "Johnny Got His Gun" does not amply engage our emotions. Close to Dead JOHNNY GOT HIS GUN, based on the novel by Dalton Trumbo; adapted by Bradley Rand Smith with Jeff Daniels; directed by Elinor Renfield; assistant director, Jonathan Hogan; managing director, Richard Frankel; set by Kert Lundell; sound by Chuck London Media; lights by Mal Sturchio; costumes by Miriam Nieves; production stage manager, Ann Bridgers. At the Circle Repertory, 99 Seventh Avenue South. Joe BonhamJeff Daniels