

Zoetic unveils a powerful 'Fear Up Harsh' at the Arsht

BY CHRISTINE DOLEN
cdolen@MiamiHerald.com



Justin Namon

Karen Stephens tells Jessica Brooke Sanford about her disintegrating post-war life in the Zoetic Stage world premiere of Christopher Demos-Brown's 'Fear Up Harsh.'

Glory and shame, truth and secrets, the ongoing price of valor: Miami playwright Christopher Demos-Brown explores those notions and more in *Fear Up Harsh*, an engrossing new play now getting its Zoetic Stage world premiere at the Adrienne Arsht Center for the Performing Arts.

Incisive, amusing, sardonic and finally deeply affecting, the play underscores strengths Demos-Brown demonstrated in his earlier Carbonell Award-winning *When the Sun Shone Brighter* and the tart comedy *Captiva*. This is a playwright who crafts smart, insightful dialogue and memorable characters in service of compelling, engagingly theatrical stories.

In *Fear Up Harsh*, Demos-Brown takes theatergoers into the world of military men and women, focusing on combat and sacrifice, how those deemed heroes are honored, and how war forever alters life for those who fight.

The play's designated hero is former Marine Capt. Robert "Rob" Wellman (Shane Tanner), a man who lost the use of his legs after saving several fellow soldiers during a firefight in Muqdadiyah, Iraq. Despite his partial paralysis and a shattered marriage, Rob has built a life that works with his 17-year-old daughter Shawn (Jessica Brooke Sanford), a girl likely headed for the Air Force Academy. Owner of a chain of home

improvement stores, Rob has parlayed the Medal of Honor he was awarded after a slow, manipulative vetting process into success and public esteem.

The counterpoint to Rob's post-war experience is Army Cpl. Mary Jean Boudreaux (Karen Stephens), who saved Rob's life after he rescued the others. Still in the military, with burn scars on her face and arm and deeper wounds to her soul, Mary (or "Redbone," as Rob calls her) is bottoming out. Post-traumatic stress disorder, a drinking problem, domestic violence that ended her relationship with the woman she loved -- all bedevil a brave soldier. Worse, discovery of the disastrous enhanced interrogation of an Iraqi woman may lead to Mary's trial and imprisonment. Rob, who was there too, could help her. But will the hero risk everything?

Exploring many moral shades of gray, Demos-Brown pushes his story back and forth in time, illuminating the spin and omissions that shaped Rob's wartime narrative. Zoetic artistic director Stuart Meltzer keeps the production's in-the-moment storytelling simple and clear, so there's no confusion as a good man's myth begins to unravel.

Brechtian make-believe, in which the audience becomes complicit, is always in evidence on Jodi Dellaventura's malleable set, a rubble-surrounded platform that becomes Rob's home, the battlefield, military and other offices. Tanner walks to the wheelchair, sits and becomes paralyzed Rob. Tanner, Stephens and the multitasking Stephen G. Anthony appear to torture Sanford, who doubles as the Iraqi prisoner. But by then, we're buying every moment of Fear Up Harsh, so we shudder and recoil.

In bringing the play to life for the first time, each actor communicates the complexities and contradictions of Demos-Brown's richly written characters. Tanner, a real-life Army veteran, brings a military bearing, discipline and self-control to Rob, yet he lets Rob's softening love for his daughter fleetingly transform his face. Sanford is persuasive as a girl whose desire to please her dad trumps a scarcely explored rebellious streak. Anthony is funny, foul and always effective as a variety of military men, a cop and a bullying Pentagon aide.

Stephens, who basks in loud cheers during the curtain call (and deserves every one), is superb as the fierce, broken Mary. Demos-Brown crafted the role for her, and one of the region's best actors makes every quip, every comeback, every moment of confessional heartbreak her own. Add the joy of seeing a brilliant performer at the top of her game to the provocative experience of watching an artfully crafted new play sure to spark debate, and Zoetic's Fear Up Harsh becomes must-see theater.

Read more here: <http://www.miamiherald.com/2013/11/09/v-print/3741856/zoetic-unveils-a-powerful-fear.html#storylink=cpy>