

THEATER REVIEW



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Don Laurin Johnson, left, plays Capt. Richard Davenport and Bob Mowry plays Capt. Charles Taylor in "A Soldier's Play," an intense look at race relations in the Army during World War II.

Racial tension at base powers intense drama

By JAY HANDELMAN
jay.handelman@heraldtribune.com

Charles Fuller's 1981 drama "A Soldier's Play" gives the audience no time to get settled. It takes only a moment before a drunken black Army sergeant stumbles across the stage and is shot dead as he bellows to his assailant, "They still hate you."

The meaning of the words become clear as the play unravels during an unusual military investigation that exposes the tension between blacks and whites on a Louisiana Army base in 1944, when the military was still segregated.

The tension unveiled in those first few minutes ebbs and flows during the course of Jim Weaver's frequently involving production for the Westcoast Black Theatre Troupe.

A SOLDIER'S PLAY

By Charles Fuller. Directed by Jim Weaver. Reviewed Feb. 22. Westcoast Black Theatre Troupe at Historic Asolo Theater, 5401 Bay Shore Road, Sarasota. Through March 1. Tickets are \$26-\$32. Call 360-7399.

Weaver's cast works well together, offsetting the drama with moments of light reverie as the black troops recall their activities in the days leading to the murder, from their exploits as champion baseball players to their desire to get involved in the fighting in Europe.

Summer Hill Seven has the powerful voice and obnoxious attitude to make his Waters believable and despicable. He can quickly shift from friendly to in-

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sulting if anyone dares to challenge him, all with the intention of changing the way his men act. And in his character's darker moments, when the core of Waters' self-rage becomes evident, Seven makes him an even more compelling character.

Each of the soldiers being questioned reveals distinct personalities without being stereotyped, from Nate Jacobs as the sergeant's lackey to the charming guitar player C.J. Memphis, played by Martin Taylor. Earley Dean as the stuttering Cpl. Cobb, along with Mike Avery, Thomas Williamson II and Eric Wilson, contribute to the sense of camaraderie and nervousness among Waters' men.

Robert Mowry has the commanding presence and the world-weary attitude to lend credence to Taylor's concerns about the investigation, while Don Laurin Johnson has the determined look required for Davenport, though his occasionally hesitant line delivery diminishes his sense of confidence.

As Pfc. Melvin Peterson, Will Dalton is up to the challenge of standing up to Waters most often. And Tommy Carpenter builds up his rage, though in a slightly forced manner, as a racist lieutenant who hurls insults at the black men he encounters.

The play is staged simply on a set made of wood frames to represent a barracks and an office. It is all that is needed as the drama unfolds, allowing the audience to focus on the story and the performances.