**Review - Grounded at the Gate Theatre**

George Brant’s monologue about an F16 fighter pilot, directed by Christopher Haydon, had a successful Edinburgh run, then played at the Gate Theatre last year; it returns for a second run there – and a good thing too.

Pregnancy forces the unnamed pilot (Lucy Ellinson) to stop flying. When she returns to the Air Force she is told that pilots do not go up in the air anymore – they control drones, remotely. From a darkened trailer in the middle of the Nevada desert she watches a grey screen for 12 hours on end, explodes a few terrorists and then returns home to her husband and child. This routine sends her, for all her laddish bravado, into a deep and chilling madness.

The design by Oliver Townsend is a miniature version of ITV’s The Cube. Ellinson is alone inside and cut off from the audience by one-way screens on each of the cube’s faces. From the beginning Ellinson adopts a cocky swagger, an open stance and an irritating zeal for fighting wars. But she subtly reveals a remarkable depth of emotions: for one thing, she's actually quite childish. Disappointment at no longer being up in the air turns to excitement at getting to play with the drone, her expensive new toy. Penetrating eyes reveal the fear and love and fatigue and everything else that she feels behind the rough exterior. It makes her compelling – and disturbing – to watch for an hour. And despite the roughness, she has the essentials of humanity: she is torn between the need to be loved and the desire to be alone.

Although the stakes of her job are higher, the act of sitting in an office looking at a screen for hours a day is not unfamiliar to most. Similarly there is, in terms of execution, absolutely no difference between the pilot’s task of controlling the drone and some guy sitting at home completing a mission on Call of Duty. The consequences of what she does are only felt by people thousands of miles away - it's understandably difficult for her to empathise.

Brant stirs up a paranoia about the pervasion of surveillance, of observation by tech into every moment of our lives – and the pilot becomes unable to dislodge the notion that she is being perpetually watched. For her, this has a deeper meaning, a greater threat because the surveillance machines that she controls also have the power to kill.

She alludes to the Odyssey, to Olympus; the drones that are ready to kill at any moment impend like the sword of Damocles. She is, she admits, a god.

*Grounded* never strays from these big themes that confront the potency of technology and the limits of compassion, but it is also concerned with how tedious marriage and jobs can be: the quotidian monotony of seeing her husband every day, dropping her daughter off every day, driving to work every day…

In Brant's prickling prose, among the many lines that drop like bombs and linger, is this double edge: that workaday woes are spliced with biting social commentary; the clash of the pilot's personal mental dystopia with a prophecy for a universal, societal one – one that, in many ways, has already landed.