



Amelia

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January 9, 2012 By [Susan Galbraith](#) [2 Comments](#)

This simply presented production exemplifies the astonishing power of theatre to unexpectedly grab your heart and carry you off into an adventure of the soul.

It was an unexpectedly warm day in January, and I, for one, wanted to romp outside. But I knew what Washington Stage Guild is capable of, and so made my dutiful pilgrimage downtown as a theatre reviewer. I came away awed, acknowledging to myself what a shame it would have been to miss this authentic and most moving piece of theatre. I am both humbled and inspired by some of the best acting I have seen on the DC stage, indeed ever seen anywhere.



Shirleyann Kaladjian & Alex Webb
(Photo: C. Stanley Photography)

Amelia is what is called in theatre “biz” a two-hander. The two actors, Alex Webb and Shirleann Kaladjian, not only carried this show, they did it with very little set, no props, and just their passion and exceptional physical and vocal skills. Yet this simply presented production exemplifies the astonishing power of theatre to unexpectedly grab your heart and carry you off into an adventure of the soul.

Washington Stage Guild has produced this world premiere in its twenty-fifth Silver Anniversary season to commemorate the one hundredth and fiftieth anniversary of the Civil War’s outbreak. Taking on the Civil War seems a bit foolhardy. Hadn’t we heard in book, film, and television all we ever needed to know about

that troubling period of our history? Yet Artistic Director Bill Largess chose this work and directs the piece completely without theatrical fanfare or gimmicks in a style both spare and dangerously exposed—like watching a tightrope act sixty feet in the air. With lesser actors or with a less cohesive script, it could have been a disaster.

Alex Webb, who plays all roles except Amelia, is making his playwriting debut with this play. The language in the play is muscular yet very tender. Webb has a very good ear for dialogue and audiences should anticipate more very strong dramas to come. His *Amelia* is a lyrical and powerful story about a woman's determined quest to be reunited with her enlisted husband who's gone off to fight in the Union army. It is a journey that takes her from a farm in Pennsylvania to the battlefield of Gettysburg and south into the confederate prison of Andersonville in Georgia, an overcrowded, horrific place of unspeakable filth and violence. Webb balances humor with pathos, and strong graphic storytelling with moments of exquisite character revelation.

Kaladjian plays Amelia, a plain and emotionally-armored farm girl, who is transformed by love and what she sees as she travels through the war torn states. As she struggles to survive, in a landscape scorched by war and surrounded by desperate people, she faces all manner of hardship and fears. At one point she dresses and serves as a union soldier to join a regiment that will bring her closer to her husband Ethan. Kaladjian brings out both the feisty toughness of this woman and her emotional frailty facing such odds.

Webb plays fourteen or more characters including Amelia's Ma and Pa, a taciturn farmer, a southern belle, a negro slave involved in the Underground Railway, an Irish deserter, a wheezing colonel, and soldiers good and bad on both sides. At the heart of it, Webb is Ethan, Amelia's husband. With his heroic jaw and strong physical presence, Webb might have opted to create a glorious but wooden soldier in a story of military valor, the kind of role he has sometimes been cast in before. But here Webb is clearly not afraid to contort his body and his voice to access the humor, the cruelty, and the brokenness of both men and women in difficult circumstances. His lightning transformations not only deliver crisp little character portraits but communicate almost instantaneously authentic worldviews and deeply held secrets of these characters. His abilities in this vein are bold and uncannily sure.

There are no props in the show, no costume changes for Webb and minimal for Kaladjian, and minimalist but effective designs in set (by Carl Gudenius and Kirk Kristilibas) and lighting (by Marianne Meadows). What this pool of talent has pulled off in ninety minutes is something more artistic and nuanced than Ken Burns' whole series on the Civil War.

It's in the little human moments, far from the battlefield, that this play excels. One of my favorite moments is when Amelia, who has scorned any attempt to get her hitched, goes to a dance social and runs into the one eligible bachelor who has arrived recently in town. Neither of them knows how to dance or has ever tried, but this scene without words, as they watch the imaginary dancers and attempt to approximate social dancing, is both hysterical and deeply touching as these two stumbling fools try with all their heart to step up to the plate and give pleasure to the other. If there is the slightest suggestion I would have for adjustments to the script in the future, it would be to trim only a little of the verbiage and extend more moments of silent, physical expression, so delightful are these two actors in this area.

Another startling moment comes near the end of the show after we have watched Webb leave or almost leave the stage as one character then turn into another character. At the hospital, Webb enters as a medical assistant carrying an imaginary, critically wounded Ethan over his shoulder. He shoves him off his shoulder and as he lurches forward, he rolls onto the ground and onto his back as Ethan. There came a sharp intake of

breath from the audience so easy, neat, and believable was the transformation executed. It's one more sign of the inventiveness as well as the subtlety of Bill Largess' direction.

At one point the playwright has Ethan express his love for Amelia. "I try not to miss a word because I never know what's coming next." That is how I spent my afternoon at a matinee of this "abiding love story." I admit, like the girl in the title role, I fell in love.

If you are a civil war buff (or want to feel the rich history of our surrounding countryside come alive), an adventurer seeking an authentic experience, or simply a lover of stellar acting, don't miss this play.

Washington Stage Guild's production of *Amelia* runs thru Jan 29, 2012 at the Undercroft Theatre, 900 Massachusetts Ave NW, Washington, DC.

[Details](#)

[Tickets](#)

Amelia, A Story of Abiding Love

Written by Alex Webb

Directed by Bill Largess

Produced by Washington Stage Guild

Reviewed by Susan Galbraith

Highly Recommended

Running Time: 90 minutes without intermission



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Comments

1. *David Musselman* says:
January 18, 2012 at 5:09 pm

I saw this last weekend and was blown away. One of the best things I've seen in years, one of the best things the Stage Guild has ever done. This is a must-see!

2. *Nick Blair* says:
February 7, 2012 at 3:31 pm

Beautiful, beautiful show all around. Very moving, very theatrical. I loved it.

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