



Entertainment :: Theatre

Defiance

by Christopher Soden
EDGE Contributor
Wednesday Sep 17, 2008



Diane Worman and Steven Pounders in "Defiance" (Source: Andy Hanson)

What is the difference between a play that comes by its surprises legitimately and one that keeps us guessing merely for the sake of doing so? We've all had the unfortunate experience of watching some Byzantine narrative pile on the revelations like a magician who can't stop pulling rabbits, doves, silks, flowers ad infinitum from his hat. Everyone enjoys showmanship and bravado but, to use the familiar adage, it's always better to leave them wanting more.

John Patrick Shanley's **Defiance** understands this principle and ends before tying up all the loose ends,. Though we may not realize it, he's told us everything we need to know. Shanley credits us with the intelligence to infer the outcome once the "hero" makes his crucial decision. What's left unsaid at play's end is either foreseeable or negligible.

"Defiance" is set on a military base during the 1970s era of racial tension. Not only have the African-American marines given up the freedom they enjoyed as civilians, but the racial barriers and intolerance they experienced on the outside have followed them right into the service. Lieutenant Colonel Littlefield has convened Chaplin White and Captain Lee King for an informal gathering to address the problem. From the onset the impressions we are given about these men are misleading. The overly pious

Chaplin White, a seemingly insipid prig, will end up being something of a moral compass and Colonel Littlefield's best efforts at heroism, both savvy and sincere, will come back to bite him in the ass.

As much a dialectic on ethics, integrity and the nature of heroism as it is a morality play, "Defiance" is a subtly crafted, heartfelt, intelligent piece that works on several levels. Colonel Littlefield, though headstrong and surly, is convivial and a devoted husband to his smart, articulate, beautiful wife. Though an officer that commands obedience, Littlefield didn't choose a spouse who would capitulate and pander whenever a disagreement arose. She isn't afraid to let him know when he's blowing it or that he needn't be The Green Lantern to merit her love. On the contrary she often seems to be the voice of reason at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, where raging testosterone boils just beneath the surface of military discipline, threatening havoc.

For what is essentially a contemplative piece, giving us much to consider yet with no easy answers, "Defiance" is absorbing and moves with finesse. It might have been a lesser play if Shanley had fallen too much in love with his own chicanery, but his sense of balance and dedication to theme carry the day. Each incident has its place in the chain of events, like a succession of explosions. How they connect isn't apparent till the house lights are restored. All Shanley has done is plant the seeds of quandary in your brain.

Whether their time on stage is brief or prolonged, the cast members of "Defiance" are efficient, modulated and impressive. J.Rod Pannek is forceful as the gunnery sergeant and Drew Wall breaks your heart as the taciturn, devastated PFC Evan Davis. Mr. Wall has demonstrated great prowess and éclat in his various roles throughout the Dallas metroplex, providing a vibrant emotional core to any production he joins. Bryan Pitts is powerful and volatile as Captain Lee King and David Fluit makes the most of his turn as the duplicitous, incisive Chaplin White. Steven Pounders as Colonel Littlefield is dry and wry and demonstrative. Sharp and aggressive yet at times surprisingly exposed, Pounders makes the Colonel authoritative without sacrificing his humanity. Diane Worman as Littlefield's wife, Margaret, is poised, ironic, practical and more than an

intellectual match for any of the men. She imbues her character with so much grace and depth you can understand why the colonel's so crazy about her.

The set design by Jac Adler is notable not only for its versatility, but for how it feels like a courtroom, though none of the action happens in one. Director T.J. Walsh keeps everything running smoothly and implacably, by the time "Defiance" is over you can hardly believe so much time has passed. Michael Robinson's costume design is serviceable and well-researched, reflecting the fashions of the early 70s, and a feel for living and working daily in uniforms.

John Patrick Shanley's Defiance will play through October 5th at Theatre Three, in the Quadrangle on Routh Street, 214-871-3300, for tickets and further information, please check their website at www.theatre3dallas.com.

Christopher Soden received his MFA in Poetry from Vermont College in 2005. He is a teacher, lecturer, actor, performer and playwright. In addition he writes film, theatre and literary critique. In his spare time he likes to read, cook, dine, do crossword puzzles, chill and nap.

[Back to: Theatre » Entertainment » Home](#)

Copyright © 2003-2008
EDGE Publications, Inc. / All Rights Reserved