

which donated a huge chunk of time and change for the students to have a space for their play. Eugeneans without a connection to the military might be reluctant, they acknowledge. "The building is intimidating to some people," Cortez says.

But director Schmor hopes for an audience far beyond the veterans and their families. After all, he's opposed to the war, and as he got involved with the play, he worried about how that would go over. "I'm a Prius-driving Obama sticker guy, and some of them tease me about it," he says.

The first time Schmor met with the entire group, a cast member mistook him for one of the Coombs brothers from across the lawn and started yelling (affectionate) obscenities at him. "So that was my introduction to them," he says.

But he was up for it. "In the theater, we're so ideologically locked; there are things we don't want to deal with. So it's been fun to work on material that may not be my own opinion," he says. He's glad for his learning curve. And, he adds, "I hope my righteously liberal students will go to the play too."

Theater Boot Camp

Schmor realized it for the first time in October: He didn't have to treat these students with kid gloves. As a matter of fact, once he got fed up with their chatting and teasing during performance classes and called them out on it, things improved dramatically. "I can bark at them, and they'll fall into line," he says.

On a Saturday in January he lets loose again. By this time, he's busy casting his play *Or Not to Be* for the Lord Leebrick



Theatre, and he doesn't have time for the self-consciousness or goofing around that marked the previous week's rehearsal. "I gave them the Nazi speech," he says at break. Not the one about fighting Nazis so much as the one where the director is the all-powerful leader, and they have to bow down before his will. "I said, no more fucking around. It's not about your individual experiences anymore. It's about how the play works as a whole."

In the week before showtime, the rain dripping outside of the rehearsal hall sounds a familiar refrain. Schmor tells them there's no time before the practice run to take one last pee break: They've got to be ready to roll. There's no set; four black bar stools are the only props. The lighting conditions aren't ideal. The actors aren't sure what to wear at the performances — plain T-shirts and jeans, maybe, or fleece jackets. Unmarked. Civilian clothes.

They stop talking. Lemuel Charley, whom they thought was going to be deployed to

Germany when the play opens, reads a video for the stage. His taped monologue, combined with a phone call later in the play, represents the absence of so many friends and colleagues — including those who have graduated or who have been redeployed.

Silence fills the room as one by one, the actors run downstage and ask their questions. They're serious now, no screwing around; they're focused. Patrice Baker slaps hands with Josh Coombs as he finishes a sequence about boot camp. A Navy vet makes the audience laugh with his line delivery. And Jeremy's wife Christina delivers a poem about planting seedlings while Jeremy sees combat. The poem adds weight to the perspectives of those at home worried about the ones they love.

Home isn't the location most of us identify with the military. "That's not a place we call the front," Schmor says, but he knows the U.S. military affects every one of us: Everyone who pays taxes, who

knows a service member, who has family or friends serving, who takes classes with these students or who drinks with them, attends a panel, comes to a play.

Telling gives these vets a focus, a feeling of community and support. Most of them hang out together anyway, but few of them have acting experience. They don't know, perhaps, that theater fosters a special kind of community during the process of the play, and maybe they don't know how hard it will be to return to life without play rehearsals, memorizing lines, learning blocking. They do see some advantages to the end of the process.

"My grades will go up!" Jeremy Coombs predicts. And Charley adds, "I'm going to get straight A's."

Even Schmor has big plans. "I bought a new house in September and moved in October." Now he'll finally unpack. His UO theater colleagues, he says, think he's crazy. "But sometimes you say to yourself, if it's a learning opportunity, you do it, and you'll pay for it later."

Beyond the play, the veterans do have a community, a constant web of phone calls, texts, emails, hanging out at the Coombs residence. Christina Coombs explains, "When vets tell their stories, there are so many and so wide-ranging, but this play is an hour and a half of concentrated, amazing stories."

Shane Addis adds, "People have a lot to gain from hearing our stories. Normally, they're for us, the privileged few. But they're some of the greatest stories you've ever heard." **EW**

Hear those stories at one of three free performances: 8 pm Friday, Feb. 8, and Saturday, Feb. 9, and 2 pm Sunday, Feb. 10, at the Veterans' Memorial Hall, 1626 Willamette. For more information, visit www.uoregon.edu/~vfjsa/telling/project.htm or email sjin@uoregon.edu

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