

# upstageGUIDE



★★★★★ A ★★★★★  
**SOLDIER'S  
PLAY**

 **ROUNDBOUT  
THEATRE  
COMPANY**

A publication of  
**EDUCATION AT  
ROUNDBOUT**



# upstage SPOTLIGHT

## ★★★★A★★★★ SOLDIER'S PLAY

By Charles Fuller

Directed by Kenny Leon

1944. A Black Sergeant is murdered on a Louisiana Army base, and one tenacious investigator must race against his white leadership to unravel the crime before they unravel him.

a note from ARTISTIC DIRECTOR

## TODD HAIMES

Set on a Louisiana Army base during the dark depths of World War II, *A Soldier's Play* explores the tensions inherent in a search for truth. When a Black Sergeant is murdered, Captain Richard Davenport journeys deep into the psyches of the men of Fort Neal. Capt. Davenport must investigate soldiers who look like him, while scrutinized and challenged by an establishment that doesn't. In doing so, he comes face to face with the injustices of the system confronting both himself and the men he encounters—both structural and self-imposed. The result is staggering, deeply unsettling, and profoundly truthful.

TECH/SERGEANT  
VERNON C. WATERS

a Black Sergeant who manages the baseball team

PFC  
MELVIN PETERSON

a Black man in his late twenties, wearing glasses, a model soldier to the other men

CAPTAIN  
RICHARD DAVENPORT

a Black lawyer and military officer attached to the 343d Military Police Corps Unit

CORPORAL  
BERNARD COBB

a Black man in his mid to late twenties, closest to CJ and unmoved by Waters's death

PRIVATE  
TONY SMALLS

a Black man in his late thirties, a career soldier

PRIVATE  
C.J. MEMPHIS

a young Black man from Mississippi; a musician

PRIVATE  
JAMES WILKIE

a Black man in his early forties, a career soldier, dressed in fatigues from which the stripes have been removed by Waters

CORPORAL ELLIS

a Black soldier who is simply always "spit and polish," thorough and detailed

LIEUTENANT BYRD

a white, spit and polish soldier in his twenties

PRIVATE  
LOUIS HENSON

a Black man his late twenties or early thirties. Pitcher on the baseball team

CAPTAIN  
CHARLES TAYLOR

a white man in his mid to late thirties who resents Davenport's assignment and rank

CAPTAIN WILCOX

a white medical officer



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# THE LIFE AND ACHIEVEMENTS OF CHARLES FULLER

**"A PLAY MEANS  
NOTHING  
ON A PAGE.  
A PLAY IS NOTHING  
UNTIL PEOPLE DO IT."  
-CHARLES FULLER**

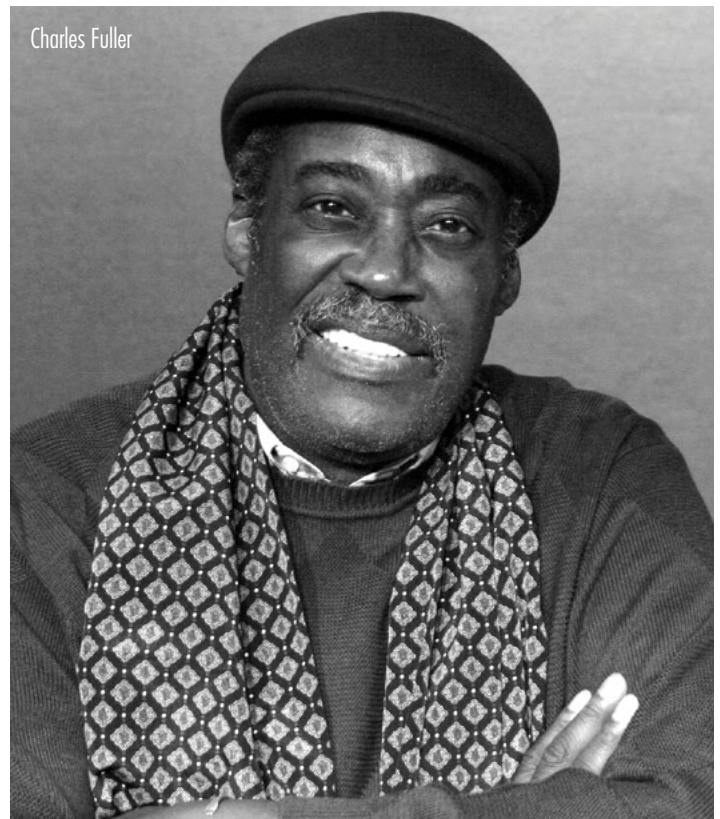
Charles Henry Fuller, Jr. was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, on March 5, 1939, the child of Charles H. Fuller, Sr. and Lillian Anderson Fuller. Fuller was the oldest sibling of three and a foster brother to around twenty children throughout his life.

Fuller spent most of his high school days in the Philadelphia Roman Catholic High School library in competition with his friend Larry Neal. They were avid readers in a friendly battle to see who could finish reading all of the books in the school's library first. When Fuller and Neal realized that none of the literature in the library had been penned by Black writers, the two charged themselves with eventually filling this void.

Fuller's knack for writing did not only stem from his love of literature; it also stemmed from his interest in romance. Fuller was originally a poet. He crafted poems to impress girls throughout his high school years. Fuller's high school experiences set the foundation for his career as a writer.

Following high school, Fuller attended Villanova University from 1956 to 1958. He left Villanova and enlisted in the U.S. Army, spending the next four years stationed in both Japan and South Korea. As a result of his service, many of Fuller's plays revolve around themes of war and the military and are largely influenced by his own experiences. In 1962, Fuller returned to civilian life in Philadelphia and shortly thereafter finished his schooling, this time at La Salle College (currently La Salle University).

Throughout the 1960s, Fuller mostly wrote poetry, short stories, and essays until he began to write short plays for a theatre group in Philadelphia. This theatre group grew to become the

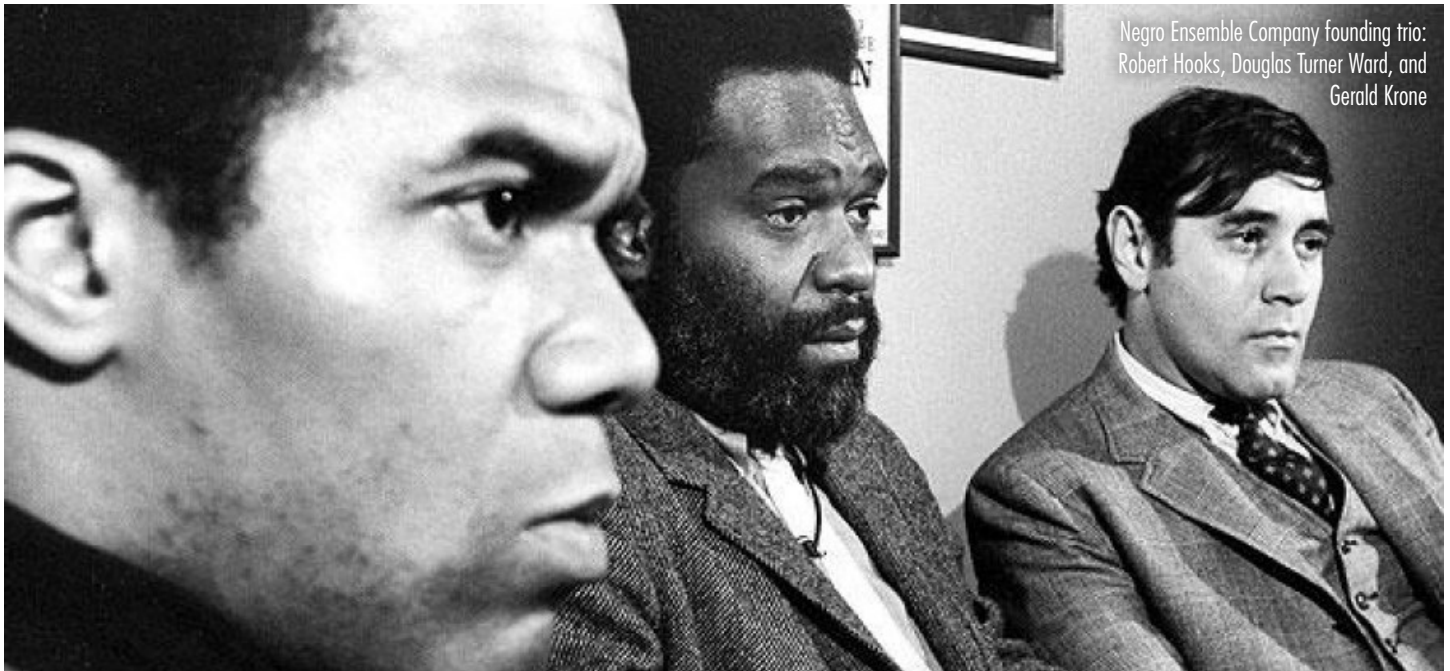


Afro-American Theatre of Philadelphia. Fuller founded and served as co-director of that theatre until 1970, when he moved to New York to devote his full self to playwrighting.

The 1970s led to a slew of off-Broadway successes. *The Perfect Party*, *The Brownsville Raid*, and *Zooman and the Sign* were all produced at the Negro Ensemble Company. *Zooman and the Sign* won Fuller two Obie Awards, an award given for off-Broadway productions. Fuller's career was supported by Rockefeller Foundation fellowship in 1975, a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship in 1976, and a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1977-1978.

In 1981, Fuller's dear friend, Larry Neal, died of a heart attack. The next year, *A Soldier's Play*, written in honor of Neal, ran off-Broadway and would earn Fuller the 1982 Pulitzer Prize for Drama. *A Soldier's Play* opened on November 20, 1981, at the Negro Ensemble Company and would go on to run for 468 performances. *A Soldier's Play* also won the 1982 New York Drama Critics' Award for Best American Play, as well as the Edgar Allen Poe Award for Best Mystery. Columbia Pictures offered Fuller a movie contract that led to his penning the screen adaptation of the play, now titled *A Soldier's Story*. His screenplay would receive an Oscar® nomination in 1985. •

# THE NEGRO ENSEMBLE COMPANY: A BRIEF HISTORY



Negro Ensemble Company founding trio:  
Robert Hooks, Douglas Turner Ward, and  
Gerald Krone

In 1966, Douglas Turner Ward, Robert Hooks, and Gerald Krone began to work on their vision for a groundbreaking, inclusive space in the theatre: a permanent home where Black theatre artists could have agency over projects made for them, by them, and about them. With Ward writing, Hooks raising money, and Krone managing, the trio produced two new plays (*Happy Ending* and *Day of Absence*) off-Broadway at the St. Marks Playhouse in Greenwich Village—to fantastic critical success. Running for 504 performances and winning Ward an Obie Award for acting and a Drama Desk Award for writing, the plays also drew the attention of the *New York Times*, who invited Ward to write on American theatre's exclusivity problem and the future of Black theatre artists in the industry. Ward took the opportunity to publish a manifesto arguing for the establishment of a resident Black theatre company, and with a \$1 million grant from the Ford Foundation, the Negro Ensemble Company was born.

The company—which celebrated its 50th anniversary in 2017—has since been a powerhouse in training and presenting outstanding Black artists. “There is no way we could survive except by being excellent,” Ward says, and the Negro Ensemble Company’s list of alumni provides ample evidence: Denzel Washington, Laurence Fishburne, Samuel L. Jackson, S. Epatha Merkerson, Adolph Caesar, LaTanya Richardson-Jackson, Garrett Morris, Ruben Santiago-Hudson, Billy Dee Williams, and Lou Gossett Jr., to name just a few. Overall, the Negro Ensemble Company has been home to more than four thousand artists from every theatre practice and background, producing over

two hundred new plays and creating an extensive theatrical training program to solidify its commitment to inclusive arts education.

Though critically acclaimed and raising some of the most trailblazing questions of its time, the Negro Ensemble Company ran into a number of economic troubles and had to disband its resident company during the 1972-1973 season. This led to the difficult decision of downsizing to only one new play produced per year. Luckily, that first new play was *The River Niger* by Joe Walker, presenting a fresh, potent, and tender perspective on the struggles of a Black family from Harlem. *The River Niger* was the first Negro Ensemble Company production to move to Broadway, where it ran just under 300 performances and won the Tony Award® for Best Play. The popularity of the production ensured the Negro Ensemble Company’s financial well-being for the next 10 years, when it debuted Pulitzer Prize-winning *A Soldier’s Play*—their most successful play to date.

Today, the Negro Ensemble Company continues to strive towards its mission of presenting theatre by, for, and about Black people to a historically underserved audience, partnering with companies like the Signature Theatre (2008-2009 Residency) to produce and teach. Their mission remains the same: to “provide African-American, African, and Caribbean professional artists with an opportunity to learn, to work, and to grow and to be nurtured in the performing arts.” •



# INTERVIEW WITH DIRECTOR KENNY LEON

Education Dramaturg Ted Sod spoke with Kenny Leon about his work on *A Soldier's Play*.

**Ted Sod:** Why did you choose to direct Charles Fuller's *A Soldier's Play*? Why is it important to do the play now, and why did you want to direct it at Roundabout?

**Kenny Leon:** I've always loved the play. I was interested in it because of the importance of the Negro Ensemble Company (NEC) and all the contributions the company has made to American theatre. The NEC production of *A Soldier's Play* was directed by Douglas Turner Ward and starred Samuel L. Jackson, Denzel Washington, Eugene Lee, Adolph Caesar, and others who have since made names for themselves and was awarded the Pulitzer Prize. It's one of those plays that started on stage and then was made into a film, *A Soldier's Story*. Even though it was written in the early 1980s, it still feels very contemporary to me because of the style and scope of Fuller's writing. He is writing about the depths of racism and the way that poison spreads if you live in a racist country. It's a really important play that I think says a lot about the here and now. When I met with the playwright in Canada recently, he said to me, "I'm still angry." And I said, "What are you angry about, Mr. Fuller?" And he said, "I'm angry because of all the sacrifices we've made and we still are not able to walk as our free, true selves in this country."

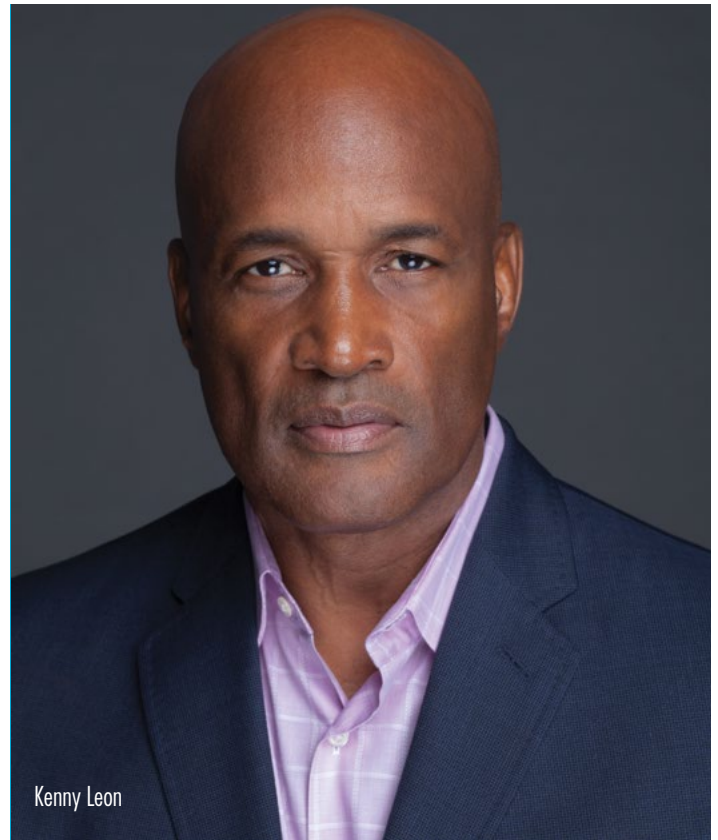
So, with that in mind, I started thinking about our production at Roundabout—I want it to not only be the story of a murder mystery that takes place in the 1940s, I also want it to say something about now, about what it means to actually stand tall as an African American in this country. A country that has had huge problems with African Americans kneeling at a football game during the national anthem. That's a complex issue. We live in a country that needs to embrace all cultures; many people have paid the ultimate sacrifices, and that includes African Americans. So it's the time and place to do the play that reminds us that we need to be fighting for the day that everyone in the country feels that the country belongs to them, and, in this case, specifically African Americans.

I've been waiting for years to do a play at Roundabout because I think Roundabout should serve as our national theatre. I am truly interested in helping to diversify the programming at Roundabout along with Todd Haimes, who is an extraordinary leader and visionary. By choosing to do *A Soldier's Play*, I hope I can help him to that end.

**TS:** Can you give us some insight into your process as a director? What's the atmosphere in your rehearsal room like?

**KL:** When I direct revivals, I'm not interested in just putting up museum pieces. I am interested in having an impact on the lives of human beings. And so, when I do *A Soldier's Play*, I'm asking, "What does this play mean to us today?" In the rehearsal room, I will probably spend a day and a half talking with the cast about where we want to go with this production and what the big issues and themes in the play are—how they can impact audiences. I'm always trying to have the entire team understand what is relevant about the play. I try to create an environment where all the actors and the creative team are encouraged to participate as we collectively get at the core of the writer's intentions.

My rehearsal room is always harmonious and is grounded in the present day in terms of what's happening in the world. I always ask



Kenny Leon

a cast to take time as artists to notice what's happening in the world, what's happening around them. I think as artists that we can only do great work when we are paying attention to what the immediate needs are in the world around us.

**TS:** How do you understand the internalized racism of Sergeant Vernon C. Waters?

**KL:** What I think is interesting about Charles Fuller's writing is that he doesn't play favorites when it comes to the theme of racism. Racism is complex, and the play delineates that. I think with Sergeant Waters, what you see is the result of institutionalized racism and how it infects specific communities and personalities. Waters is the victim of racism, and he goes too far trying to assimilate. He goes too far trying to assimilate and he loses himself. He says, "No matter what I do, I still can't live in this country the same as white Americans." He hasn't seen or felt a lot of love in this country. His final lines are haunting. He says, "They still hate you." When authorities lock out people of color at the border or when police arrest young Black men and kill them before they get them to the police station, you have to say to yourself, "Do they still hate us? Why is there so much hate?" There's a lot there to unravel in Waters and in this play.

**TS:** What are you hoping audiences will take away from seeing this play?

**KL:** The thing people should take away from this play is that it's never too late to do what's right. We are all connected to each other, and it's never too late to do what's good. And in many cases, since a lot of the white community is in powerful economic positions, it takes the white

community to say that these issues are not just Black issues. When more people do what's good and what's right—it will get us closer to the day we all want to see. Small things make an impact. Have a conversation with someone that doesn't look like you. Watch a television station that you don't usually watch. Americans, regardless of our race and gender, are always and forever tied to each other. I'm hoping that when people leave the theatre, they carry love out with them. Love of country, love of people, love of all cultures. I look forward to that day when Americans can live up to all of this.

**TS: What traits were you looking for when you were casting the actors for this piece?**

**KL:** I was looking for excellent actors first and foremost. Fuller has written a very theatrical story told by an ensemble of men, so I needed 12 actors who would be givers and not takers. I wanted to build an ensemble that not only looks different and has various points of view but who are also great listeners. In doing auditions, I was looking for those actors who knew how to truly listen. Everybody in the play has a story to tell and I needed 12 exceptional men who could tell those stories with honesty and dignity. We have assembled an amazing cast led by Blair Underwood and David Alan Grier. I am looking forward to working with every one of them.

**TS: How are you collaborating with your design team? How will the space be manifested visually?**

**KL:** It's a very diverse team of designers. Derek McLane is our set

designer, and Dede Ayite is doing the costumes—mostly period Army uniforms. Allen Lee Hughes, who lit the original production, is designing our lights, and Dan Moses Schreier is doing the sound, and Jacinth Greywoode is working on music.

I didn't want to repeat what was done in the original set design—I wanted the set to be designed specifically for the American Airlines Theatre<sup>SM</sup>. I want the audience to feel that the set was built for them to lean into. The most important thing is that we'll be able to fluidly go back and forth in time—which is a requirement of the script—and we will play on two levels. There's also a sleek quality to the set, so the audience hopefully senses how the past relates to the present and the present relates to the past.

**TS: What advice do you have for aspiring directors? Is going to graduate school necessary if someone wants to have a career?**

**KL:** I think there are many ways to get at the truth and many ways to tell stories. I think that going to graduate school is good for some people. I always tell young people that when you're in your 20s, it is important to realize that you're still in school, whether you are literally in graduate school or not. As an artist who is beginning your career, you need to watch human behavior—sit in a courthouse and watch behavior, ride the subway or go to the park, and just watch people. Tell yourself: I'm an artist, I'm a director, I'm an actor, even if you're not making enough money to sustain yourself and, hopefully, by the time you reach your 30s, you will be. •





# JIM CROW, THE MILITARY, AND RESPECTABILITY POLITICS DURING WWII

The state of Louisiana played an integral role in the development and implementation of Jim Crow laws in the United States. Beginning with the separation of white and Black people in schools and on public transportation, Jim Crow expanded rapidly to become a codified system of justification for the subjugation and violent treatment of Black Americans throughout the country.

Because of Louisiana's French and Spanish history, laws regarding the integration of races in the territory during the 18th century were significantly more relaxed than they were in the United States. This resulted in a large population of free persons of color who were adversely affected once Louisiana became a part of America with the Louisiana Purchase, and even more so with the advent of Jim Crow laws in the wake of Reconstruction.

**ANOTHER JIM CROW CAR CASE.**  
**Arrest of a Negro Traveler Who Persisted in Riding With the White People.**  
On Tuesday evening a negro named Adolph Plessy was arrested by Private Detective Cain on the East Louisiana train and locked up for violating section 2 of act 111 of 1890, relative to separate coaches.  
It appears that Plessy purchased a ticket to Covington, and shortly before his arrest the conductor asked him if he was a colored man. On the latter replying that he was the conductor informed him that he would have to go into the car set aside for colored people. This he refused to do, and Mr. Cain then stepped up and requested him to go into the other coach, but he still refused, and Mr. Cain thereupon informed him that he would either have to go or go to jail. He replied that he would sooner go to jail than leave the coach, and was thereupon arrested.  
He waived examination yesterday before Recorder Moulin, and was sent before the criminal court under \$500 bonds.

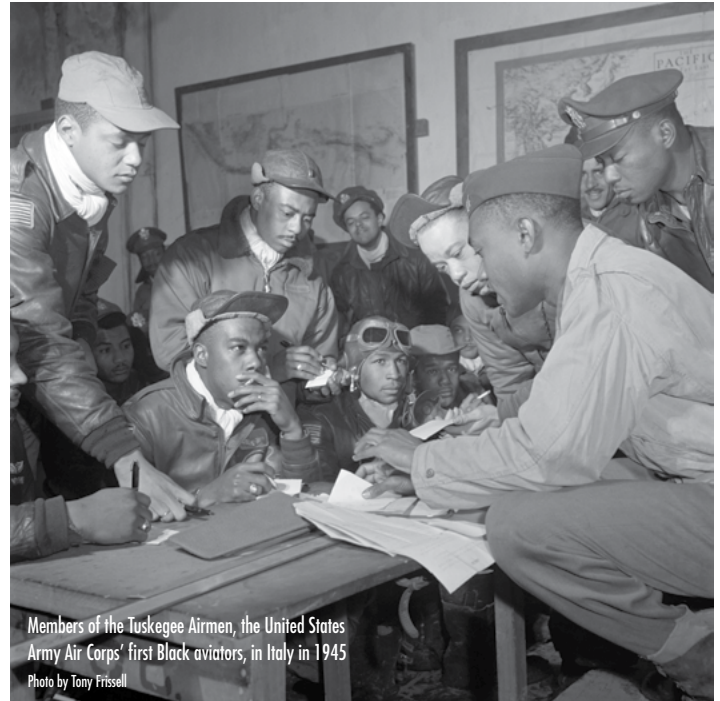
This article was printed in *The Daily Picayune*, a New Orleans newspaper, on June 9, 1892, detailing the arrest of Homer Adolphe Plessy. The case that ensued made it all the way to the Supreme Court in 1896.

## PLESSY V. FERGUSON

Additionally, *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the famous 1896 Supreme Court case that cemented the legality of "separate but equal" treatment, originated in New Orleans. Conditions only got worse in the years that followed. The Ku Klux Klan was re-established in 1915. Certain towns in the south instituted curfews in which Black residents could not be out of doors between certain hours of the evening and the following morning. Simply living as a Black person became a dangerous proposition.

## SEGREGATION IN THE MILITARY

Jim Crow was in full force during the early 20th century and even extended to segregation within the military. During World War II, Black soldiers were not accepted into the Marines and the Army Air Corps (the precursor to the Air Force) at the beginning of the war, and in the Navy and Army, they were only allowed to take on non-combat jobs. In addition to the injustices that these separate but inherently unequal policies reproduced, the military had its own hierarchies, structures, and laws that created a pressure cooker for the Black soldiers living under its rule.



Members of the Tuskegee Airmen, the United States Army Air Corps' first Black aviators, in Italy in 1945  
Photo by Tony Frissell

Inequitable systems such as Jim Crow breed conflict and competition among those they subjugate as a way of dividing the population and thereby decentralizing their power. There is a long history among Black Americans of intraracial prejudice enforced through respectability politics. There was a belief that if Black people behaved more "respectably," then they would not be subject to criticism and therefore would not be victims of racism. Many prominent Black social critics and journalists write about this phenomenon even today.

In his article, "Black-on-Black Racism: The Hazards of Implicit Bias," professor, writer, and retired U.S. Navy commander Theodore R. Johnson writes, "Too often, racism is seen as a social phenomenon that happens to Black people. But it happens through Black people as well. That is, the negative associations thrust upon Black people and Black culture can color how we Black people view each other." It's easy to see, in the aforementioned pressure cooker of the Armed Forces in the 1940s, how Black soldiers might internalize this racism. Jim Crow laws put a ceiling on the potential success of Black individuals, and some fell prey to the false narrative that by breaking through that ceiling they could rise above the limits of systemic racism—when in reality, this was just another "coping mechanism," in Johnson's words, that put the onus back on Black Americans rather than on the system that oppressed them in the first place. •



# CENTRAL LOUISIANA: 1944

The setting of *A Soldier's Play* is based on the realities of Central Louisiana in 1944. Though Fort Neal, the base where *A Soldier's Play* takes place, is not real, Louisiana is full of rich military tradition.

In 1944, there were six active military bases in Louisiana, most located in the South near New Orleans, with one in the Northeast of the state. Yet only one of the six military bases served the Army: Fort Polk, in Leesville, Vernon Parish. Fort Polk most likely served as the inspiration for *A Soldier's Play's* Fort Neal.

## FORT POLK

Fort Polk opened on August 1, 1941 and was designed in "an east-west, horizontal pattern divided into sections with space for training, barracks, offices, motor pool, and maintenance.... [as well as] an area near the railroad tracks for parking tanks." In the early days of the War, Fort Polk served as a station to prepare soldiers to fight in the European, Pacific and North African fronts. Fort Polk also served as the location for the "Louisiana Maneuvers." During the Louisiana Maneuvers, over half-a-million soldiers decamped to Leesville and neighboring small towns in preparation for the outbreak of war by carrying out large-scale battlefield-style drills.

Not only was Fort Polk beneficial for the country in terms of war preparation, but it was a blessing to the citizens of Leesville and surrounding areas deemed an "economic savior."

Much of Fort Polk's construction was completed by residents of Camp F-4, which was full of men from nearby towns, such as Leesville and Deridder. As such, the goings of Fort Polk were directly related to the fortunes and activities of Leesville.



Members of the 2nd Battalion, 25th Infantry, during the Louisiana maneuvers of 1941

Beginning in the early 1930s, the US Government established "Civilian Conservation Camps," which would provide shelter and a paying job. These camps were established to help workers affected by the Great Depression, which struck Louisiana particularly hard. Central Louisiana was primarily a timber and agriculture economy. The demand for these goods ravished the land, leaving residents with no market to sell and no product.

Residents in the Civilian Conservation Camps "received food, medical care, clothing, and housing, as well as \$30 a month in return for hard, physical labor. The camps, supervised by the U.S. Army, also offered high school education programs and classes for college credit. Camp F-4, about fifteen miles southeast of Leesville, featured Spartan dormitories, a first-aid building, and a large recreation hall. Every Sunday night, camp administrators showed a motion picture for residents and their guests."

## LEESVILLE, LOUISIANA

Leesville was a modest city for 1944: as of the 1940 U.S. Census, there were over 2800 residents in Leesville. The creation of an Army base would add a significant number of new residents to the area and increase the number of Black residents as well. Much like Leesville itself, the majority of residents at Fort Polk were white. Today, the population of Fort Polk is nearly 67% white and 23% African American, continuing a demographic trend that was in place in the 1940s.

In a state like Louisiana, where the population was heavily lopsided, and in a town where an "integrated" Army base flourished, it is easy to see how violence between Black and white residents could be on the horizon—regardless of whether it actually happened, the threat was always plausible. •



A group of soldiers train at Fort Polk during WWII

# INTERVIEW WITH ACTOR BLAIR UNDERWOOD

Education Dramaturg Ted Sod spoke with Actor Blair Underwood about his work on *A Soldier's Play*.

**Ted Sod:** Where were you born and educated? Did you have any teachers there who had a profound influence on your work as an artist?

**Blair Underwood:** I was born in Tacoma, Washington. My dad is now a retired military officer of 28 years, and he was stationed at Fort Lewis. I was only there for the first three months of my life. Because of the military, we moved every two to three years. I grew up in Colorado, Michigan, Germany, Kansas, and Georgia. Having named all those locations where I lived at one time or another, I would have to say we mostly lived in Virginia. As far as important teachers go, there was Mrs. Warren, my first drama teacher in junior high school, and Marie Maniego, who was my high school mentor. I was trained at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Angela D'ambrosia was my acting coach during my second year in college, and she was very instrumental in my growth as an artist. She pushed and challenged me. She was tough. Angela was one of those teachers who students either adored or didn't. I happened to adore her. I moved to Los Angeles to start doing film work, and for the first three or four years, I would always go to Angela in order to make sure that I was creating the character in the right way and doing the mechanics of the work because I deeply trusted her perspective.

**TS:** I read that before your stint in LA, you came to New York City and you had good fortune right away. Is that correct?

**BU:** That's true. I could not afford to finish going to Carnegie Mellon. I was caught in the no man's land where my dad was making too much money for financial aid, but not enough to keep me and my brother in college. So, I left Carnegie Mellon in the middle of my junior year, and Billy Wilson, who was my dance instructor there, introduced me to his agent, Perry Kipperman. She turned me on to "The Cosby Show," and on my second day in NYC, I had a one-word part on "The Cosby Show"—I said, "Hey!"

**TS:** I'm curious about why you chose to do the role of Captain Richard Davenport in Charles Fuller's *A Soldier's Play*?

**BU:** I grew up on various bases, and with my father being an officer, I have a very unique perspective on military life, bearings, personalities, and personas. It is a very specific thing.

**TS:** What do you think the play is about? And what about the play is relevant to audiences now?

**BU:** As I see it, it's a play about survival, race relations, honor, country and duty, self-preservation, self-love, self-hatred, and the schisms between us within and outside of ourselves in our communities. I think it is a very specific, acute look into the dynamics of race and how every element and aspect of race affects how we not only see ourselves, but the world around us. I came into the industry in the early '80s and, for years, while I was building my career, there were a number of times that I would not take a role if it was specifically about race relations. I just wanted to be a man who happened to be Black in the world. A lot of the roles in the '80s and '90s were asking me to lead with my race. And now, because of the public and political discourse, people are acutely aware of our differences more than our commonalities. Because of that, a play like this—which is enlightening and reminds the



audience of our humanity—is vital.

**TS:** Can you give us an insight into your process as an actor and the research you have to do to play this part?

**BU:** With this specific role, my greatest source of research is my life and my relationship with my father. In the early '60s, my dad was an army officer, and that was rare at the time. When I read the play, and I've seen the movie, too, it reminds me so much of my life and how people would respond to my father. In the military, your rank trumps everything. So, it doesn't matter what you look like. When a superior officer is on deck, you salute, and you show respect to the rank. In fact, Davenport says that at one point. When a character responds badly, Davenport says "respect the rank." My father had conversations with me when I was growing up. One time, someone with a lower rank than him, who happened to be Caucasian, walked by and begrudgingly saluted. And my dad checked him. The way my father and parents raised us—me, my brother, and my two sisters—was truly to lead with your humanity. It's truly how we were raised. In terms of preparation for Captain Davenport, my goal is to just be. You just be and you strive for excellence, and that's the way I live my life— it's the way I see Captain Davenport living his life as well.

**TS:** What do you make of this relationship between Captain Davenport and his colleague, Captain Charles Taylor?

**BU:** I see Taylor as someone who is certainly racist, but he is racist because he is a product of his time. One of the things about being



a so-called minority—African Americans are approximately 12-13% of the population—you really have to understand the people who surround you. In other words, Black people have to understand how white people think and operate and live their lives. It's not the same conversely. White people don't necessarily have to really understand Black culture, life, characters, people. I think Davenport understands Taylor and his sense of racism and superiority much better than Taylor understands it himself.

**TS: Can we talk about Captain Davenport's relationship to the other Black soldiers? It seems like they don't trust him because he is part of the power structure, or do you see that differently?**

**BU:** You're always going to have that sense of pride because someone that looks like you is in a position of power, but then the second blush is thinking—Oh, you're in a position of authority, which means you can rule me in certain ways, you can have a certain opinion that can affect my livelihood and future. So, I think it's a mixed bag, but as I see it, it definitely starts with this sense of tremendous pride to have this man of color with this rank among them, who has been assigned the task of solving a murder that occurred on base.

**TS: What do you want audiences to take away from this play?**

**BU:** I would love the audience to take away the understanding that everything and everyone is multilayered. There's much more behind a person's presentation of themselves than what we see. Even when we point fingers and we blame the "others"—and there's a lot of that going on in our society right now—people who look different than us, who believe different than us, who love different than us—there are usually very deep and profound and complex reasons for that. What Charles Fuller has written is a play that really uncovers and mines all the human beings featured in it. The play asks audiences to look for why people do what they do. This is a murder mystery, but I am speaking way beyond the murder that takes place. Human behavior—why do people love? Why do people hate? Why do people hate themselves? Why do people hate others who are not like them? *A Soldier's Play* allows all of us to explore the human psyche—especially the psyches of the Black and white men who are at the center of the drama.

**TS: What do you look for when you work with a director? What's important to you when you collaborate on a role?**

**BU:** For me, and I feel this in Kenny, a director is someone who has a very strong understanding of the text and the characters and how he or she wants to direct our performances and direct the story in terms of its breadth, width, and depth. What are the messages we want to leave the audience with? How do we want them to think and feel? If we can understand what we are aiming for, then we can all get there collectively. I'm looking forward to working with Kenny—we've never worked together before. We were hanging out last weekend at Tyler Perry's studios in Atlanta and had a chance to touch base and talk about where he is going with it. I'm very thrilled to be working with him.

**TS: How do you keep yourself inspired as an artist?**

**BU:** Just keep challenging myself. Doing something different. I was doing "Ironsides" out here in LA—the reboot of the Raymond Burr series—and it was one of those projects that was on the air for three weeks because they ended up canceling it. There was not much of an opportunity to see what it could really do. After that experience, I got really burnt out and I had to remind myself why I'm doing this in the first place. So, I took a year off and went away to do what I love to do—which is the theatre. I wanted to get back on the boards and didn't want to see a camera for at least a year. During that year, I played Othello and opposite Cicely Tyson and Vanessa Williams in *The Trip to Bountiful*. I needed to remind myself why I'm in the business in the first place. And the answer to myself was that it's not about the business, it's about the craft and the work, and the place where you can delve into that more than anywhere else.

**TS: Do you have any advice for a young person who says they want to have a career as an actor?**

**BU:** Yes. Dream big, number one. Number two, run to the things that scare you. And number three: use the technology that you have. •



Blair Underwood in *A Soldier's Play*

# INTERVIEW WITH ACTOR DAVID ALAN GRIER

Education Dramaturg Ted Sod spoke with David Alan Grier about his work on *A Soldier's Play*.

**Ted Sod: Where were you born and trained as an actor? Did you have any teachers who had a profound influence on you as an artist?**

**David Alan Grier:** I was born and raised in Detroit, Michigan. I went to the Yale Drama School and graduated in 1981. My first acting teacher was a guy named Dr. Ron Washington from Michigan, and he actually came to see me when I did *Porgy and Bess* in New York City, and it was really great. We've been in contact intermittently throughout the years, but he was my first real acting teacher.

**TS: Why did you choose to play the role of Sergeant Vernon C. Waters?**

**DAG:** I've worked with Kenny Leon several times, and he called me up and there was dread. I thought, I'm not going to go to New York and do a play for no money. I have a young daughter, and in order for me to do a play, it has to be something I HAVE to do. It has to be an offer that I cannot say no to. And as soon as he said *A Soldier's Play* on Broadway, I asked, "What role is it?" He said, "Sergeant Waters." And I could not say no. Sergeant Waters is such a bastard, and the way he talks to his soldiers—I love it. This is a character that anyone would dream of playing. There's so much dichotomy—most of the play he's so cocksure. "I know I'm right. I've seen more than you, I know more than you, I'm smarter than you," and in the end, he knows nothing. Waters is resentful that these Black men under him are treated differently—because they are baseball players. Baseball at the time was at its height in this country, so you just know how special they were and how special they were treated. Waters seems determined to cut all of that away. He's harder on those men who play—he thinks has to be.

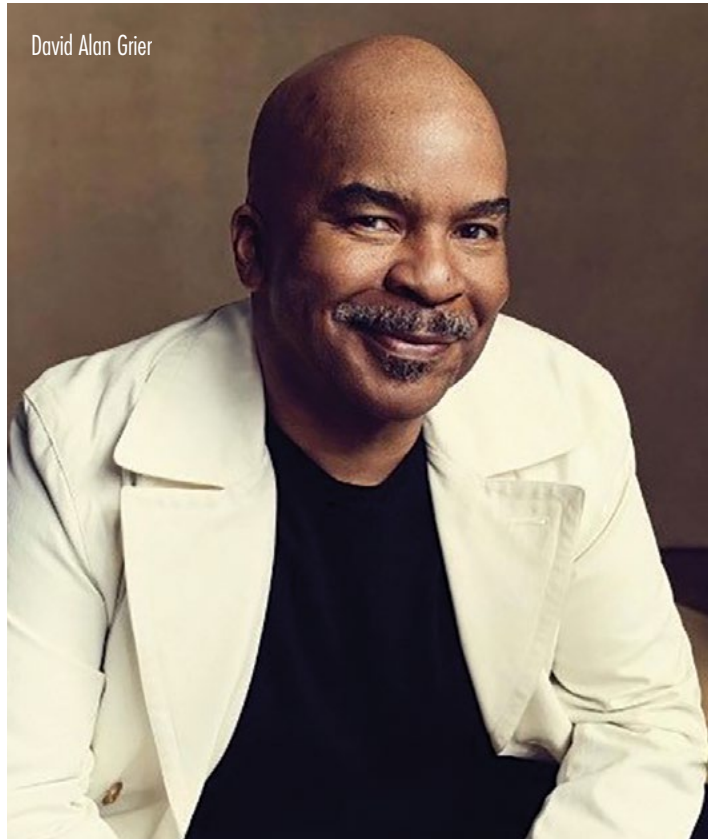
**TS: As I understand it, you went into the original production of *A Soldier's Play* at the Negro Ensemble Company, is that correct?**

**DAG:** Yes. The late, great Reg E. Cathey and I were college roommates. Reg E. went in to audition. He called me and said, "Hey listen man, I'm not right for this role, but they're looking for someone to replace this character, CJ Memphis, and he plays guitar." I played guitar since I was 12, and he said, "You could do this role." I called my agent, I went in, I auditioned for Douglas Turner Ward, the director, and they cast me. They put me in immediately. That's how I got to replace Larry Riley in the original production. When I came in, everybody was there—Sam Jackson was there, that's where I met Denzel, Bret Jennings. A lot of the original cast was still intact. You know, in 1983, it was very rare to have a play with all these different racial, cultural, and political points of view. That's really what takes place in Charles Fuller's play—all these different kinds of black and white people are discussing, pondering, and arguing about who is right and which belief system should be honored.

**TS: Why do you think it is important for audiences to see the play now?**

**DAG:** Well, first of all, it's a brilliant play about Black men in the United States Army during World War II—most people, if they know *A Soldier's Play*, know the movie version. They don't know it was a Pulitzer Prize-winning play first. Also, it has never been on Broadway. It's a great play with exceptional roles for African American actors. That's why audiences should see it.

David Alan Grier



**TS: I want to ask about Sergeant Waters, because it's such a complex psyche this man has. What kind of research do you have to do in order to play Sergeant Waters?**

**DAG:** Sergeant Waters is a committed racist. He really is. There's been some discussion that Black people can't be racist because we don't have the power to institute change on a wide level. People believe you have to have power to bring about racist activity. But anybody can be a racist. Sergeant Waters is single-handedly weeding out those weak and inefficient Black men that he thinks are holding the race back. He's eliminating them. And he has no qualms about that. He explains his belief very plainly. I have encountered people like that in my life. But I am not like Sergeant Waters. As an actor, there are two types of roles I usually play. There are roles that I know. I'll read the script and I'll go, I know this. This is a part of me. I can play this. The other type of role is a person you recognize, but you don't share their beliefs, and it's that kind of role that I have to do a lot more research for. I have to dig for Sergeant Waters because everything about him is foreign to my orientation. I grew up around Black men who believed as Sergeant Waters does. Black men of a different generation. Most of my uncles fought in World War II. Going over to Europe, they experienced a world that they didn't even know existed, meaning the absence of prejudice. They were treated as human beings. A lot of them came back to the USA hoping and expecting to be treated differently. And they weren't. That created bitterness. You're shown some daylight only to return and be shackled once again by society. So, I think that kind of experience fuels a lot of Sergeant Waters's frustration, anger, and resentment.





**TS:** I'm curious about his line: "They still hate you." What do you think he wants?

**DAG:** He wants to be accepted, but he's come to the conclusion that it doesn't matter what he does, it doesn't matter how good he is at what he does. At the end of the day, all of that is bullshit because he realizes there's nothing he can do to not be hated by the whites. Hatred, especially racial hatred, is illogical. Race is a concept that is outdated, yet we are all societally tethered to it. Waters realizes even after all of the hard work he's done, he's still going to be hated.

They had a hard time implementing the integration of Black troops in World War II. The Klan was in high gear all over the country. In the armed forces, they would give the Black soldiers the worst and most taxing shifts—cleaning out the latrines, loading ammunition on battleships and on planes. Many of those Black soldiers were killed because nobody else wanted to do those dangerous and backbreaking jobs. Yet these men were fighting for their equality and their dignity as men.

**TS:** What's important to you when you're collaborating on a role with a director?

**DAG:** Robert Altman told me that a great director has the ability to get an actor to do everything the director wants and yet the actor will think it was all his own idea. I have to trust my director, and the first thing

I've said to quite a few people that have never directed before is, "Go ahead and direct me." I have to be able to trust that if I'm going in a direction or making choices that aren't working, the director will tell me, "That doesn't work. Try this." Or, "What you stopped doing was so powerful. Bring that back." Someone who can push me in a direction that I can't push myself. I like a director to point out things about the character I am playing that I can't see.

**TS:** Do you have any advice for young people who say they want to act in the theatre?

**DAG:** I would say, if you're really passionate about acting, act. Anywhere and everywhere and as much and as often as you can. Because you need that stage time. In church, at school, community theatre, college. Take risks. Those roles that make me nervous and a little fearful and that I don't know exactly how I can pull this off, I want to do those characters, because I'm challenging myself, I'm requiring myself to step up and throw caution to the wind.

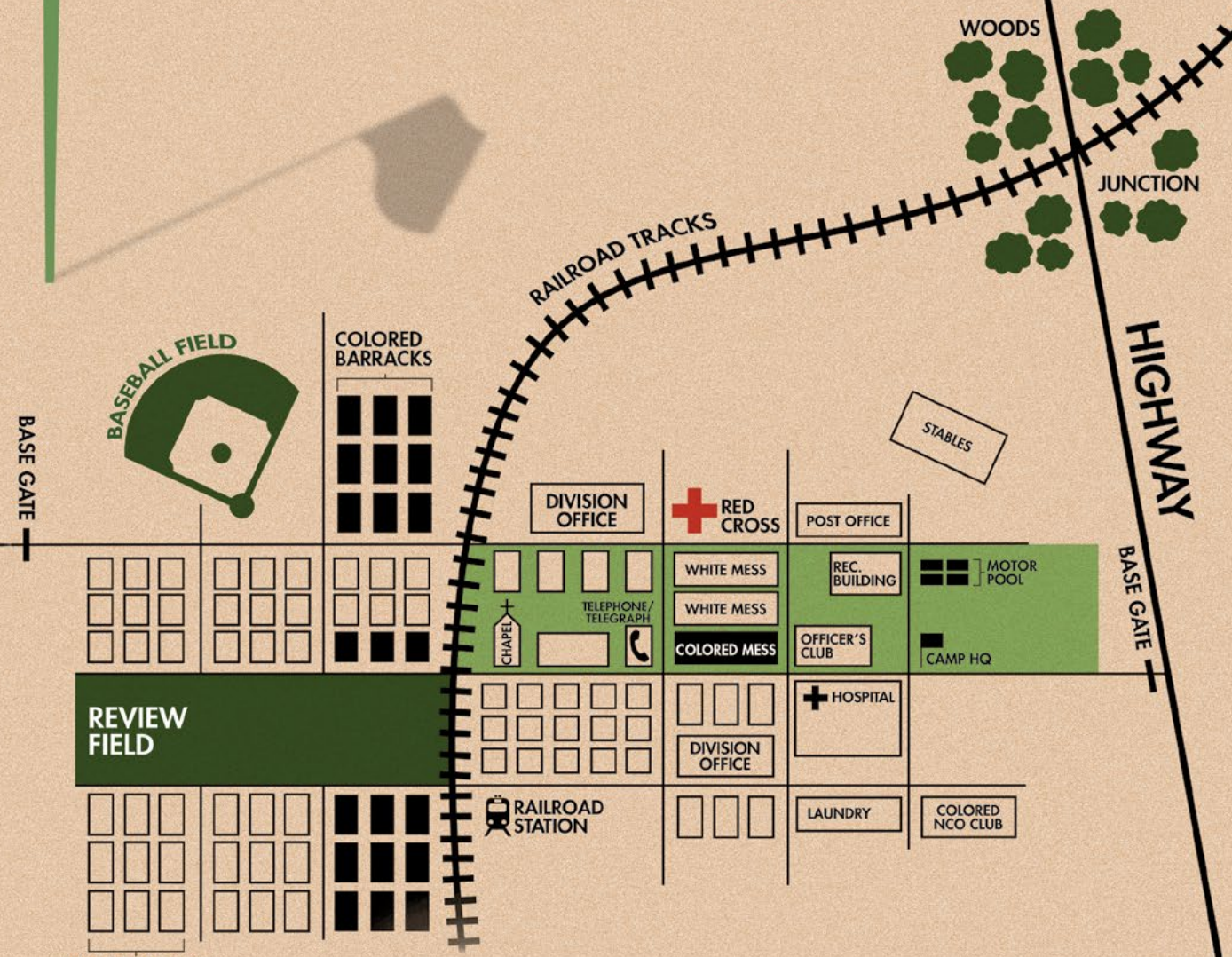
**TS:** Is there a question you wish I had asked you?

**DAG:** How have I remained so beautiful? I've been growing this beard for the last few years, and I just shaved it off to get ready for this role. And everyone on Instagram said, "No! No! Don't shave it off!" But it's hair. It'll grow back. •



# LIFE ON A MILITARY BASE

A *Soldier's Play* takes place in Fort Neal, a fictional army base in Louisiana, during WWII. During the war, the U.S. Army grew from a force of 174,000 to 8 million, and bases were constructed around the country to train these new recruits before deployment. Each base was a small, self-contained city, with a hospital, laundry, mess halls, barracks, offices, recreation centers, telephone and telegraph offices, and more. Fort Neal, like all U.S. military bases during the war, was segregated. Bases were often located near small towns, and soldiers would visit local bars, restaurants, and social clubs during their free time.





# MILITARY RANKS AND JUSTICE

In the military, a soldier's rank determines where they fall in the chain of command. Orders flow from the highest-ranked leader in a situation down to the lowest-ranked soldier. Soldiers wear insignia, a badge or distinguishing mark, on their uniforms to indicate their rank. During WWII, when *A Soldier's Play* takes place, there were three classes of military rank: enlisted, warrant, and commissioned. This remains true today.

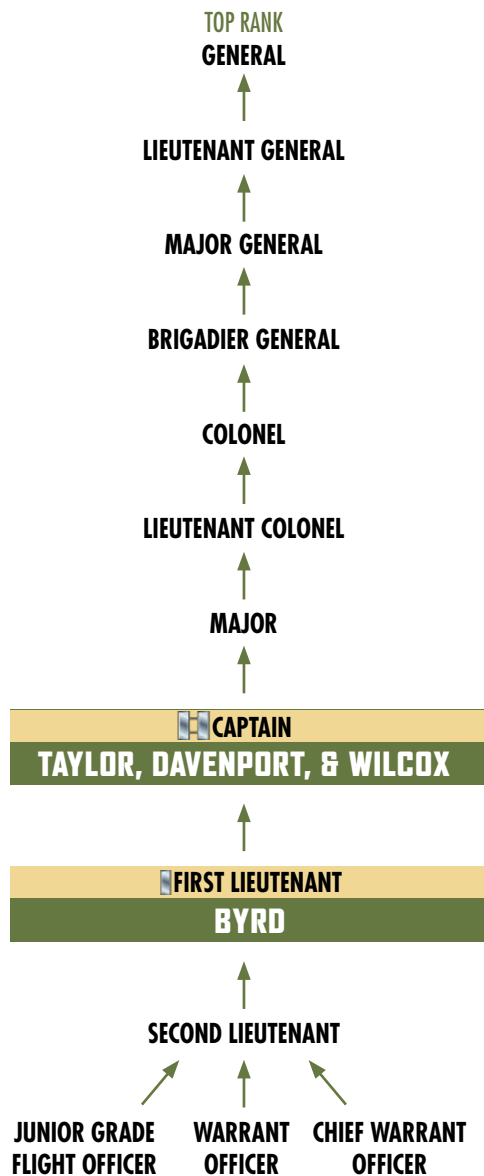
**ENLISTED SOLDIERS** are the army's labor force and carry out military operations. They may volunteer or be drafted, and they begin their military careers with basic training. Enlisted soldiers rise through the enlisted ranks to become non-commissioned officers, or NCOs. NCOs are responsible for commanding groups of enlisted soldiers.

**WARRANT OFFICERS** are the technical experts of the military. They are enlisted soldiers who attend Warrant Officer Training School and specialize in anything from engineering to bandleading. The rank of warrant officer is below that of commissioned officers and above that of enlisted soldiers and NCOs.

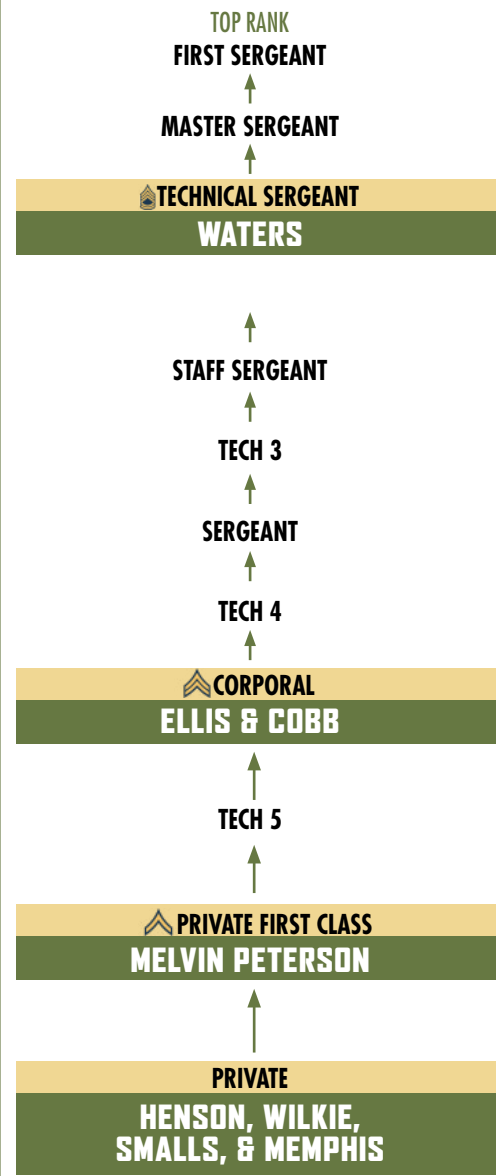
**COMMISSIONED OFFICERS** are the leaders and strategists of the military. They receive a commission to lead. Today, as in WWII, they are recruited from university graduates, military academies, and enlisted personnel. Additionally, some professionals—like lawyers—can receive a direct commission on the basis of their skills.

A commissioned officer always outranks a non-commissioned officer. The Selective Training and Service Act of 1940 contained a provision stating that, in selection and training of military personnel, "there shall be no discrimination against any person on account of race or color." Despite this, the Army was segregated, reflecting the racist attitudes and systems of the broader American culture. Black commissioned officers, like Captain Davenport, outranked all white NCOs but had little authority in practice.

## COMMISSIONED OFFICERS



## ENLISTED SOLDIERS



## MILITARY JUSTICE

Military branches have their own justice systems separate from civilian courts. Military justice systems handle criminal offenses committed by soldiers as well as offenses specific to military life. An accused soldier receives a court-martial rather than a trial. Their fate may be decided by a single officer, a military judge, or a panel of officers or enlisted persons, depending on the severity of the crime. Sentences can range from reduction in rank or pay to the death penalty. During WWII, military defendants had few rights during court-martial. As a result, in 1951 the Uniform Code of Military Justice was created to codify military justice practices.

# FIGHTING FOR EQUALITY: BLACK SOLDIERS IN THE MILITARY

A *Soldier's Play* looks at one chapter in a long chronicle of Black history: since the founding of the United States, Black soldiers have served and defended a country that denied them basic rights as citizens at home.

## Revolutionary War 1775-1883

At the start of the Revolutionary War, George Washington feared arming Black people who had been slaves; however, he developed respect as he witnessed their loyalty. The Revolution resulted in a mixed victory for Black Americans. Blacks in Northern states were given freedom and, in some cases, enfranchisement; but the constitution permitted slavery in the southern states

**5000 ENSLAVED & FREE**  
Black soldiers fought against the British

Source: American Battlefield Trust

THE RHODE ISLAND REGIMENT WAS  
**62% BLACK**,  
the largest percentage of any integrated unit

## CIVIL WAR 1861-1865

A Civil War family



At the start of the Civil War, Black men fled Confederate states to join Union forces. At first, Black men served unofficially as soldiers and laborers, while Black and White women worked as nurses, cooks, and laundresses. Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 officially sanctioned the enlistment of Black soldiers into the Union Army. Still, Black soldiers faced prejudice from white Union officers, risked greater danger if they were captured by Confederate troops, and struggled for equal pay.

**10% OF UNION TROOPS WERE BLACK**

Source: Gilder Lehman Institute

UNION ARMY:  
approx.

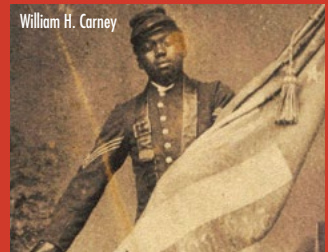
**180,000**  
BLACK SOLDIERS

UNION NAVY:

**29,000**  
BLACK SOLDIERS

23 out of 1,523 Medals of Honor given to Black soldiers for service in Civil War

Source: National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics



A former slave, Carney served in the 54th Massachusetts Infantry, an entirely Black unit. On July 18, 1863, the 54th took Fort Wagner in South Carolina. A wounded Sgt. Carney proved his valor by climbing to the top of the fort and planting the Union flag, earning him the first Medal of Honor ever given to a Black soldier.

### PAY FOR UNION SOLDIERS:

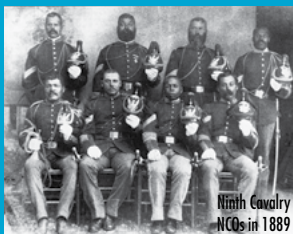
BLACK MEN: **\$7/month** VS WHITE MEN: **\$10/month**

BLACK WOMEN (FOR SERVICES IN THE WAR): **\$0**

Black soldiers in the 54th Massachusetts Infantry refused to accept their monthly pay until the passage of an equal pay Bill in 1864

Source: Gilder Lehman Institute

## THE BUFFALO SOLDIERS 1866-1891



Black soldiers in the 9th & 10th Cavalries and the 24th & 25th Infantries aided U.S. western expansion by building roads, serving as the first National Park Rangers, and, paradoxically, fighting in government-led wars against Native Americans. Some of the soldiers obtained property, better jobs, and higher education as a result of their service; however, they also faced discrimination within the Army and in frontier towns, and some were lynched upon their return home.

**5000+** Black soldiers served in Buffalo Soldiers

Source: Gilder Lehman Institute

**18 MEDALS OF HONOR**  
given for combat against Native Americans

Source: National Museum of African American History & Culture

## WORLD WAR I 1914-1918

**400,000+** BLACK SOLDIERS

SERVED IN WORLD WAR I

Source: National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics

**1,300+**

BLACK SOLDIERS WERE COMMISSIONED AS OFFICERS

Source: National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics

ONLY **42,000** OF THESE SOLDIERS SAW ACTION IN EUROPE

Source: Gilder Lehman Institute

Black men enlisted for WWI to defend democracy in Europe and earn greater rights at home. Nevertheless, they were segregated, used mostly in labor-intensive service positions, and only a small percentage were given the chance to prove themselves in combat.

The "Harlem Hellfighters" (the 369th Army Infantry Regiment) fought on the French front lines for six months—longer than any other American unit in the war—losing no prisoners or territory. The entire unit was awarded the Croix de Guerre, France's highest military honor. 171 members of the regiment were awarded the U.S. Legion of Merit.



# WORLD WAR II 1941-1954

Black soldiers mobilized to fight fascism abroad; meanwhile, they were denied employment, housing, education, and voting rights at home. They faced racial violence near Southern military bases, where Jim Crow laws held firm. Some journalists and activists drew comparisons between the racist ideology of Nazis and white supremacists in the U.S. Attitudes about Blacks in the military gradually shifted throughout the war. Some units were desegregated for the defining Battle of the Bulge (1944-1945). Following the war, President Truman ordered the complete desegregation of the Armed Services in 1948. Historians attribute Black contributions to the war effort as a key factor in the Civil Rights movement of the '50s and '60s.

**900,000+** BLACK SOLDIERS SERVED IN WORLD WAR II

Source: National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics

**1.2 MILLION+** BLACK PEOPLE CONTRIBUTED TO WWII EFFORTS

including those who served abroad, at home, and in the Women's auxiliaries

Source: National WWII Museum

## TUSKEGEE AIRMEN

In 1941, responding to pressure from the Black press and civil rights organizations, the Army Air Corps found a squadron of Black pilots based in Tuskegee Alabama, who were trained and ultimately deployed to fight. Through their accomplishments and military victories, the Tuskegee Airmen proved that Black Americans were capable and helped pave the way for full integration of the military.

**992** BLACK PILOTS GRADUATED FROM THE TUSKEGEE AIR FIELD COURSES

**1,578** MISSIONS FLOWN **15,533** SORTIES FOUGHT

**261** ENEMY AIRCRAFTS DESTROYED **850+** MEDALS WON

Source: Encyclopaedia Britannica

## BLACK MEN IN THE MILITARY BY %

**9%** of army **4%** of navy

**2%** of marines **1.8%** of military officers

vs. **10%** of the U.S. Population

National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics

## DEMOCRACY



The original Double V campaign artwork  
The Pittsburgh Courier

## THE DOUBLE V CAMPAIGN

The Pittsburgh Courier, one of the nation's largest Black newspapers, launched the Double V campaign in 1942. The paper published two interlocking Vs, with the text: "Democracy: Victory at home, Victory Abroad" to encourage Black Americans to support the war effort while fighting for civil rights at home. The campaign attracted readers and brought national attention to the issues of segregation and discrimination within the U.S.

# THE VIETNAM WAR 1960-1973

SP4 Tyrone Rankins, radio operator, in Vietnam in 1968



The Vietnam war coincided with a transformational (and turbulent) period for civil rights at home. It was the first major war fought with the military fully integrated and featured the highest proportion of Black soldiers to serve in an American war. The early years saw a high proportion of Black casualties (25% of all deaths in 1965), leading to protests and a reduction in the number of Black soldiers sent to combat. Many white and Black soldiers discovered new camaraderie amid fraternization with fellow soldiers of different races. As the war went on and as racial conflicts escalated at home—especially after Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination—conflicts emerged between white and Black soldiers.

★ **11%** U.S. TROOPS IN VIETNAM WERE BLACK MEN

★ **2%** OFFICER CORPS Source: New York Times, July 7, 2017

★ **TOTAL CASUALTIES: 58,220**

★ **WHITE: 49,830 BLACK: 7,243**

★ Source: National Archives

★ **14%** OF TOTAL CASUALTIES IN VIETNAM WERE BLACK MEN

★ **VS. 11%** OF U.S. POPULATION

★ Source: American War Library

# RECENT YEARS 1970s-TODAY

Cadet Field Training at West Point, 2013



The U.S. ended the draft in 1973, making military service all-voluntary. Black recruitment rose steadily for the next decade, then began to fall off after the mid-1980s,

possibly reflecting skepticism in the Black community for American policy in Iraq and Afghanistan. Black soldiers are still under-represented in leadership positions and tend to be assigned to service jobs rather than combat positions, which lead to higher advancement. Black soldiers face a disproportionate amount of casualties, court-martials, and hardships as veterans.

## 1991 GULF WAR

**BLACK MEN AND WOMEN= 25% OF MILITARY VS. 12% OF U.S. POPULATION**

Source: New York Times, July 7, 2017

**% OF BLACK RECRUITMENT 2001-2009 DURING GULF WAR CONFLICTS**

**20%** IN 2001 **13%** IN 2006 **10%** IN 2009

Source: New York Times, August 7, 2017; USA Today



General Colin Powell began his military career in Vietnam, and in 1989 he became the first Black man to serve as the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. In 2000, Powell was appointed Secretary of State by President George W. Bush, a position he held through 2004.

★ **1.29 MILLION**

★ **TOTAL MEMBERS OF U.S. MILITARY IN 2018**

★ Source: The Council on Foreign Relations

★ **MILITARY OFFICERS IN 2016 (APPROX.):**

★ **8% BLACK VS. 78% WHITE**

★ Source: BBC News

★ **1 IN 5 SOLDIERS ARE BLACK (AS OF 2014)** Source: USA Today

★ **BLACK SOLDIERS ARE**

★ **61% MORE LIKELY TO FACE COURT-MARTIAL THAN WHITE SOLDIERS**

★ **BLACK AIRMEN ARE**

★ **71% MORE LIKELY TO FACE COURT-MARTIAL THAN WHITE AIRMEN**

★ Source: BBC News

# DESIGNER STATEMENTS

## DEREK McLANE—SET DESIGN

When I first read *A Soldier's Play*, I was totally absorbed by the murder mystery of it. Who killed Sgt. Waters? The play, of course, has bigger themes in mind, but that structure is very effective at grabbing your attention. For me, the play taps into a certain nostalgia for World War II—a war with far less ambiguous goals than more recent wars—and the patriotism I associate with it. That patriotism is the backdrop for every character in *A Soldier's Play*, and the nostalgia I felt makes the racism the soldiers deal with that much more jarring. The play is very fluid in the way it is written. It jumps backward and forwards in time as various soldiers tell their story of the events surrounding the murder. Many scenes are simultaneously in an office and outside somewhere, as soldiers recount their last encounters with Sgt. Waters. So the play requires several different realities to co-exist, with both specificity and simplicity.

After I read a play, I always start by doing some research. In the case of *A Soldier's Play*, I looked a lot at WWII army bases, particularly in the south, where this takes place. I was struck by how simple they were. Virtually everyone was made of unadorned wood boards and beams; there was no decoration and simple construction. It is clear looking at the research the buildings were built quickly, and presumably not necessarily intended to last past the end of the war. Even senior commanders had very simple offices. And so I started sketching structures based on these images, to create a space simple enough and flexible enough that all of the many scenes could be contained with really minimal scene changes. From the sketches, I moved onto models—I usually make several different drafts—as

I did here. Eventually, director Kenny Leon and I settled on the version that became the design. The last step in my studio was to draft the set —produce a set of scale drawings that a scene shop could use to build from.

I've done a pretty wide variety of shows with Kenny, from intimate plays to big television musicals, and I know how interested he is in bringing out the human side of every story and also in making every show feel that it is somehow of "today." So my work with him on this was about putting us confidently in the America of 1944 and to do it in a way that also has the immediacy of 2020. My goal was to give it just enough detail that you feel WWII military base, and not so much that it feels fussy.

## DEDE AYITE—COSTUME DESIGN

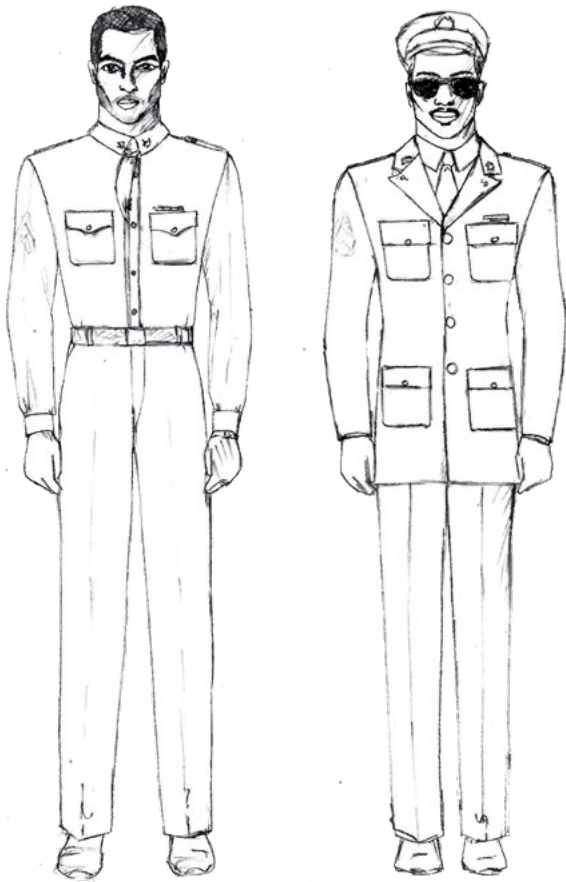
Suspense, thrill, sadness, and pride were emotions I felt as I read the last sentence in *A Soldier's Play*. Written beautifully, I am honored to be a part of telling this story. A story that delves into the complexity of race in America. Although set during World War II, the heart of this piece feels just as significant for today. When I first read *A Soldier's Play*, I was deeply intrigued by the sense of duty these brave men had that made them serve a country that did not recognize them as equals.

Supporting this story with costumes, my first step was to identify the status of each character; identifying the rules and parameters that surrounded them in the army. A deep dive through historical material ensured accurate portrayal of the uniforms they would have worn during this time. Speaking with people who have in-depth knowledge of the time we are aiming to represent on



Set models by Derek McLane for *A Soldier's Play*





Costume design sketches by Dede Ayite for *A Soldier's Play*

stage is always a crucial point to get the most accurate sense of the period. The next step for me was to then identify their individual journeys through the play, noting what makes them different from each other. How their personalities, backgrounds, and sense of self might affect the way a character is presented.

Yet another helpful part of the process was to sit with the rest of the design team and the director, Kenny Leon, to discuss how we want to manifest this story. Collaboration is key here—in order to create a world that feels seamless. Hearing various viewpoints and approaches surely enriches the process and final product. The next step for me after gathering enough information will be fittings with the actors playing the various roles. This is vital, as the uniform pieces and costumes don't become real until there is a human being wearing them. Here the pieces start to take form. Ultimately, the individual pieces begin to tell a story that adds depth and specificity to the character wearing them.

### **ALLAN LEE HUGHES—LIGHTING DESIGN**

I designed the lighting for the original production of *A Soldier's Play* directed by Douglas Turner Ward at The Negro Ensemble Company (NEC) in November of 1981. The first time I designed lighting for this play, I thought of it as a "whodunit"—and it still is a "whodunit" because the opening scene is a murder, which is the first thing the audience sees happening on stage. But this time around the play has different resonance, I believe, because of Sergeant Waters's disturbed state of mind and recent

race-inspired crimes that have occurred in our country. This is an African American story that speaks to me as an African American man, especially in this day and age—when we see so-called "good people" acting in questionable ways.

My job as lighting designer is often to bring together the set and the costumes in terms of how they are lit and the colors I choose. Once I speak to the director and I receive samples of the costume fabrics and renderings of the set, I find a complementary color palette. With *A Soldier's Play*, I also have to decide how to use the lighting to delineate scenes that are taking place in the past as opposed to those taking place in the present. I will be using backlight and color to highlight the scenes in the past. I also will be using a technique called selective visibility, so the audience isn't aware of who is using the gun in the opening scene. The entire action of the play takes place at Fort Neal in Louisiana in 1944, and that location requires specific color choices as well. Kenny Leon, the director, has asked that the heat and humidity of that area be reflected in the lighting, and it is my job to make that happen.

### **DAN MOSES SCHREIER—SOUND DESIGN**

This powerhouse of a play has personal resonance for me as someone who grew up in Detroit, Michigan in an integrated neighborhood and who went to integrated schools. The play deals with racial politics of the segregated United States Army during World War II and very skillfully delineates attitudes towards race in the entire country at the same time. The first thing I have to do is read the play over numerous times and jot down my thoughts, and then I meet with the director. My initial meetings with director Kenny Leon have been about how to best evoke the time period and themes of the play in terms of the music choices we make. The original script calls for the play opening with the Andrews Sisters recording of "Don't Sit Under the Apple Tree," but Kenny and I have been looking into using a recording by Son House, who was an American delta blues singer and guitarist, noted for his highly emotional style of singing and slide guitar playing in the 1920s, '30s, and '40s. In fact, his work was rediscovered by the late Alan Lomax, who spent almost 70 years as a folklorist and ethnographer, collecting, archiving, and analyzing folksongs and music in America. In addition to music, this play literally starts with a bang because the first thing after music—sound-wise—is a gunshot, but so far we haven't decided whether those shots will be live ammo or recorded. As sound designer, I am not only responsible for music and all the necessary ambient sound, I am also in charge of how best to hear the actors in a space that has tricky acoustics. So, I will be making decisions about the best way to mic actors subtly, so that everyone in the audience can hear them. •

# UP FOR DISCUSSION

## BEFORE THE PLAY

1. A **murder mystery** is a narrative involving murder and how that murder is discovered and solved. What are some of the most well-known elements of a murder mystery?
2. How do you think **flashbacks**, moments of a character's memory or a past moment in time, affect a narrative? In what ways can a flashback influence a character's perception of a current event?
3. Has there ever been a time in which you've had to recall an event from memory? How do you feel memories can shift over time?

## DURING INTERMISSION

1. Describe how theatrical conventions (lighting design, set design, and the way the director has staged the show) are allowing you to interpret time, location, and character.
2. **Consider:** During World War II, Black citizens who wanted to fight (or were drafted) for their country were sent to American barracks before being deployed and were only deployed if absolutely necessary. How does this reflect feelings that many of the characters in the play are experiencing? What do you notice about the relationships between people of different ranks in the military and how they are interacting with one another?
3. How has this play followed the conventions of a **murder mystery** thus far? What do you notice about the evidence being considered? In what ways has the production made you feel like a detective?

## AFTER THE PLAY

1. In 1982, *A Soldier's Play* won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama. The Pulitzer Prize for Drama is awarded to an American author, preferably original in its source and dealing with American life. In 2016, *Hamilton* won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama for its innovative use of the musical structure. In what ways do you think this play was deserving of this honor? How did this play's structure surprise you? In what ways did this play differ from others that you've seen?
2. At what point did you have an idea of who murdered Sergeant Waters? How did that change throughout the play?
3. *A Soldier's Play* explores strong feelings Black men had about one another—in what ways did the race relationships that were visible in the play reflect our society today?



## CREATE YOUR OWN FLASHBACK

Flashback plays a significant part in the narrative of *A Soldier's Play*. Utilizing flashbacks and memories in a story can have significant benefits but can also skew the way characters interpret a past event. Take a moment to flash back to an important memory in your life and create your very own narrative flashback.

### WHAT MOMENT WOULD YOU FLASH BACK TO?

Who are the characters in your flashback?

What feelings do you associate with this memory?

Describe the location of your flashback.

How has this flashback affected you today?

Draw a moment from your perspective.

Draw a moment from another character's perspective.



# ROUNABOUT ARCHIVES

## THE WAR ONSTAGE



The Company of  
*Privates on Parade*  
Photo: Martha Swope



J. Smith-Cameron and Chris Sarandon  
in *The Voice of the Turtle*  
Photo: Martha Swope



J.D. Williams in *Streamers*  
Photo: Joan Marcus

Roundabout's production canon includes several plays that explore military life, soldiers, and wartime. A few have been lighter comedies, such as *The Voice of the Turtle* (1985) and *Privates on Parade* (1989), but far more have been darker explorations of the people whose lives are impacted by military service and war. Below are examples from the Archives.

Arthur Miller's play *All My Sons* (2019; staged previously by Roundabout in 1974 and 1997) portrays a family's unraveling due to the death of a son in the military, coupled with a father's role in the deaths of soldiers.

*Streamers* by David Rabe (2008) is part of a trilogy focused on soldiers deploying to Vietnam. The work explores the personal lives of soldiers who have different socio-economic and racial backgrounds and must fight to put those differences aside.

*The Overwhelming* by J.T. Rogers (2007) portrays a country and its peoples on the cusp of civil war and follows an American family into the conflict as they try to understand the political turmoil of 1990s Rwanda.

*Beyond Glory* by Stephen Lang, based on a book by Larry Smith (2007), is a one-man show that looks at eight different servicemen who not only fought in wars but whose courage earned a Medal of Honor. The show explores the psychic stress of military duty and the ways that people survive and describe their experiences.

*Cabaret*, with music by John Kander, lyrics by Fred Ebb, and book by Joe Masteroff (and based on John Van Druten's play *I Am a Camera*, which was adapted from Christopher Isherwood's novel *Goodbye to Berlin*) explores Weimar Germany and the rise of Nazism. The show's comedic points are heavily underscored by the allusion to the depravities of WWII.



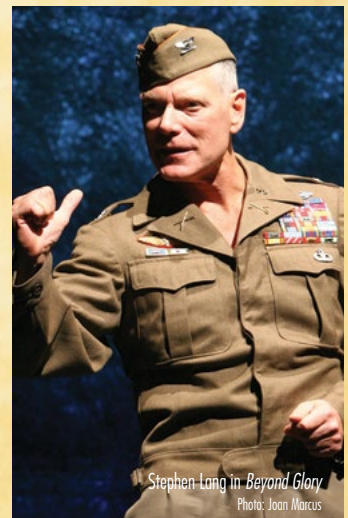
Tracy Letts and Annette Bening in  
Arthur Miller's *All My Sons*  
Photo: Joan Marcus



Owiso Odera in *The Overwhelming*  
Photo: Joan Marcus



Gayle Rankin and Aaron Krohn in  
the 2014 Revival of *Cabaret*  
Photo: Joan Marcus



Stephen Lang in *Beyond Glory*  
Photo: Joan Marcus

For more information on the Roundabout Archives, visit <https://archive.roundabouttheatre.org>  
or contact Tiffany Nixon, Roundabout Archivist, at [archives@roundabouttheatre.org](mailto:archives@roundabouttheatre.org)



**Ted Sod:** Tell us about yourself. Where were you born? How and when did you become the American Airlines Theatre's Associate House Manager?

**Zipporah Aguasvivas:** I was born in New York, the Bronx to be exact. I started with the Roundabout Theatre Company in 1995, selling t-shirts and hats. I went on to become an usher, and after a few years I was promoted to Assistant House Manager. My title changed to Associate House Manager years later when I was working at the American Airlines Theatre.

**TS:** Describe your job at RTC. What are your responsibilities?

**ZA:** Associate House Managing includes many things. In an effort to keep it short and sweet, I believe my job is to help the House Manager run the theatre. To know as much as possible about what they do so I can jump in at any time, if needed. I also have to be familiar with what the ushers do so I can help them as well. Another large part of the job is customer service. Helping the patrons have the best possible experience when they visit our theatre.

**TS:** What is the best part of your job? What is the hardest part?

**ZA:** One of the best things about my job is that it keeps me active. I'm always moving around, and I feel challenged every day, physically and mentally. I'm never bored. The hardest part is not being able to please everyone. It's impossible to make everyone happy all the time.

**TS:** Why do you choose to work at Roundabout?

**ZA:** I choose to work at Roundabout because for me it has a family atmosphere. My coworkers are like an extension of my family, and my theatre is like my second home.

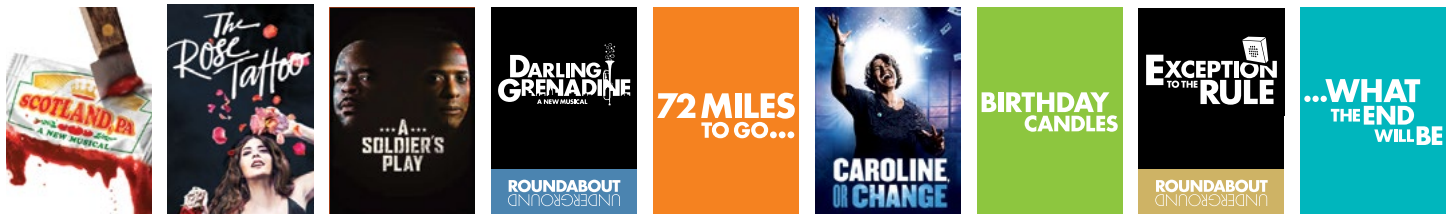


Zipporah Aguasvivas

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

**CLICK HERE TO VIEW THE WORKS CITED PAGE FOR THIS GUIDE.**

### ROUNABOUT THEATRE COMPANY • 2019-2020 SEASON



Roundabout Theatre Company (Todd Haimes, Artistic Director/CEO), a not-for-profit company founded in 1965, celebrates the power of theatre by spotlighting classics from the past, cultivating new works of the present, and educating minds for the future. More information on Roundabout's mission, history and programs can be found by visiting [roundabouttheatre.org](http://roundabouttheatre.org).

Learn more at [roundabouttheatre.org](http://roundabouttheatre.org). Find us on:





Jean Smart



Harriet Harris and Byron Jennings

THE Man WHO CAME TO Dinner



Nathan Lane

Photos: Joan Marcus

# IN THIS THEATRE

American Airlines Theatre<sup>SM</sup>

1. This building was originally known as the Selwyn Theatre. The theatre's first production, opening on October 2nd, 1918, was *Information Please*. Not a particularly auspicious start, the show would only run 46 performances.
2. By 1934 the Selwyn Theatre was screening films. In 1950, a new policy was introduced that mandated a new short play be staged before each screening—which totaled about 30 new live shows each week here.
3. American Airlines partnered with Roundabout Theatre Company to restore the venue back to its neo-Renaissance style in 1997. American Airlines continues to support Roundabout Theatre Company to this day, and the theatre was named in recognition of that support.
4. Roundabout's first production in the American Airlines Theatre<sup>SM</sup>, *The Man Who Came to Dinner*, opened on July 27, 2000, and was a huge success, going on to receive a Tony Award, a Drama Desk Award, and an Outer Critics Circle Award.

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