

Virginia Arts Festival and NSU bring back live theater

BY MAL VINCENT CORRESPONDENT

The wait is over. Live theater is back. I'm not talking "virtually live," but actually live.

In the first scene of "A Soldier's Play" a shot rings out. In this production, that shot signals a distressingly rare event — a local, live, stage production — because of the restrictions placed on the arts beginning in March due to the coronavirus pandemic.

Co-sponsored by The Virginia Arts Festival and the Norfolk State University Theatre Company, the staging is being done at the outdoor courtyard behind the VAF's main offices in the Clay and Jay Barr Educational Center on Bank Street in downtown Norfolk.

From there you can see Chrysler Hall, which will remain dark until, possibly, September. According to the Seven Venues website, Chrysler Hall has nothing scheduled for this month and one item on the calendar for September: Black Jacket Symphony presents Pink Floyd's "The Wall" on the eleventh.

"A Soldier's Play" is set on a military base in the Louisiana of 1944, and these performances are meant to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the end of World War II. The original off-Broadway production in 1981 won the Pulitzer Prize for drama, and NSU productions of the play have earned Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival honors for Distinguished Performance by an Actor in a Play and Distinguished Performance and Production Ensemble, and an HBCU award for Best Fine Arts Program.

Playwright Charles Fuller wrote a who-done-it about the murder of a Black soldier on a segregated Louisiana Army base in 1944. He cries out "They'll still hate you!" before he is shot. The rest of the story is told in flashbacks, as we learn that the victim was an especially cruel sergeant who had given many men a reason to want him dead.

The courtyard setting was approved by the city only after the strictest cautions. Only some 50 will be able to attend each of the eight performances, running Wednesday through Aug. 15. (All of the performances have been sold out.) Social spacing and mask-wearing will be enforced. The entrance and exit of the audience will be staggered so that not everyone leave in a mass.

Indeed, if past outdoor performances are any indication, overhead airplanes may be more a threat than spacing the coronavirus.

Rob Cross, director of VAF, said that he is pleased to be able to “save” the production by finding this home. It had originally been set to be produced in May, but was one of many festival productions that fell victim to the virus.

The production is directed by Anthony Stockard, theater chairman at NSU. He confirmed that “we have been able to recruit alumni who have been successful elsewhere to come back and join the students. It is a learning opportunity for all.”

“A Soldier’s Play” was first staged off-Broadway in 1981 and revived in 1996. It did not reach Broadway until 29 years after its original production.

A 1984 movie version, renamed “A Soldier’s Story,” brought Fuller an Oscar nomination for best screenplay, and also was nominated for best picture, and best supporting actor (Adolph Caesar).

Fuller served in Korea and drew upon his military background to write it. In interviews later in life, he said he simply wanted to write a good, solid mystery. He didn’t think that the Pulitzer Prize committee would notice the subplots involving racism that gave the play added social importance then, and makes it feel vital and fresh today.