

Pentagon calls in British drama squad for 6-hour lesson in war

TRISTRAM KENTON

Christina Lamb
Washington

THE world's most powerful army has called in a tiny London theatre company to educate it about Afghanistan.

The Tricycle Theatre group will perform two Pentagon com-

mand performances of its six-hour marathon, *The Great Game*, next month. Its audience will be generals, soldiers about to be deployed to Afghanistan and wounded veterans.

The theatrical masterclass comes as Washington prepares to send an extra 1,400 marines

to southern Afghanistan in a "mini surge" to prepare for a tough spring fighting season.

With the conflict now in its 10th year and 97,000 US troops already on the ground, President Barack Obama is facing growing criticism from within his own party. Lynn Woolsey, a

Democratic congresswoman, called Afghanistan an "epic failure and a national embarrassment" last week.

While Americans may have been condescending about the role of the British troops in Helmand, as quoted in recent leaked cables on WikiLeaks,

their commanding officers have decided that British luvvies can teach them useful lessons.

The *Great Game* covers the troubled history of foreign involvement in Afghanistan from the first Anglo-Afghan war of 1839-42, and the

following two wars, through to the Soviet invasion in 1979 and the current conflict.

When the show toured the US recently it was a great success and attracted many CIA agents and army officers.

General David Petraeus, the commander of Nato forces in Afghanistan, requested DVDs of the production. "Experience has taught me that some of our most insightful military leaders are those whose educations and interests are grounded not only in military and political studies but also informed by the arts and humanities," he wrote.

Among those who attended was Brigadier General John Nicholson, then head of the Pakistan-Afghanistan co-ordination unit at the Pentagon. He asked the trilogy's co-director, Nicolas Kent, to the Pentagon for a meeting. "If we're going to win, we have to fight this war differently," he said.

All 20 cast and production staff will perform for an audience of 1,600, including the army's top brass.

"It confirms the power of theatre to engage with contemporary policy issues and spark debate, to educate and to challenge, as well as to entertain," said Kent.

It is not the company's first brush with power. Its play on Sir Richard Scott's arms-to-Iraq inquiry was performed in the Palace of Westminster, and one on Guantanamo was put on in a US Congressional building.

In London *The Great Game* attracted considerable interest from the British military. General Sir David Richards, chief of the defence staff, organised a performance for his men.

"If I'd seen the plays before being deployed to Afghanistan for the first time in 2005 it would have made me a much better commander," he said. "Seeing the sweep of history in an afternoon gives a perspec-



The *Great Game* will be performed twice at the Pentagon

tive that isn't easy to achieve from reading reports or watching the news."

Kent conceived the show, which consists of 12 half-hour sections, in 2008. "When I went into the project I didn't even know there had been a second and third Anglo-Afghan war and was only very hazy about the first," he said.

"I thought if we're going to have serious discussions about whether we should be there or not, we need to be better informed."

He decided on a day-long

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production, despite the demands it places on an audience. "I wanted people to give up a day of their lives to really wrestle with the problems."

The plays are interspersed with recordings from key figures which are constantly updated. General Stanley McChrystal was recorded just four days before he was forced to resign. He has been replaced in the show, as in real life, by Petraeus.

The plays may lead audiences to conclude that getting involved in Afghanistan is more trouble than it is worth. But turning people against the war is not Kent's intention.

"None of the plays is trying to say we should or shouldn't be there," he insisted. "They are just saying 'this is the situation as we understand it' so people can empathise both with soldiers and Afghans and be better informed."

"If people deploy to Afghanistan after watching the plays, they will have learnt a huge amount of the history of the country, its customs and Afghan heroes, all of which will stand them in good stead."