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Amelia, A Story Of Abiding Love

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Drama is new, but not modern

By Jane Horwitz
Thursday, Jan. 12, 2012

A corner of the Civil War comes vividly to life in "Amelia: A Story of Abiding Love." Washington

Stage Guild's production is about as far from cutting-edge theater as you can get. It is, instead, a trip back in time powered by good words, deft acting and clear direction.

The world premiere production of actor-playwright Alex Webb's 95-minute piece runs through Jan. 29. [The Stage Guild](#) performs in the Undercroft Theatre at Mount Vernon Place United Methodist Church.

Although it's a new play, "Amelia" fits the Stage Guild mission - George Bernard Shaw is their mascot - to do works rich in language, history and ideas. With his crystalline staging of the play, [Artistic Director Bill Largess](#) does extremely well by Webb, who's a Stage Guild alum, having performed with the 25-year-old company in its early years. In 2010, the Stage Guild collaborated with him on a reading at the Kennedy Center's Page-to-Stage festival.

Only two actors populate the small stage - Shirleyann Kaladjian as the title character and playwright Webb as everyone else, from Amelia's parents to her new love, Ethan, to all the people she meets as she heads south disguised as a Union soldier to find him after he's taken prisoner and sent to the Confederate prison camp in Georgia known as [Andersonville](#).

In one sense, the play is a showcase for Webb's chameleon-like acting skills, which are manifest as he morphs from a comically monosyllabic farmer into Amelia's kindly father and mother (not at the same time), various soldiers and an escaped slave who helps Amelia by moving her along a leg of the Underground Railroad.

There's a bit of Henry Fonda about Webb's physiognomy and his gift for playing laconic men with humor and feeling. A speech by a Union corporal describing how he saw one cannonball kill four men is particularly affecting, both in the writing and in Webb's delivery:

"First man, it took his head off his shoulders liked it was greased; second man, put a hole in his chest you could stick your head through; third man, cut him clean in half - that's my friend, Joshua; and the fourth man, more like a boy, tore out his loins. All dead. One cannonball. I ain't never gonna forget that. Hope I do, though."

But tour de force showcase or not, Webb has written a lovely script and found a feisty acting partner in Kaladjian, his real-life wife. Her Amelia is a slip of a woman with a waifish demeanor. As soon as she opens her



C. Stanley Photography

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Like

mouth, however, she's all sharp edges and strong opinions - a steely 1861 Pennsylvania farm girl whose refusal to flirt or flatter could doom her to spinsterhood.

It is her luck and her tragedy that she finds love. Ethan can match her wit for wit, and he says he *likes* smart women. It's wedlock made in heaven. Then war breaks out, and Ethan joins up.

Webb's play mines an intriguing sidebar of the Civil War. While researching a role for the play "[The Andersonville Trial](#)," he learned that several hundred women fought in the Civil War disguised as men or wore soldiers' garb so they could search for husbands and lovers.

Clad in the uniform of a dead Union soldier, Amelia slogs southward to find Ethan, even letting herself be taken prisoner, so she can get to Andersonville.

The scenic design by Carl F. Gudenius and Kirk Kristilibas celebrates simplicity (and a tight budget): a floor of wide, grayish planks; a burlap backdrop the color of a burnt-orange sunrise; scraps of split-rail fence framing the back of the stage like apostrophes; silhouette cutouts of tree branches marking the wings; and a bench.

Lighting designer Marianne Meadows marks changes of time, place and mood with gracefully shifting, occasionally breath-catching illuminations.

Sound designer Stowe Nelson's fragments of distant musket and cannon fire and plaintive violin melodies are effective. The recurring fiddle tune quotes a sacred song from the period, "There Is a Fountain."

"Amelia" is a rather staid piece of theater, and its final scene loses an emotional coup de grace by ending too quickly. Yet the Stage Guild's handsome production is highly affecting overall.

The folks at Ford's Theatre could easily incorporate a piece like "Amelia, A Story of Abiding Love" into their Civil War repertoire.

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