

"And Grace Will Lead Me Home"

Play recalls the horror of captivity, the joy of survival

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Senior Feature Writer

The horror of captivity. The sustenance of hope. The joy of survival.

Audiences witnessing "And Grace Will Lead Me Home: The American POW Drama," find it hard to describe their emotions following this powerful production that portrays the prisoner of war experience throughout history. Now playing at Georgia Southwestern University in Americus, the play continues through Saturday.

"We make people laugh. We make people cry," said Ron Martin of Atlanta, production manager for the project. "We know that it's a very strong project and it has proven to be very powerful for us and for our audiences."

Andersonville Prison, where Union soldiers were held captive by the Confederacy during the Civil War. Though much of its content deals with the Civil War, the play spans generations of captive experience, including World War II, and the Korean and Vietnam wars.

In preparing for the play, DeTitta interviewed a number of former prisoners of war to gain an understanding of how they viewed their captivity. Two of those interviewed, Bill Fornes of Valdosta and Bill Price of Marietta, appear in the play and tell of their experiences.

"It took me 20 years to learn how to eat rice again and 30 years before I could talk to people about my



Left to right, Todd Wilson, Ron Fross, Leonard House and Ken Johnson depict life at Andersonville Prison Camp during a performance of "And

Grace Will Lead Me Home: An American POW Drama," now playing in Americus. Special Photo

down over Japan and held captive for five months.

"For many years the only people I could talk to about my POW experiences were other former POWs and close family members," he said. "Sharing all of this first with the cast and then with the audience has really helped me put many things into perspective, even after all these years."

The powerful cast includes actors from across the country, as well as several area actors and musicians known for their talents. Among them are Kangelon Dexter, Bruce Wright, Bill Wright, William Wright, Wendy Wright and Jade Tucker, all of Albany. Deanna Higgins of Albany is music director for the production.

"The music is outstanding and the acting superb," Martin said of the project that has been in the making for the past couple of years. The play is well-suited for the entire family, he said, beginning with children around age 10.

"It is very moving ... most definitely a performance everyone can learn from," he added.

Fred Boyles, superintendent of the Andersonville Historic Site in Sumter County, agreed.

"This powerful drama captures the essence of the POW experience that is common to all who have

endured captivity under our aggressors," Boyles said. "(The Park Service) has taped interviews of former POWs and the one thread that runs

through all of their stories no matter how their individual confinements differed is the indomitable will to survive and to overcome the suffering and degradation."

"This play conveys the strength of the human spirit whether at Andersonville, in World War II, in Korea or Vietnam," he said.

The play also portrays the pain and suffering of black slaves.

Darendra Garth of Amer-

icus said the performance is inspirational.

"It showcases the spirit of blacks who never gave up hope, kept their eyes on the Lord and drew their strength from Him," she said.

"It took me 20 years to learn how to eat rice again and 30 years before I could talk to people about my captivity without feeling uncomfortable."

BILL FORNES,
Held captive for 13 months during the Korean War

Proceeds from the production will help in renovation of the historic Rylander Theater in downtown Americus, Martin said. Plans include setting the stage next summer for another performance at

Georgia Southwestern University, with future performances at the Rylander Theater upon its restoration.

The play will continue this week at 8 p.m. August 7 through Saturday at the Georgia Southwestern University Fine Arts Theater. Tickets are \$12 for adults and \$5 for children under 12. Group rates are available.

For tickets and information, call (912) 931-0001.



Yasuteru Torii, left, plays a Chinese interrogator questioning Michael Lopez, who

portrays an American prisoner of war. Special Photo

captivity without feeling uncomfortable," said Fornes, a fighter pilot shot down in Korea and held prisoner for 13 months.

A gunner during World War II, Price was gunned

Written by Tom DeTitta, writer in residence at GSW, and directed by Geoffrey Hitch of Pittsburgh, the play is set against the back drop of

Lifestyles

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Americus Times-Recorder

Friday, July 19, 1996

Beth
Alston

Managing
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Audience held captive by play

"Men are freest when they are most unconscious of freedom." - D.H. Lawrence

Is it possible to feel despondent yet uplifted, depleted yet overflowing, ravenous yet satiated, peaceful yet tumultuous? Yes, and to experience myriad other emotions as well.

Raw responses whorled through the audience following the premier of Tom DeTitta's "And Grace Will Lead Me Home: The American POW Drama," Wednesday night in the Fine Arts Theater on the campus of Georgia Southwestern State University.

Set primarily in and around Andersonville Confederate Prison during the final years of the Civil War, the play is dominated by powerful images from the very beginning. Three men slowly, quietly, enter in darkness from stage left and right while the house lights remain on.

Amidst greetings and general conversation of the half-full house, it takes us several minutes to realize the production has begun, as the trio enters the spotlight at center stage, assuming the stances of the figures in the Georgia Statue, sculpted by the late Bill Thompson of Athens.

The statue, dedicated to all POWs, stands at Andersonville National Historic Site and repre-

sents, according to some interpretations, the suffering of humanity, Christ and the angel of death. One POW's arm embraces the shoulders of the one at center who gestures beseechingly toward a seemingly uncertain yet hopeful future, while another, leaning on a crutch, is being supported by the man at center.

It is a dramatically stark and riveting beginning to a sprawling work with multiple perspectives of the prisoner of war experience throughout time, interwoven with threads of man's inhumanity to man, the indomitability of the spirit, the human condition, isolation, escape, justice and remembrance.

But foremost are the themes of survival and freedom as movingly narrated by two former POWs, Bill Fornes and Bill Price, who tell their own stories intermittently while action continues on the stage.

The set, the costumes, the lighting, the graphic black and white slides, as well as mostly a capella music, all lend to the authenticity of a work drawn from the history and culture of our area.

DeTitta has presented the people of Southwest Georgia a rare gift to be shared with others. He remains true to his subject and he allows us to know him.

Life within the confines of Andersonville Prison centers on four Union soldiers, each bringing his unique story and presence to bear in an epic of emotional suffering, captivity, starvation, disease, slavery of the soul and, consistently, a quest, a yearning for freedom.

"If we ain't working together to live, we're dying alone," one soldier implores to his fellow prisoners. We, as an audience, are fully involved.

We are imprisoned with them. We feel their pain, their hunger, their fear of themselves, of their captors, and of each other.

Perhaps the most powerful of many emotional scenes is the last, the storm sequence. The lighting is so close to reality you can almost smell the ozone. There is a velvet cloak of intimacy between the players and audience in this gently moving light. We are lulled.

This is when Frank Wiley, as Abraham, gives his gut-wrenching soliloquy, echoed by the testament of William Wright as his son, as the gospel angels offer an ephemeral musical backdrop.

It is once again, unifying and electrifying and disturbing in not uncomfortable ways. The audience feels a part of this experience. At play's end, the messages of the POW drama have been received. But it is overwhelming for us. Many weep openly and embrace each other, while others retreat alone to absorb or mourn or celebrate or reflect in private.

DeTitta has written and produced a play so vivid, so real, so painful, so powerful, so provocative that we each take something poignant home to ponder. We may not be certain what that something is, anymore than does Bill Price, who says that even years following his incarceration, he still searches for something, though he doesn't know what.

But we are closer to that knowledge now than we've ever been.

"Faith is not a perfect knowledge of things; therefore if we have faith we hope for things which are not seen, which are true." - The Book of Mormon



From left, Mayor Russell Thomas Jr., former POW Bill Price, Andrea Thomas and former POW Bill Fornes, at cast party.

POW DRAMA PREMIERS HERE



From left, Carolyn Turner talks with cast members Pamela Rowel-Andrews and William Wright.