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Few Good Men

Well-acted dramas explore scandals and racism in the military. Can you handle the truth?

By Elaine Liner

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Diane Box Worman and Steven Pounders snap the audience to attention in Theatre Three's *Defiance*.

Details:

A Soldier's Play continues through September 28 at the African American Repertory Theater, DeSoto. Call 972-572-0998.

Defiance continues through October 5 at Theatre Three. Call 214-871-3300.

Subject(s):

[A Soldier's Play](#), [Defiance](#), [military racism](#), [Theatre Three](#), [African American Repertory Theatre](#)

Merely by chance, *Defiance*, a snappy 2006 drama by *Moonstruck* writer John Patrick Shanley, and *A Soldier's Play*, the 1982 Pulitzer winner by Charles Fuller, are running at the same time at two Dallas theaters, **Theatre Three** and the new **African American Repertory Theater**, respectively. The serendipitous scheduling allows playgoers the opportunity to see two finely crafted dramas both exploring tense race relations and moral uncertainty in the military at different moments in the 20th century. See these plays back to back and they resonate even more strongly as commentaries on how tough it was for black soldiers to advance through the ranks between World War II and the Vietnam era—and for those who did become officers to command the respect of their white counterparts.

Both of these productions, by the way, are well worth seeing, and as soon as possible. (*A Soldier's Play* runs only through September 28.) They are passionately and vibrantly acted by tight ensemble casts, with authoritative direction and efficient but elegant design elements. If the rest of the theater season offers more work of this caliber from these companies and others, we're in for an autumn of artistic bar-raising.

In *Defiance*, directed for Theatre Three by T.J. Walsh, the time is the 1970s at the end of the Vietnam War. The place is Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, where a white lieutenant colonel named Morgan Littlefield, aiming for a boost to "full bird" before his retirement from the Marine Corps, thinks promoting a black captain will earn him favor with the Pentagon brass. He casts his eye on young Captain King, who has arrived at Lejeune to look into a series of racial crimes. Among these are a riot, some drug-related incidents among returning Vietnam vets and the rape of a white Marine by a black one. King soon realizes that he's actually part of Littlefield's scheme to appease black enlisted men and to earn glory with higher-ups. The plan hits a snag when King announces that he has no desire to be used as a symbol and doesn't want to be singled out.

Defiance of a superior is just one of playwright Shanley's plot threads. At

home Littlefield faces the simmering anger of wife Margaret, who can be as bristly as her husband when it comes to giving and receiving orders. Everyone's future, inside the corps and out, will be thrown into jeopardy when one of the officers casually beds an enlisted man's wife, setting off a new investigation that tests the ability of military men to admit personal responsibility for amoral actions.

At a brisk 90 minutes start to finish, *Defiance* can seem at times like an especially well-written episode of *Law & Order*, performed live and without commercial interruptions. Scenes are crisply and evenly paced, with cliffhangers dropped in about every 20 minutes. It's skillful if obvious stuff and not Shanley's best play, which would be the first of his projected "D Trilogy," *Doubt*, a chronicle of the suspicions about the behavior of a Catholic priest. It opens next month at WaterTower Theatre.

In *Defiance*, Shanley paints with grand gestures. Characters' personal lives are intertwined with major events of social and political upheaval: the Vietnam War; the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.; the rise of the black power movement; the exodus to Canada of young draft dodgers, including the Littlefields' son; and the dawning of feminism. Margaret, steadfast military wife, plays dutiful helpmate, but there's also a hint of a firebrand underneath that pageboy hairdo and sensible skirt. She might just be flirting a little with that Captain King too.

Much of the dialogue in *Defiance* devolves into rapid-fire questions and answers, turning Littlefield's living room and office into quasi-courtrooms. Serving as de facto judge is the camp chaplain named White—talk about obvious—who bears a deceptively dispassionate demeanor but turns out to be the most dangerously defiant figure of all.

The excellent acting ensemble for *Defiance* includes several newcomers to Theatre Three and a couple of actors who've had smaller roles in previous productions. Their chemistry is first-rate, and they have a fresh and ferocious energy that fills this intimate acting space and lifts the material beyond what's on the page. (The more Theatre Three continues to cast outside its usual loose rep company of hammy actors and aged ingénues, the better its productions.)

As Littlefield, Steven Pounders looks every inch the career officer at middle age, still flat of belly and taut of jaw. Pounders' scenes with Diane Box Worman, playing Margaret, really crackle. One minute he's the strutting martinet, issuing orders for his wife's every move, including how much lemonade to pour, and the next he's the silly, horny husband begging for kisses and foot rubs. Worman, alto-sax voice booming out of her petite frame, makes a formidable, explosively take-charge Margaret when her husband fails her.

Bryan Pitts is a terrific King, the handpicked protégé caught up in a situation that could end his military career. David Fluitt seems namby-pamby as Chaplain White at first, but peels back layers till he's absolutely chilling. And in a one-scene role as the cuckolded private, Drew Wall shows once again that he's one of the best young actors working Dallas stages right now. He's so good it's too bad he's on and then dismissed so quickly.

There are parallel relationships among the officers and enlisted men in *A Soldier's Play*, the first production by the new African American Repertory Theater company founded by veteran actress Irma P. Hall. The troupe is in residence at DeSoto's Corner Theater, where they will produce three more shows over the next seven months.

Fuller's two-act procedural drama (adapted for film as *A Soldier's Story* in 1984) is set in a segregated army unit stationed in Louisiana in 1943. The soldiers, many of them former pros from the Negro Leagues, play ball on the camp team but itch to see combat to prove that "colored boys can fight Hitler" too. When their black drill sergeant is murdered, suspicion falls on local white thugs. But blatant racism on the base, including the black-on-black kind, proves to be more dangerous than the

Klan.

Director William Earl Ray has put together a dynamic cast, and he also plays one of the leads, Sergeant Waters, the career NCO who zeroes in on a thickheaded Southern private named Memphis (Marcus Mauldin), hounds him as a "fool for the race to be ashamed of" and drives him to suicide. That gives the platoon plenty of motives for retaliation. The mystery to be solved by the black army lawyer (Vince McGill) sent in to interview them isn't simply who killed Waters and why. The play's real investigation delves into the depths of hatred and self-hatred carried by and toward black men.

Ray, McGill, Mauldin and the other nine actors in *A Soldier's Play* keep the tension high and the emotions raw. On a tiny stage in DeSoto, this new company has made a stunning debut.