

Make Love AND War

By Karen Green

Friday June 6, 2008 09:00:00 am

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According to the *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, "satire" is "a humorous or malicious exposé of hypocrisy and pretension." The authors add that "many satirical techniques—parody, exaggeration, deflation, caricature—depend on incongruous juxtapositions." Satire has a proud classical tradition, you see, with its roots in ancient Greek invective poetry. In ancient Rome, where blunt speech was practically a national characteristic, an amused Horace and the far angrier Juvenal expanded on the Greek tradition. For the Romans, satire was as much a function of metrical style (dactylic hexameters, for those of you scoring at home) as content, although, to us, anger and humor are the defining characteristics of satire. A play such as Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*, which we might think of as satire because of its subject matter—Greek women banding together to end the Peloponnesian Wars by denying their husbands sex until the menfolk lay down their weapons—is, strictly speaking, comedy, but it's also evidence that sex and war have a long associative tradition.

So! Have you guys read Rick Veitch's *Army@Love* yet??

In "the not too distant future," the United States is mired in an endless war in Afbaghistan, a quagmire that has so bankrupted the federal coffers that the administration decides to bring in corporate gurus to rebrand the concept and improve recruitment and retention. Healey, a former Polka Cola exec, put in charge of the Office of Motivation and Morale (or MoMo) by wheelchair-bound Secretary of War Stelaphane, decides to sell war the way society sells everything else: with sex. He encourages the presence of women in combat, arranges hedonistic retreats, and promotes the military experience as a guilt-free bacchanal, a peak experience—spring break with guns. It's a far cry from the push-back against the Equal Rights Amendment in the 1970s, when upstanding Americans feared the law's passage would mean the gentler sex would be forced to carry M-16s.



Pinned down by insurgents in downtown Najjaff, where the Polka Cola Santa merrily hoists his soda bottle on the sides of bombed-out buildings, two soldiers—Switzer, who has a husband back in New Jersey phoning her amidst the rocket's red glare to ask if she knows where his green tie is, and Flabbergast, a professional magician still called upon to entertain the troops—are pumped up with battlefield adrenaline. Switzer asks if Flabbergast has ever heard of the Hot Zone Club, whose members have had sex while under fire; a new twist on the Mile High Club. She's just invented this on the spur of the moment, actually, but Flabbergast tells his fellow grunts about it and the next thing you know MoMo's made up Hot Zone Club shoulder patches (not, perhaps, as mysterious as some, but still pretty out there) and the Afbaghi skyline sports billboards for Hot Zone jeans.



War satire isn't new, and Rick Veitch isn't writing and drawing in a vacuum. He's clearly seen "Dr Strangelove, or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb;" Secretary Stelaphane evokes the similarly wheelchair-bound Dr Strangelove, military strategist and (barely) former Nazi, and Stelaphane's obsession with collecting celebrity hair samples is reminiscent of General Jack D. Ripper's conviction that the Commies are plotting to steal our "precious bodily fluids"—a realization that came to him while he was having sex. You see how we come full circle here.

There's a touch of *Catch-22* in this as well, somehow inverted and made even more absurd: while Heller's novel presents Yossarian, an anti-hero trapped in the military by *Catch-22*, which states that pilots may only be taken off flying missions if they're crazy, but if pilots ask to be taken off flying missions they clearly are sane, *Army@Love* seems rather about the attraction of war once its horrors have been completely neutralized. Veitch's soldiers don't worry about *Catch-22*; they're so dizzy with lust and adrenaline they barely notice that people are dying. (Incidentally, if you've never read *Catch-22*, one way to start is by following along with Matthew Baldwin's recent National Novel Reading Month project.)

There's another book that casts a long shadow over *Army@Love*, and that's Michael Herr's 1977 book, *Dispatches*, a chronicle of the Vietnam War reported by Esquire magazine's war correspondent (a Marine remarks to him, "Esquire, wow, they got a guy over here? What the fuck for? You tell 'em what we're wearin'?). Because Herr didn't need to meet daily or weekly deadlines, as other correspondents did, he had the time and opportunity to go in-country with the grunts, hear their stories and feel their fears. Herr wrote, "I went to cover the war, and the war covered me." He brought back to the States the stories of what war did to our fighting men, those who coped and those who snapped; the music, the drugs, the despair, the humor. His book brings the reader as close to war as a non-combatant can be but, as Flabbergast observes in *Army@Love*, "Nobody back home has a clue about what's going on here." *Dispatches* paints a vivid picture of the toll war takes on soldiers—and, as such, should be required reading for anyone choosing to send our fighting men and women into war—but *Army@Love*, in its way, paints a more tragic picture still: soldiers whose souls are so compromised by the corporate dog-and-pony show that they're virtually unaware of

the consequences of their actions. Combat hasn't looked like this much fun since Major "King" Kong rode a nuclear warhead like he was a rodeo cowboy...but MoMo's soldiers don't get killed in the process.



Veitch's writing captures the coal-black humor of war, just as Herr did thirty years earlier (Flabbergast lobs a grenade at a sniper: "He's toast!" "...and jelly, too," observes Switzer, as the impact shatters the body), and he and inker Gary Erskine don't miss a single opportunity to illustrate the consumerization of war, from the stylized LG logo on the street signs, to the "Rayguntheon" logo on the defense secretary's plane, to the Automated Combat Support System that operates using a phone tree ("Please answer yes or no to the following menu options")—Ike's military-industrial complex taken to the ultimate level.

The satire is all the stronger for being contrasted with tropes from a time when war was considered a nobler pursuit. GIs trying to give Hershey bars to Afbaghi children are met with contempt; the kids want cell-phones, not candy. One GI, a mentally-challenged nebbish whose mother appears to be running his unit from the U.S., is named Beau Gest, a reference to the classic film, "Beau Geste," in which three English brothers in the French Foreign Legion find their inherent decency almost crushed by the vicious Sergeant Markoff (I'd hoped to include a video of the climactic scene where brother John honors Beau's childhood request for "a Viking's funeral... with a dog at my feet and 'last post' blown for me," but, alas, YouTube let me down). War, theoretically, was once fought for high-flown principles; in *Army@Love* the point of war seems to be only to perpetuate itself.



I bought the first volume of *Army@Love* for our library after the cover of issue 7 grabbed my eye: three soldiers dancing down a burning Afbaghi street like the Jets in "West Side Story," with the subtitle "When You're a Grunt, You're a Grunt!" The later issues don't all have the same bite as the earlier ones—a subplot that marries "The Manchurian Candidate" to reality television isn't entirely successful—but the anger shines through. (I like my satire angry, don't you? One of the best and angriest I've ever read is Jonathan Coe's *What a Carve-Up!*, which furiously indicts the predations of Thatcherism on British society, and is a worthy successor to the interbellum satires of Evelyn Waugh.) And this is the great thing about comics, isn't it? Films on the subject of our military endeavors in Iraq have bombed at the box office (it will be interesting to see the fate of the satire, "War Inc.," which opened last weekend). Moviemakers want to appeal to the widest possible audience, and that often causes them to temper their passion with Hollywood clichés. But comics aren't subject to focus groups and preview screenings and endless, facile producers' notes. In great part, they present the unadulterated, unmediated voices of their creators speaking directly to any audience that finds them. Veitch holds his satiric mirror up to America's Iraqi endeavor and, in the purest academic tradition, asks his readers to draw their own conclusions.

Previous article: ...Mea Maxima Culpa

Army@Love image credits:

Images from *Army@Love*, Vertigo 2007. Writer and penciller: Rick Veitch; Inker: Gary Erskine.

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