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Post-9/11 journey blows one man's cynicism to pieces

By RETTA BLANEY

A year ago I wouldn't have wanted to see *Staggering Toward America*, Rik Reppe's one-man show about his travels around the country following the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. The horror was too fresh; I didn't want any more reminders of all that pain.

With the second anniversary approaching, however, I am calmer. I was curious to hear what Reppe, a management consultant, learned after he closed his business, packed his pickup truck and left California for an eight-week trip across the country to visit the terrorist sites and talk to people about what it means to be an American. *Staggering Toward America*, one of 209 shows in August's New York International Fringe Festival, is a travelogue of people rather than places, bringing together a hooker in Las Vegas, a bigot in North Carolina, a street musician in Washington, D.C., and grieving families in New York, among others, and made me see how connected we all really are.

In a program note, Reppe says he started out cynical about the country and its people, but found "in small acts that such things as honesty, charity, nobility, community and patriotism really do exist and that blows my cynicism all to pieces." An actor and writer before "a severe allergy to poverty" drove him to pursue a Ph.D. in economics, Reppe is an engaging storyteller who clearly loves being center stage. He blew away my cynicism in regard to the term "my fellow Americans," which politicians of every stripe overuse; I left feeling that the people he brought to the stage were indeed my fellow Americans, and it was a good feeling.

I liked the old woman in Memphis who encouraged Reppe to visit the National Civil Rights Museum in his search for meaning. "You find something you believe in and you fight like hell for it," she told him. And so he journeyed on, looking for something to believe in.

He began to find it in Washington, N.C., through a bigot named Red who hated blacks, gays and liberals, to name three groups, but loved the flag. When asked why, Red described the idea of a symbol that stands while people are fighting and dying all around it, and Reppe heard in that description the words of the ☐ Star-Spangled Banner. ☐ ☐ Until I talked to Red the national anthem was just an annoying pause before a baseball game, ☐ Reppe says.

When he got to Washington, D.C., he saw more clearly the effect of that song when a man named D.J. performed it on his flute. Office workers, tourists and even a trio of “skate punks” stopped, removed their caps, put their hands over their hearts and began to sing. “I heard thousands of voices bouncing off the hard brick walls and I was thinking, Maybe I do believe in something.”

The song moved him again when he visited the site of the World Trade Center, the image of which he had seen for 90 days but which shocked him in actuality. Although flames were still shooting up from the wreckage, work stopped on Dec. 11 for a three-month anniversary ceremony and the singing of the national anthem. He brings us “the absolutely crushing grief” he found that evening at nearby St. Paul’s Chapel, especially of a child saying goodbye to a picture of her firefighter father. “Even I could grasp the gut-wrenching sadness of a little girl saying ‘Goodbye, Daddy’ to a picture. All I wanted to do was get my detachment back.”

That certainly didn’t happen in Shanksville, Pa., where dozens of little handmade signs memorialized “Let’s roll,” the final known words of one of the passengers on Flight 93 before they attempted to overtake the hijackers. It was late at night and, ignoring a sign telling people to keep out of the field, Reppe ended up falling into the crater where the plane had crashed and he knew he had gone too far. “Oh, God,” he says. “I was in their grave. I had just defiled something holy.”

Unfortunately all that emotion seems to be too much for him still because instead of ending his show there with some concluding thoughts in hindsight, he takes us to a truck stop diner in Gary, Ind., where he ate on his way back to California. In describing a karaoke Christmas carol evening he helped prompt, he seemed to want to show a humorous slice of America, but it went on too long and was just a little too cute. It is an evening of theater, after all, not just sitting around the kitchen table telling his wife about the whole trip. It was much more powerful theater to hear from normal Americans responding to abnormal situations, and Reppe is too gifted in that presentation to stifle the emotion as he does.

He plans to travel the country again, this time presenting his show. He has been asked back to Minneapolis in September where he performed *Staggering* in that city’s fringe festival. The show will travel well since it has no costumes or props, just Reppe, a stool and his water bottle. Then again, with all the people he brings along, the theater will be richly filled.

Retta Blaney’s latest book is *Working on the Inside: The Spiritual Life Through the Eyes of Actors*.

Related Web Site

"Staggering Toward America: A Post-9/11 Journey"
<http://www.reppe.com/>

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