

"Nicolas Royer-Artuso's one-man show 4'33" in Baghdad, directed by Ulfet Sevdı, is like a savage Jonathan Swift satire delivered by an unflappable TED talk academic. It's also got male stripping in it. Let me try and explain.

Royer-Artuso purports to be presenting the findings of his research into a Baghdad performance of John Cage's famous silent piece of "music", 4'33". He offers to spice up this potentially dry lecture by interspersing it with some striptease.

Initially, it seems he really is informing us about a music festival created by America as a way of bringing culture to the country they've just devastated. But when Royer-Artuso then plays a recording of what he says is a performance of Cage's piece, we just hear (and see) CNN's footage of the shock-and-awe bombardment. Further "recordings" of the piece from places such as Libya and Syria turn out to be sounds of a war zone filled with the cries of the dying and of terrified children. Silence, it seems, means different things in different places.

If all this sounds heavy handed, Royer-Artuso delivers it with such disarming ease and good-humour, it comes across as bleakly funny, thought-provoking, charming and distressing all at the same time. The closing moments have Royer-Artuso walking from the stage, leaving us with footage of a war-blinded child singing. How, this quietly powerful show asks, can we remain silent in the face of such things?"

Jim Burke, playwright and art journalist

Link: <https://theatrefunhouse.wordpress.com/2018/06/15/mtl-fringe-433-in-baghdad-lucky/>

"Strolling onto a brightly lit stage, Nicolas Royer-Artuso welcomes his audience, apologizes for his nervousness, and launches into an explanation of his most recent research project. The character Royer-Artuso portrays is a musicologist, who has received a grant to analyze a performance of the song 4'33" at a music festival in Baghdad many years prior. The song, written by experimental composer John Cage, instructs the musician not to play their instrument, but to sit in silence for four minutes and thirty-three seconds. The silent song displays that sound—all sound—can be music.



Nicolas Royer-Artuso in 4'33"

in Baghdad. Photo by Ülfet Sevdî.

Inspired by techniques of the Theatre of the Oppressed and experiences living in Syria, Tunisia, Morocco, and Turkey, Royer-Artuso and creator/director Ülfet Sevdî turn Cage's theory of music on its head. Irony is at the heart of *4'33" in Baghdad*; this becomes clear when Royer-Artuso shows a video clip of the supposed music festival – which turns out to be CNN footage of the 2003 bombing of Baghdad by the US military. The sounds of gunfire, explosions, and roaring fires are particularly shocking, as Royer-Artuso has prepared us to listen carefully to the silent notes of *4'33"*. When the clip ends, Royer-Artuso grins, explaining that it is impossible to tell how long the music festival actually lasted as it was difficult to hear over the bombing.

4'33" in Baghdad reminds us not only of the human cost of the US invasion of Iraq, but also of the academic complicity in distancing and intellectualizing warfare. Royer-Artuso and Sevdî turn an especially critical eye on institutions of government, education, and military for disregarding human suffering.



Nicolas Royer-Artuso in *4'33" in Baghdad*. Photo by Ülfet Sevdı.

The ironic message of *4'33" in Baghdad* can be summed up in one particular sentiment that Royer-Artuso borrows from twentieth-century philosopher George Santayana: "Music is essentially useless, as is life." By the end of the performance, it's clear how ridiculous this statement truly is. Such disregard is an excuse afforded only to those in positions of power and for whom survival is not precarious. This absurdity is reflected in the cavalier attitude of Royer-Artuso's character, who occasionally breaks into a G-rated strip-tease. At first, the strip-tease functions as a funny way to distance the audience from the tragic themes, but as the performance progresses and the content becomes increasingly disturbing—at one point Royer-Artuso repeats a clip of a woman screaming as he taps his foot to the "music"—the strip-tease becomes darkly ironic and discomforting.

After the performance, Sevdı explains to me that through *4'33" in Baghdad* she and Royer-Artuso wanted to show that "oppression cannot be aesthetic." This is not to say that the oppressed cannot create art, but that the act of oppression is itself a direct contradiction to art. "There is no equality in silence," notes Royer-Artuso.

Both comic and tragic, *4'33" in Baghdad* ultimately leaves its audience with a haunting reminder of the horrors of war and the impossibility of art for art's sake.

4'33" in Baghdad plays at the [Montreal Fringe](#) until June 14, 2018, and at the [Toronto Fringe](#) from July 6-15, 2018. For more information about other performances of *4'33" in Baghdad*, follow Thought Experiment Productions' [Facebook page](#).

Willow White, alt theatre magazine

Link: <https://alttheatre.ca/2018/06/18/review-silence-and-violence-in-433-in-baghdad/>

"I experienced a piece that they [Thought Experiment Productions] did during the Festival of Original Theatre (FOOT) at the University of Toronto early this year (Feb 2017) and was positively impressed about the boldness of their practice. In 4'33" in Baghdad, they perform an ironic report that presents the USA-led invasion to Iraq as an instance of John Cage's 4'33' piece. The effect is that it leaves the audience with the impression of experiencing a kind of 'sonic Guernica'. By that I mean that they produce a kind of sonic portrait of the panic and pain caused on a multitude by the air strikes in Baghdad."

Luis C. Sotelo Castro (*Canada Research Chair in Oral History
Performance and Associate Professor in Theatre, Concordia University*)

"This is the most powerful experience I've had at any fringe+definitely a companion piece to #NUD #fringebuzz Their last show is tonight at 10pm 3680 Jeanne Mance. Go if you can!"

Tasha Diamant Hurling-Earthling, performance artist

"Absolutely brilliant!"

Victoria Hall, performance artist

"This was great satire. Do you hear the music? Go see it."

Christine Rodriguez, actor and playwright

"First show of the fringe that really got me shook. Go check it out if you can!"

Mahalia Golnosh Tahririha, performance artist

"Was able to catch the premiere. Highly recommended. Very disturbing content. Very well executed. For me, it was important to experience the visceral emotions it engendered. I thought I was immune to such reactions due to exposing myself to this stuff, but this is the point of (well-made) art, to reframe old ideas in ways that reach the jaded. thank you to the people who made this, I imagine it was much harder to create than to witness. I really appreciate your courage and strength."

Stanislav Birko