Based on Life

In 2005, U.S. Marines, allegedly retaliating for an IED attack on a convoy of Marines, killed 24 unarmed Iraqi civilians. *Battle for Haditha* is a 2007 feature film about that incident, written and directed by British documentary filmmaker Nick Broomfield. The film uses a style Broomfield calls “direct cinema,” casting non-actors—in this case former Marines and Iraqi refugees—to play roles that closely resemble their lives.

To prepare for the film, Broomfield traveled to Jordan to interview Iraqi refugees from Haditha who had witnessed the incident. Then he went to the U.S. to meet with Marines who were also there. What emerged was a complex story that continued to point to the Marines’ guilt, but nonetheless challenged Broomfield’s preconceived notions about who was to blame.

“The deeper I dug into the whole story,” he explained in a 2008 interview with the *New Statesman*, “the harder I realized it was to take a side. These soldiers were very, very poor kids, who had all left school unbelievably early. It was the first time they had all been out of the United States. They didn’t speak a word of Iraqi. They had no idea what they were doing in Iraq and felt let down by the Marine Corps. It was hard to condemn them out of hand as cold-blooded killers.”

This was certainly true of playwright Quiara Alegría Hudes’ cousin Elliot, about whom she’s written a trilogy of plays. He was deployed to Iraq at age 17. After he was injured and returned home to Philadelphia—the period of time chronicled in the second play in Hudes’ trilogy, *Water by the Spoonful*—Elliot dreamed of becoming an actor. He landed a national Colgate ad before Broomfield cast him as the lead in this film. Shot by a small crew, *Battle for Haditha* was filmed on location in Jordan in chronological sequence, which allowed the actors to craft their characters and embody their stories as the film progressed. For Elliot and the other “actors” on the set, the process of telling this story was both painful and cathartic. “Nick gave me the opportunity to release the situations in my head,” Ruiz explained in a 2008 interview. “It wasn’t like acting, it was really like letting it out.” —**Tanya Palmer**

An edited version reprinted from OSF’s 2015 Illuminations, a 64-page guide to the season’s plays. For more information, or to buy the full Illuminations, [click here.](#) Members at the Patron level and above and teachers who bring a school groups to OSF receive a free copy of Illuminations.