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"Defiance" director challenges critics

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TJ Walsh is an astute man. He's tackling the controversial play *Defiance* knowing full well the very mixed reception the script received when the play premiered. What makes *Defiance* controversial isn't so much the play in itself, though it does provide fodder for heated discussions after the show: It's the rabid opinion of the public and the critics. Some claim it to be a great play, others see it as an absolute mess. Walsh has read all these reviews, and while he adheres to the base that is a fan, he understands full well why there is a dislike.



Diane Worman in "Defiance"

Walsh began his directing career 30 years ago in the San Francisco Bay area. He did everything from stage managing, to props, to assisting with costumes. He found himself as an apprentice to a master director, and "like in the middle ages, you learned from not just doing but observing." His first solo directing assignment was *Philadelphia Story*, and he fell in love with directing. It was there that he learned that the purpose of a director is to "find the truth of the play; your job is to discover what the playwright wrote."

He eventually moved to the North Texas area and became a professor at TCU. About 6 years ago he decided to contact Jac Alder at Theatre 3. "I sent Jack a solo play of mine that I performed and he read it and he called and said 'I want to take you to lunch.'" The meeting produced a different result than what he expected: "I went in to discuss my play...I ended up directing *Rounding Third*." This was the beginning of his collaboration with Theatre 3. As for his solo play, he's hoping to perform it next spring during his sabbatical from TCU.

The choice of *Defiance* for this season was made by Jac Alder. The theme for this season is "Stay in Dallas...Come to Theatre 3...See the world!" Upon making the selections for plays that spanned the globe Alder felt there should be one American play and *Defiance* was it. Part of his interest in the play is that it is John Patrick Shanley's follow up to his Pulitzer winning *Doubt*. While Shanley stated that he wrote *Defiance* with the intention of it being the second part of a trilogy, and thus the play was marketed accordingly, he inevitably set up comparisons to his highly successful *Doubt* and fell short. Theatre 3's approach is to present *Defiance* on its own merits and avoid the comparison.

One of the risks that Theatre 3 is in trying to overcome the misconceptions this play brings with it: many people think it's about war. War plays and films have had little commercial success as of late as the public has tired of the subject matter. While it is set during the late Vietnam War era at a Marine Corps Base the play is very much a drama about loyalties, family and race. As TJ explains, the war "is an undercurrent of the play, not the main thing. It's about the military culture and honor, what does loyalty mean; it brings up questions of race: What does it mean to be an African American marine. It deals with other weighty subjects, including marriage."

In TJ's opinion this script has a much stronger classical feel to it, "This is a Greek play for today. He's [Shanley] positioning characters so that they have to make a choice. It's very Greek in that it's 90 minutes without an intermission." He compares it to *Oedipus Rex*, even though they don't share the same plot line, because moral choices are being made and decisions based on those choices guide the characters and create the conflict of the play. TJ acknowledges the danger of the melodramatic tendencies of Greek theatre which are currently out of favor with audiences. He knows how to avoid this potential pitfall: "It's a drama, though it does have melodrama, we tone it down, it does have humor in it."

Fortunately for TJ directing this play has been a breeze. Plays that deal with weighty subjects can bring out many negative emotions in the actors. "Rehearsals have been professional and without any drama. I don't want drama in my drama. My actors know their lines and are working well with each other."

So what are audiences going to get out of the play? "Audiences will see the truth of the play, and see what Shanley wrote. It is a play that offers moral questions of right and wrong and what good people do." And Gay audiences? He pauses to think. It's obvious that he can't find a specific appeal because of the universal theme's of the play. He then replies with a humble yet golden kernel of truth: "I don't have a good answer for that; it puts human beings in the choice of defining who they are. And that is life." A very astute answer.

"Defiance" runs through October 5 at Theatre 3.

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