

Otterbein offers challenging Gulf War drama

By Michael Grossberg

Dispatch Theater Critic

Otterbein College Theatre can be applauded for taking a risk by committing itself to an annual spring production of a commissioned new play.

Otterbein takes even more risks with *Catnap Allegiance*, a nicely staged student production that opened last night on the Westerville campus.

Kia Corthron's impressionistic new drama about the Persian Gulf War is challenging in style, theme and violent, profanity-filled content.

Otterbein achieved a success last spring with Anthony Clarvoe's witty, literate adaptation of Dostoevski's *The Brothers Karamazov*, which has gone on to professional productions elsewhere.

No one can argue with a classic, but some might disagree with Corthron's highly contemporary, political and polemical play. To her credit, this up-and-coming New York playwright isn't afraid to raise some disturbing questions about the Gulf War. And isn't that part of what makes for an evening of provocative theater?

Director Ed Vaughan, who did a fine job helping shape *Karamazov* last year, does pretty well with Corthron's more amorphous and episod-

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Catnap Allegiance, Otterbein College Theatre's world premiere of Kia Corthron's Gulf War drama. Directed by Ed Vaughan.

Jeddie..... Aaron D. Carter
Heath..... Michael Faber
Theo..... Mark Van Oesen
Shale..... Rodney Cross
Father..... Yosvany Reyes

Remembering the war's victims — on both sides

Being presented at 8 tonight through Saturday and 2 p.m. Sunday — through June 4 — in the Campus Center Theatre, 100 W. Home St., Westerville.

Tickets cost \$8-\$9.50. Call 823-1109.

ic two-act work-in-progress. Dana White's lighting design is instrumental in delineating the many transitions from Saudi Arabia to Brooklyn, reality to fantasy and present to past.

Vaughan also shapes the four young actors who play the two black and two white U.S. soldiers into an ensemble team. Most subtly effective is

Aaron D. Carter's long-suffering, introspective Jeddie; most energizing is Mark Van Oesen's strutting Theo, a bigoted white soldier who keeps testing the others' limits.

New plays often need more work. This diffuse drama — reportedly cut a half hour in rehearsal — is no exception. The script needs more focus.

Is it an ensemble piece about the meaning of allegiance, as some desert scenes suggest? Or is it a drama about a black soldier's relationships with his Vietnam-damaged father (Yosvany Reyes, eloquently inarticulate), his fellow soldiers (including Rodney Cross' poetic Shale) and himself?

As the soldiers choke on invisible fumes and begin suffering from mysterious headaches, Corthron raises one more issue left unexplored.

Although some may lose patience with Corthron's subjective collage approach, which sets much of the action (and inaction) in Jeddie's mind, *Catnap* finally achieves a sense of muted anger and grief about the tragedy of war.

Corthron is most impassioned about the harm that war causes for both sides. She doesn't always translate her passion into a coherent story, but her strong belief that one must question one's allegiances comes through loud and clear.

War stories

Otterbein's graceful, inconsistent saga

Playwright Kia Corthron loves the English language.

Playwright Kia Corthron hated the Gulf War.

These two facts quickly become apparent while watching Otterbein's premiere production of **Catnap Allegiance**.

Corthron is so intent on her wordplay and anti-war message, in fact, that she sometimes neglects the mundane matter of creating a consistent style or believable characters.

During its best moments, *Catnap* has a poetic, stream-of-conscience quality that makes up for the deficiencies. Other times, it comes off as a work in progress that tries to say too much in too little time. Besides attacking the Gulf War, it also includes volleys against such targets as racism and governmental propaganda.

Director Ed Vaughan and his cast don't perform miracles with this earnest but uneven play. However, they do make the most of its strongest moments, when the characters are allowed to be more than walking symbols spouting billboard-type dialogue.

At the center of *Catnap* is Jeddie, a black soldier who has lost his attempt to

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RICHARD ADES



be declared a conscientious objector. The action leaps back and forth across time as it follows the reluctant Jeddie into battle and into a series of postwar skirmishes with his resentful father, a crippled Vietnam vet.

Aaron D. Carter is a tense, angry presence as Jeddie. Yosvany Reyes is much the same as the father, who spends his days watching television and speaking in strangely truncated sentences—when he speaks at all. The verbal conflict between the two veterans produces more heat than light, since Corthron doesn't explain why the father-son relationship is so strained.

The bulk of the play is spent on the battlefield as Jeddie and his platoon wait for the fighting to begin. Of Jeddie's three fellow soldiers, Mark Von Oesen makes the strongest impression as Theo, the script's least consistent character.

At first, Theo is a dumb, jingoistic racist who mocks Jeddie with comments about "sand niggers" and affirmative action. Later, he jumps outside reality by speaking in rhyming couplets. "I'm just analogizing," he explains, using language his former self wouldn't even recognize. Von Oesen is effective in both of Theo's incarnations.

Also waiting for the battle to begin are

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INFO:

Otterbein College Theatre will present *Catnap Allegiance* at 8 p.m. today through Saturday and 2 p.m. Sunday in the Campus Center Theatre, 100 W. Home St., Westerville. Tickets are \$8 today and Sunday, \$9.50 Friday and Saturday. 823-1109 (1-4:30 p.m. weekdays).

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Heath (Michael A. Faber), a white soldier who is justifiably suspicious of the pills the Army forces on them; and Shale (Rodney L. Cross), a black soldier who speaks in dreamy but pithy ramblings. (At least I think they're supposed to be pithy—Cross's soft voice makes it hard to hear all the words.)

Additional cast members, most appearing in more than one role, portray Army personnel and members of the press, among others. The most memorable are Adam Donmoyer's sadistic officer and Christopher M. De Paolo's Iraqi soldier.

During *Catnap*'s stronger moments, Otterbein's production trips along with skill and grace. In general, though, it only reveals that the playwright has more work to do on this Gulf War saga.

Otterbein play bites off more than viewers can chew

By DENNIS THOMPSON

Suburban News Theater Critic

Otterbein College Theatre's second entry in its annual new play presentation is *Catnap Allegiance*, a work by Kia Corthron about the Persian Gulf War and its effect both on a personal and national scale.

This becomes the rub. Corthron broaches so many issues on both a personal and societal level that we skip from one to another. Some are visited more than others, some developed, some simply tossed on the water.

She tries to cover it all, the war, public opinion, chemical warfare, Army attitude, family wounds, the press, the fleetingness of national allegiance.

The main story line follows the actions of four American soldiers, Jeddie, Heath, Theo and Shale. It's primarily Jeddie's story and



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we also see him at home with his family after the war trying to establish a relationship with his father, a wounded Vietnam veteran.

The beginning is rocky. Dialogue bounces along in a rather high tone, then the characters get intense with each other which becomes a signal to us that perhaps we should pay attention as something important may be going on.

The home scenes are the

least satisfying. The father mocks the boy, ignores him, but we don't know why. Adjustment issues become racial issues.

We later see the father doesn't feel their war experiences match up, but it is still not clear why he carries such a distaste for his son who we have come to know as an upstanding person.

Both father and son carry their own wounds. Ultimately, Corthron makes the point that war is atrocious no matter if it's short or long.

The play picks up at the end of the first act in a riveting sequence that follows Jeddie through his quest to be declared a conscientious

objector. Corthron leads us through a military attitude that hits enlistment public relations, Army training and the battle lines between military logic and personal conscience.

Aaron Carter plays Jeddie with sensitivity and a clear depiction of his conflicts. Carter, only a sophomore, appears to be a real find for the department. With his deep voiced resonance, and assured stage presence he shows a promising future as an actor.

Because he does it so well, Mark Von Oesen has often been asked in his Otterbein career to play characters of a powder-keg intensity. So while we've seen this before, Von Oesen's Theo is still an unsettling character that both captures our attention and raises our discomfort.

Rodney Cross plays the sleepy eyed Shale with an unperturbed lack of pretension. Although he occasionally is so laid back his performance washes out, his casual manner strikes a fine-tuned balance with the strong emotion that he brings to establish a presence that makes much of an impact.

Yosvany Reyes keenly establishes Jeddie's dad as another ambiguous, uncomfortable character, playing his unrelenting bitterness

with a finely tuned soft spokeness.

Tonya Watson doesn't have much to go on as Jeddie's mother. She clearly shows her love for both her son and husband but is given little by the playwright to clarify why during the father-son confrontations she backs her husband at every turn.

Multiple supporting characters are played by Rachel Chaves, Adam Donmoyer, Christopher De Paolo and Lisa Kneice. Strongest among these are Donmoyer's appearance as an officer and De Paolo's as a captured Iranian soldier, both very affecting moments.

Paul Marr's set design is indicative of the desert war zone with a sand background, boulder and bunker. The home scenes remain in this setting with a few adjustments, lighting that indicates a window and

a clever appearance of a television set.

Dana White's lighting design which mixes in reds and shadows contributes greatly to the atmosphere. So too does S.E. Reinick's sound design of battle noise, wind and sirens.

Corthron's play strikes a chord with many issues. But she raises more than she can effectively deal with. *Catnap Allegiance* thus becomes a play of moments, moving and powerful ones, but a play in which the parts are more satisfying than the whole.

Otterbein College Theatre's Catnap Allegiance continues at 8 p.m. today through Saturday and 2 p.m. Sunday at the Campus Center Theatre, 100 W. Home St. in Westerville. Tickets are \$9.50 Friday and Saturday and \$10 Wednesday, Thursday and Sunday. For more information call 823-1109.

Playwright awakens Persian Gulf War debate

By Michael Grossberg

Dispatch Theater Critic

Playwright Kia Corthron hasn't forgotten those who died in the 1991 Persian Gulf War.

She wrote *Catnap Allegiance* so other people would remember, too.

"Hundreds of thousands of Iraqi people died as a result of the war or its aftermath," Corthron said. "Several hundred Americans also died — the final count was about 300 — but people don't even think about that anymore."

Otterbein College Theatre, which launched a new-play program last year with a successful production of Anthony Clarvoe's *The Brothers Karamazov*, hopes to strike gold again with *Catnap Allegiance*.

The college

expects the play to provoke debate and even disagreement after it opens Wednesday.

"Although it has some comic moments," Corthron said, "*Catnap* is a serious play."

The drama explores the relationships



Corthron

among four soldiers — two white, two black.

"The first act is waiting for the bombs to fall," she said. "The climax is a confrontation that happens when the four soldiers come upon a young Iraqi soldier."

Catnap also explores the family relationships of the central character, Jeddie



Michael Faber, Mark Van Oesen and Aaron D. Carter, from left, struggle with Rodney Cross, on the ground, in a scene from *Catnap Allegiance*.

— a black soldier whose father fought in Vietnam.

"A big part of it is the father-son relationship," Corthron said. "The father, in a wheelchair because of an accident that happened in Vietnam, is very resentful of the son."

The play's unusual title is from Jeddie's monologue.

"He refers to the American catnap," she said. "When America does something like bombing a country, soon after it can easily be forgotten — as if it were some dream fantasy that no longer exists."

Corthron, 34, was active in the anti-war movement.

"Starving people because you're angry at their dictator doesn't make much sense. I don't know whether sanctions would have worked, but it would have been better than bombing the country."

"The problems here — unemployment, racism — are very distracting. People can get caught up in being patriotic almost as a relief from what's going on here."

Corthron, who grew up in Cumberland, Md., has called New York home since attending graduate school at Columbia University.

A college connection — classmate Christina Kirk, who teaches at Otterbein — led to the Otterbein commission.

Corthron has written seven plays that she likes.

Among them are *Cage Rhythm*, *Wake Up Lou Riser* and *Come Down Burning*, which had a staged reading last year at Otterbein.

In 1992, Corthron received the first Van Lier Playwriting Fellowship from the off-Broadway Manhattan Theatre Club. She has won the New Professional Theatre Screenplay/Playwriting Festival.

Soon after the war, she wrote the first draft of *Catnap Allegiance* under a commission from the Manhattan Theatre Club. She rewrote the script during the past year after receiving Otterbein's commission.

"The students are really strong at Otterbein," she said, "so I feel really fortunate."

Most of her commissions — from Chicago's Goodman Theatre and New York's Second Theatre, for example — have restricted her to entirely new works.

"I've never had a commission where I could pull out an older play and rewrite it," she said. "The idea was to focus and sharpen the script. It was much more directly political before. Originally, the 12 scenes were like 12 little plays. Even now, the play's 11 scenes feel very large, almost epic — but I feel I've focused it more."

Corthron, who arrived May 11 for rehearsals and plans to attend opening night, hopes her play reminds people of the war and its victims.

"I hope that what happened to the Iraqi people can become more personal for audiences."

■ Otterbein College Theatre will present *Catnap Allegiance* at 7:30 p.m. Wednesday, 8 p.m. Thursday-Saturday and 2 p.m. Sunday — and through June 4 — in the Campus Center Theatre, 100 W. Home St., Westerville. Tickets cost \$8-\$9.50. Call 823-1109.

Otterbein commissions play about black Gulf War veterans

By Michael Grossberg

Dispatch Theater Critic

Otterbein College Theatre has commissioned noted playwright Kia Corthron to write *Catnap Allegiance* for its season finale.

The new play, set to open May 24 in the Campus Center Theatre, focuses on black soldiers during the Persian Gulf War.

Otterbein launched its new-play program last season with an acclaimed world premiere of Ohio playwright Anthony Clarvoe's adaptation of *The Brothers Karamazov*.

That show did "extremely well" at the box office, according to Tod Wilson, Otterbein College Theatre managing director.

"We couldn't have had a better first experience," Wilson said. "We may not always have that kind of success, but that was a perfect way to launch our new-play project."

Corthron, who was featured in the October issue of *American Theatre* magazine, is known for plays that give voice to the voiceless.

Her hard-hitting plays, which often focus on victims of racism and



Kia Corthron

... voices for the voiceless

the government, address political issues in the human struggle.

Corthron has received commissions from the Manhattan Theatre Club, the Long Wharf Theatre and Second Stage Theatre.

Her other works include *Cage Rhythm*, *Come Down Burning* and *Wake Up Lou Riser*. *Come Down Burning* will be included in *Plays by American Women of Color* and *The Best American Short Plays 1993-94*.

In *Catnap Allegiance*, the soldiers, pumped full of inadequately explained and risky combinations of medicine, are ordered to "take no prisoners ... eliminate and go."

The New York-based playwright, winner of the New Professional Theatre Screenplay/Playwriting Festival, has had plays produced at Long Wharf, off-Broadway's Circle Repertory Company and Columbia University.

Her work appears in *Moon Marked and Touched by the Sun*, a Theatre Communications Group anthology of black women playwrights.

Catnap Allegiance will be performed May 24-28 and May 31-June 4 in the Campus Center Theatre, 100 W. Home St., Westerville.

To reserve tickets, \$8 and \$9.50, call the Otterbein College Theatre box office at 823-1109.