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Stormfield's opener is heroically touching

By **Bridgette M. Redman**

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"Heroes" makes for a compelling war story in part because the war is so rarely mentioned and exists only in the murky past. Yet its presence in the lives of the three characters is unmistakable.

Stormfield Theatre is producing this three-person show translated and adapted by Tom Stoppard from Gerald Sibleyras original French play. It's a gentle comedy filled with heart-felt moments. There are no villains in this piece, or rather, the antagonists are the ravages that combat has left on the bodies and minds of the three World War I veterans.

Philippe, Gustave and Henri have been home from "their" war for more than 40 years. They went as young men and came back permanently damaged. Henri (Richard Henzel) has spent 25 years in a nursing home for veterans run by nuns partly because of his bad leg and partly because he no longer fits into a society of "whole" people. Philippe (Richard Marlatt) has been there 10 years, but the previous years had been in the care of his sister; the shrapnel in his head has left him unable to perform any occupation as he passes out frequently. Gustave (Gary Houston) has been there a mere six months and is a recluse except for the other two vets and a 200-pound stone dog. Today we'd probably diagnose him with post-traumatic stress disorder, and we watch as he alternates between periods of haughty intelligence and puddles of quivering fear.

Henzel, Marlatt and Houston interpret these characters so brilliantly that you can never simply write them off as three crazy, cantankerous old men. For that matter, it was easy to forget they were actors, as they so assiduously portrayed the men with their fears, hopes, annoyances and disappointments. They were erudite gentleman of 1959, sitting pleasantly on a terrace wearing full suits and sweaters despite it being a warm August. Like companions anywhere, they sometimes dropped their sophisticated conversation for locker-room banter and coarser language, but never their dignity. Even when emotions flew high and their bodies and minds betrayed them, they still found shreds of dignity that they wore with pride.

Nor did they ever shed their compassion for each other, not even when they were annoyed or provoking each other. It was here that the trio displayed the greatest skill, for the compassion was shown in their expressions, in the way they moved and in the way they looked at each other. The words were, as Stoppard's always are, brilliant and insightful, but they played second fiddle to the subtext that Marlatt, Houston and Henzel exhibited with such depth.

"Heroes" questions whether veterans ever come home from their wars, or whether the stamp it leaves on them is a permanent one. In an even larger sense, it questions whether anyone recovers fully from traumatic events, or whether those events reshape them into people whose behavior from the outside can seem erratic and strange. What do we as a society do with our broken people? In the veteran's home, the three find solace in each other. The pain is too great for them to talk about, so they don't. They acknowledge it and they help each other up, but they don't try to psychoanalyze each other or seek out healing. Rather, they just keep fighting and making sure that none of them is left behind, not even the 200-pound stone dog. They provide each other with a kindness and only the most understanding and respectful form of pity.

Henri's disability is the most quickly apparent, for the cane and limp broadcast that his movements are limited. Henzel balances an innocent enthusiasm with perceptive gazes. He plays along with the insanity of

others because he has long grown bored, and he harbors a genuine compassion for those whose scars are mental.

Nor can Philippe's injuries be hidden for long, for the shrapnel in his head causes him to have fainting spells and to play tricks with his vision. He becomes upset and paranoid, succumbing to wild conspiracy theories. Marlatt never overplays this, but rather shows us a man who is well aware of his limitations even while being powerless to change them.

Houston creates a complex Gustave, whose internal battle has left him in full retreat. From the safety of the terrace he is biting, strong, intellectually sharp and witty. He takes charge with great comfort and is irascible in his criticism of the general populace, the care they receive and even his friends and companions. He lets the layers be peeled back slowly to reveal the wreckage that has caused him to be placed in a home until eventually he leaves the audience with no doubt as to the casualty the war has painted on him.

This tender, intense and often funny interaction between the three veterans home residents takes place upon a beautiful Kirk Domer set that beautifully captures a restful French countryside institution with its ivy crawling over stone walls and the wooden swinging doors. Tim Fox makes the most of the narrow space to create moody lighting that marks the transition of time.

In some ways, "Heroes" is a play about nothing; the plot is unimportant, it is merely an August; in other ways, the play is about everything that is important in our lives - relationships, independence, interdependence, love, hope, physical ability, mental fitness, loyalty and laughter.

REVIEW:

'Heroes'

Stormfield Theatre, 201 Morgan Lane, Lansing. Thursday-Sunday through Sep. 18. \$18-\$24. 517-372-0945.
<http://www.stormfieldtheatre.org>