



‘Johnny Got His Gun’: Solo power;

By Marshall Fine

It’s never the wrong time for an anti-war film – and the timing seems perfect for Rowan Joseph’s unique and powerful new version of Dalton Trumbo’s “Johnny Got His Gun.”

Joseph, a theater director, has taken a one-man stage version of Trumbo’s novel – which had a legendary and short-lived off-Broadway run by Jeff Daniels in 1983 – and recreated it on a simple set with a single actor. His cast consists of Ben McKenzie, who completely sheds “The O.C.” to play a World War I doughboy caught in a hellish situation.

Simply put, he’s a living corpse: Hit by a shell on the last day of the War to End All Wars, he has been saved by doctors, surviving without arms, legs, eyes, hearing or the ability to speak. He is a doorstop of a human being, a brain trapped in an immobile lump of flesh, kept alive by tubes in a hospital bed.

Trumbo himself directed a film version in 1971 that was much more literal and viscerally horrifying. Trumbo was one of the legendary Hollywood 10, a screenwriter who served jail time for contempt of Congress for refusing to testify during House Un-American Activities hearings about communists in Hollywood. (Yet somehow Karl Rove, Harriet Miers and others thumb their noses at Congressional subpoenas with impunity.)

But Joseph’s version, while packing the same emotional power, is a more poetic, more imaginative version. Working on a bare stage decorated only with a chair and a plain wooden bench (and a few strings of lights), McKenzie conveys a mind that is alarmingly alive, trapped in a nightmare. He shows how we avoid reality by escaping into memory – and how a resourceful, vital young man can learn to grab a tiny measure of control over his existence: to rejoin the world, if only by figuring out how to tell time based on the schedule of nurses and by the feeling of the sun’s heat on a small, uncovered patch of skin on his neck.

When he makes that discovery, it is a moment of triumph that is genuinely moving – both for the accomplishment and for the audience’s realization of just how small a victory this is. By taking control of time, he has sentenced himself to an awareness of how long the rest of his life will truly be.

Using only lighting, camera angles and McKenzie’s full-bodied performance, Joseph blends horror and hopefulness and a muscular anti-war message. The particular conflict it depicts may have occurred almost a century ago but the message – that war kills young men, while sparing those who put them in harm’s way – remains current and vital.