



A courtroom scene from "The Andersonville Trial."

Photo by Cal Jones

drama

VLT's
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filled
'Trial'
marred
only
by
small
mistakes

The Very Little Theater took a big gamble when it decided to produce "The Andersonville Trial", and for the most part, the gamble paid off.

The play takes place in a courtroom in 1865 where Henry Wirz is being tried for criminal conspiracy. Wirz, an officer in the Confederate army, was in charge of a prison camp outside of Andersonville in which 14,000 Union soldiers died because of cruel and inhumane treatment. Wirz pleads that he was simply following orders, and to have done otherwise would have placed his own life in jeopardy. The entire court case slowly dwindles down to a question of whether or not Wirz should have disobeyed orders.

By the very nature of the play, it is very static. The judge remains seated most of the time, the witnesses are limited in their amount of movement, and the court Clerk and other assistants are not motivated to move very often. Any action and interest in this play must therefore be created by the dialogue and the actors.

The dialogue is certainly not exceptional. There are some good sharp comments, but they are few and far between. After a few witnesses, the questioning even becomes rather predictable.

Into a play with all of these drawbacks, director Henny Willis has placed a strong cast that prevents the play from being a two hour episode of "Day in Court."

The Judge Advocate and the Defense Counsel carry a large portion of the play and fortunately they are played by two of the strongest actors. Mark Bruce, as the Judge Advocate, exhibits an amazing amount of energy as he pressures each witness and works to get his points across. His quiet moments are also appropriately handled in a sincere and convincing manner.

His opponent is the Defense Counsel played by Kenneth Payne. Payne not only looks like the stereotyped lawyer, but he has an outstanding ability to make many of his lines sound so spontaneous that they seem to be ad libbed.

Two other standouts in the cast are Ed Banker Jr. as the bullish and frustrated President of the Court, and Don Porter as a simple minded witness. Both have strong grasps on their characters and consistently maintain them.

The fine acting level slips twice, at moments when strong acting is really needed. Kevin Leinbach plays a young soldier who describes the killing of one of his friends by dogs in the camp. The scene is played so intently that many of the words are lost between heaves and sighs.

Ron Field, who plays Wirz, is also plagued by this same problem but to an even greater degree. His final monologue is essentially the climax of the play. Unfortunately, it is simply overdone. His minor physical infirmities seem to creep over his whole body causing him to become a convulsive cripple. Much of what he says is either whispered too softly or lost in his cries. The only feeling evoked is one of pity (or frustration because he can't be understood), which only gets in the way of the sympathetic feeling that should be generated.

The lights dim in two spotlights towards the end of the play which seems incongruous with the realistic lighting of the rest of the play. Aside from this inconsistency, the technical aspects of the play are quite adequate.

The sparsely decorated set poses a few blocking problems. The judge's bench is set far upstage, and anyone who stands in front of it addressing the bench has his back to the audience. This position cannot be taken very often, thus limiting some movement.

The majority of the blocking is smooth and effortless, something which is especially difficult to achieve in this play. This is certainly a part of director Willis' fine work. Also, his pacing of the show is a credit to him. To have let the pace slow down in an inappropriate moment would have been deadly to the show, but Willis has the play trotting along at a fast, steady clip, and the few pauses are even more effective because of it.

Basically, "The Andersonville Trial" receives a pretty good production by the Very Little Theater. Those who really appreciate the play and its issues will probably find this production pleasing. It continues to run each night this week through Saturday.

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