

## **`A Few Good Men' clicks with military precision**

**Dispatch/Argus –July 20, 2007 - by Julie Jensen**

The Richmond Hill Players' production of "A Few Good Men," directed by Joe DePauw, is intense. It's the story of two Marines being court-martialed in connection with the death of a member of their unit at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

The large cast -- 16 members, several of them playing multiple roles -- includes one female, Angie Keeney, playing Lt. Cmdr. Joann Galloway, a feisty Navy attorney who looks mighty sharp in uniform.

The stage becomes 10 different sets merely by moving chairs around, and it requires concentration to know where you are at any given time.

Jonathan Grafft plays the defense lawyer, Lt. j.g. Daniel Kaffee, who doesn't take the case seriously until Galloway forces him to do so. He has some funny lines, and he resists intimidation by his superiors admirably.

Don Hazen is Lt. j.g. Sam Weinberg, Kaffee's sidekick, who eagerly awaits his baby daughter's first word.

The defendants are Nicholas Waldbusser as Lance Cpl. Harold Dawson and Josh Johnson as Pfc. Loudon Downey. They stand at attention and shout the word "Sir!" repeatedly.

The victim, Pfc. William Santiago, played by Matt Melcher, is seldom seen, but the two men subjecting him to Code Red punishment make him an object of pity. What's it all about? Training him to respect unit, corps, God and country, in that order.

Renaud Hayman plays Lt. Johnathan Kendrick, who quotes the Bible and believes in a God of wrath.

Greg Cripple is Col. Nathan Jessup, a nasty piece of work, the commander of the base at Guantanamo Bay. It's satisfying to see him get his comeuppance at the trial.

Don Faust is the prosecutor, Capt. Jack Ross, and he raises Cain in the courtroom. Jim Pearce is Capt. Randolph, who presides over the court-martial, and he has some funny moments as he maintains order.

Greg Kerr is Lt. Col. Matthew Markinson, who wields a gun twice in the play, but I won't tell you how. His acting is admirable.

Thom May is Cmdr. Stone, the doctor who testifies at the court-martial. Archie Williams is Capt. Whittaker, Cpl. Hammaker and an MP, bringing military sharpness to all the roles.

This play is no laughing matter, but it has moments of levity, like the line about the Japanese pilot who didn't like jazz. He bombed Pearl Bailey.

You'll have to arrive at the verdict on your own after listening to the arguments.

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## **United States Marine Bore: "A Few Good Men," at the Richmond Hill Barn Theatre through July 22**

**River Cities Reader – July 18, 2007 - by Mike Schulz**

Imagine an episode of TV's *The West Wing* performed at half-speed, and underwater, and you may begin to approximate the experience of the Richmond Hill Barn Theatre's opening-night performance of *A Few Good Men*.

I'm exaggerating, of course. But I'm also trying to indicate just how spectacularly Aaron Sorkin's military courtroom drama has been botched with this production; a work that screams for speed and conviction

has been presented with neither. The fact that director Joe DePauw's show runs nearly three hours isn't, in itself, a detriment. Your being able to feel every second of those three hours *is*.

To be fair, the play isn't exactly Sorkin's finest offering. Written years before the author honed his talents on *Sports Night* and *The West Wing*, *A Few Good Men* - which concerns an upstart Navy lawyer who defends two Marines accused of murder - is a patchy combination of melodrama and wisecracks, too portentous to be a crackling good time, and too smart-alecky to be taken seriously. It does, however, showcase Sorkin's gifts for precisely delineated characters and snappy banter, and features the sort of juicy, barking monologues that performers love to deliver; it isn't a great work, but it's a pretty great work for *actors*.

Unfortunately, no one seems to have conveyed that to the Richmond Hill cast. At Thursday's presentation, none of the show's 16 ensemble members appeared happy about being there; line after line was read with dutiful, earnest competence (or less), but with little performance relish and almost no sense of what the dialogue *meant* - as *A Few Good Men* neared its climax, the production didn't build in intensity so much as the cast merely started *shouting* their lines.

To take the heat off the actors for a moment, the presentation itself was mostly a mess. Technically, *A Few Good Men* seems an extraordinarily difficult piece to perform in the Barn, as its continual locale changes and occasional flashbacks require both more space and more specific lighting effects than the venue's theatre-in-the-round allows. And you can sense the fluid style that DePauw is going for here, with actors freely traversing between scenes (and time periods), and new locations marked by subtle lighting cues.

Yet on Thursday, those cues were handled so ineffectively that it was often difficult to gauge where and when the characters were at any given time, and a few goofs were impossible to ignore. During one character's monologue, down-lights shined on both him and a front-row audience member on the opposite side of the stage, so we weren't initially sure *which* of them we were meant to focus on. And the lighting effect that closed Act I - a backlit tableau of an officer standing guard - was so tardy that what was intended as dramatic punctuation practically turned into its own *scene*.

Slowness, in truth, was the show's running motif. I had a foreboding as to what we were in for before the dialogue even started, with a doleful recording of "The Halls of Montezuma" signifying Seriousness and Importance and A Three-Hour Running Length right off the bat.

But I wasn't anticipating the deathly sluggishness of the dialogue rhythms themselves, which wound up killing the gags and neutering the drama. Sometimes it seemed that actors had been directed to speak as deliberately as possible - the weighty utterances of Nicholas Waldbusser, as the accused Lance Corporal Harold Dawson, were so consistent that they eventually felt right for the character - but in most cases, the torpor didn't feel intentional. It felt like the actors were in mortifying fear of forgetting their lines.

I have no way of knowing whether cast members were as ill-prepared for opening night as they appeared. But nearly actor for actor, all you could see was the *thought* behind the readings; even when deliveries felt committed - and they occasionally did - the pauses between the performers' exchanges gave them away. (Everyone here seems to have *barely* memorized the material.) The cast, none of whom made a true connection with their co-stars, displayed a discomfiting lack of confidence; I watched the show with apprehension and dread not because of Sorkin's script, but because I was waiting for a dropped line to stop the production cold.

Let it be said, at least, that Greg Kerr and Don Hazen had relaxed and conversational moments, and Renaud Hayman's delivery of the line "Ten minutes is up" was so naturalistic that it seemed like a *mistake*. I'd call his reading the most honest sound *in* this *A Few Good Men*, except it was topped by the ones coming from the gentleman sitting two rows in front of me. He was snoring.

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## Most of 'A Few Good Men' deserve salute

Quad City Times – July 19, 2007 - by Ruby Nancy

“A Few Good Men,” which opened this past weekend at the Richmond Hill Barn Theatre in Geneseo, Ill., is a military drama centering on the trial of two young Marines accused of murdering another soldier.

This Aaron Sorkin script has many tightly written scenes, great courtroom dialogue and characters who engage you in their individual perspectives. With a cast of 16 playing 23 roles — virtually all of them in uniform — and a script that calls for flashback sequences as well as extended courtroom scenes, the show challenges the actors and tech crew alike.

Happily for Richmond Hill audiences, most of the cast and crew are up to the task, and the resulting production is a generally satisfying, often-engrossing show.

Jonathan Grafft stars as Daniel Kaffee, a Harvard Law School grad and junior-grade lieutenant known as much for his love of softball as he is for his plea bargain-only record of courtroom avoidance. Kaffee is a smart-mouthed young lawyer who takes nothing (except his softball team) seriously, and Grafft gives the role a nicely drawn insouciance that is never overdone. In fact, Grafft's fantastic Kaffee is rich with subtlety, letting us see the progression from devil-may-care smart aleck to impassioned litigator — and his understated, powerful performance is at the heart of this show.

As Col. Nathan Jessup, the hard-edged career officer whose inflexible standards set in motion the chain of events leading to the death of the young Marine, Greg Cripple is also superb. His sunburned, wiry Jessup is shoe-leather tough, with a barking, power-drunk self-assurance that is viscerally real, and this demanding portrayal surpasses anything the talented Cripple — who is often typecast as dapper or urbane — has done to date. Grafft's performance is the central one, but Cripple's work is a riveting tour de force that practically steals the show, making their courtroom clash the drama's single finest moment.

Josh Johnson and Nicholas Waldbusser also do terrific work as the defendants, whose blind faith in the Marine Corps code has brought them to this trial. Waldbusser plays the principled Lance Cpl. Harold Dawson with a strong, minimalist intensity that is particularly effective; and Johnson turns in sensitive, evocative work as Pfc. Loudon Downey, the young private who is unable to understand exactly what is happening to him.

Other fine performances enrich this production as well, including Don Faust's authentic turn as a conflicted prosecutor, Matt Melcher's quiet readings (in flashbacks) as the private who is killed and Archie Williams's effective portrayal of three separate (and very different) roles. Don Hazen's genuine work as a Navy lawyer is laidback and thoughtful, and Greg Kerr is absolutely awesome as a captain with more prescience than tact.

Costumer Jean Melillo did well at the task of finding all the uniforms needed for this large ensemble, with almost every costume appearing (or at least approximating) authentic, and the simple production values let the actors' work shine. The major technical disappointment (at least on opening night) was the lighting, which failed to clearly differentiate between past and present - and sometimes seemed not to change at all.

More significantly, the actor playing Lt. Cmdr. Joann Galloway was not quite up to the challenge of playing this pivotal role. Angie Keeney (whose line readings often were emphasized by a forward jerk of her shoulders or a pouty glare rather than by vocal inflection) appeared in a few scenes where her character seemed on the verge of a child's tantrum, even to the point where I would not have been surprised to see her stamp her foot and stick out her tongue. While she did much better in the second act — and, to be fair, seemed to hit her marks and line cues throughout — her performance was not on par with the often-amazing work of her co-stars.

Despite its imperfections, however, this “A Few Good Men” is a fine show that fans of drama will not want to miss.

## Grafft enjoying Kaffee with 'A Few Good Men'

Dispatch/Argus –July 20, 2007 - by Claudia Loucks

GENESE0 -- Jonathan Grafft is enjoying his part as Kaffee in "A Few Good Men," the courtroom drama being staged by Geneseo's Richmond Hill Players.

Mr. Grafft said playing Kaffee is "a great deal of fun. The character's personality is an aspect of who I really am, but it is exciting to take that sarcastic wit to the stage.

"I have enjoyed working with the cast and look forward to sharing that energy throughout the performances."

"A Few Good Men" is a familiar title, but Mr. Grafft said the story is told quite differently in the play.

"I think the audience will enjoy the thought-provoking dialogue and subtext as we tell the story that is relevant to world affairs," he said. "We will be able to use the intimate setting of the Richmond Hill Barn Theater to enfold the audience in the passion of the storyline, while they still will be able to enjoy the overlying comic banter."

"A Few Good Men" is the first Richmond Hill production for Mr. Grafft. His previous stage appearances were in high-school plays in South Page, Iowa; he was cast as Bilbo Baggins in "The Hobbit" and as Bob McDonald in "The Egg and I."

Since those high-school days, he said, he has concentrated on career and family. "I've been talking about auditioning (with Richmond Hill) since we moved to Geneseo in 2005, and with the passing of my father last fall, I decided that life is too short to 'wait until later,' so I decided the time was right."

Having been in the audience for numerous Richmond Hill shows, Mr. Grafft noted that "It is a unique atmosphere. I have also attended several Broadway shows, and I enjoy the live energy of stage performances."

When he read the audition notice for "A Few Good Men," he said he decided to "give it a shot. My wife (Ann) has been incredible throughout the process, and I couldn't have done it without her support.

"I have always enjoyed the excitement and energy of the theater productions," he added. "The way an entire story can be told on one stage with limited space is magical. This opportunity to work with a great group of people and to help tell a story that is both enlightening and entertaining is truly a gift."

He sees himself continuing to be involved with the theater, and he credits the cast and director Joe DePauw "for patience and flexibility in accommodating my travel schedule for work so that I can get as much rehearsal time as possible."

