

Demos-Brown's Fear Up Harsh At Zoetic Is Explosive Inquiry Into Our Need For Heroes

by Bill Hirschman

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While paying all due respect to those who serve our country, Christopher Demos-Brown's *Fear Up Harsh* is a mercilessly penetrating interrogation of how our need for heroes — a need even among the heroes themselves — can trump the very values of truth, honor and loyalty that they fought to preserve

This compelling world premiere at Zoetic Stage is like watching a Humvee drive toward the IED you know is planted in the road and be stunned by the explosion, first in slow-motion and culminating in an annihilating blast.

The universally terrific cast directed by Stuart Meltzer features a world-class performance, no exaggeration, by Karen Stephens who invests truth and life into the familiar trope of a physically and mentally scarred veteran who can no longer find home back home.

But the linchpin character is Robert "Rob" Wellman (Shane Tanner), a Marine captain wounded in Iraq while rescuing six soldiers from an ambush and now nominated for the Congressional Medal of Honor. He has returned home haunted by the horror; soon he loses his wife but retains custody of his daughter Shawn (Jessica Brooke Sanford). Over nearly three years, he creates a string of DIY supply stores, promoted through TV commercials in which the wheelchair-bound Marine in his dress uniform says, "We don't just help you build a home, we help you build with pride and honor."

He also uses a combination of claustrophobically tight military discipline and profound love to mold the bright and vivacious Shawn into a solid candidate for the Air Force Academy.

Wellman seems willing to receive the accolade but uncomfortable with the growing attention as the presentation ceremony approaches. A Pentagon aide (one of several roles for Stephen G. Anthony) tells him, "You have no idea, do you? Once that medal gets put around your neck? You're untouchable. You could go all Columbine on us, they'd still give you a key to the city....I'd wish you good luck, Captain. But you're never gonna need it again."

The vetting process for the award, seen in flashbacks, is lengthy and complex. They also reveal bit-by-bit that the heroic incident is tainted by "circumstances" with the details parceled out during the play.



Mary Jean Boudreau (Karen Stephens) as a physically and emotionally wounded veteran meets Shawn (Jessica Brooke Sanford), the daughter of her comrade-in-arms in the world premiere of Christopher Demos-Brown's *Fear Up Harsh* at Zoetic Stage / Photo by Justin Namon

But the last thing the military bureaucracy wants is gray areas. A brigadier general notes that it has been 30 years since a living Marine received the award. “You have earned this, but this belongs to the Corps.... For someone about to become a demigod, you seem... reticent.” Rob says he doesn’t want to be a demi-god.

To which the general replies, “The hell you don’t. This right here’s why we (soldiers) give up civilian lives, SUVs and fantasy football. I got shrapnel from a bouncing Betty in this shoulder... pauper’s pension and a closet full of polyester. This is what it’s all for. This is why we do it.”

But he goes one more step, implicating the public: “This has very little to do with your actions on the battlefield.... A sovereign nation, through its people, demands sacrifice of the few to preserve the values and security of the many. This... is the people’s imprimatur.”

As the newsman says in the film, *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, “when the truth becomes legend, print the legend.”

Rob’s carefully constructed life is about to unravel. One night, Shawn comes home to find the vision of African-American Corporal Mary Jean Boudreau inside their living room. Boudreau (Stephens) is an unnerving sight, the right side of her face still showing the scars and burns from the same incident that injured Rob. She is sitting with her legs sprawled, dreads tied in a ponytail, dressed in illegally cut-off desert fatigues and swilling Rob’s fine Glenfiddich.

As whip smart as she is articulately blunt, Boudreau has her secrets. Right now she is drunk and waiting to see her comrade-in-arms Rob who, it turns out, she had rescued after Rob had finished his heroic action. She banters with the girl in a hilarious in-your-face collision of cultures. When Mary Jean rags on *Charlotte’s Web* that she has just taken from Shawn’s bedroom, the teen says paternalistically, “I just... I still can’t believe you never read it.” To which Mary Jean says, “Oh, boo.... I’m bettin’ your love of fine children’s literature ain’t the only way you and me grew up different.”

Later she cites a soldier who died next to her: “One of ‘em was Private Sergio Ortega from Hialeah, Florida. Ever heard of him? Nah. But I bet you can name all the Kardashians . . . can’t you?”

It’s only the first way Demos-Brown underscores that the melting pot of the military doesn’t erase that its inhabitants came from – and return to – very different homesteads and different values.

When Rob returns, he is at first stunned to see her, for more reasons than we initially know, but the bond of blood kicks in almost instantly. She reveals to him that she is deeply troubled. She cannot fit back in. Her profound relationship with the love of her life, Priscilla, has fallen apart over her alcoholism and the gulf of guilt that the war has put between her and humanity.

She says, “Yeah... that war fucked all of us up pretty good, didn’t it? I lied and told the VA people this (the scar on her face) still hurts so they’d keep writing me up for my meds. Them pills the only thing make me stop tasting hemoglobin all the time... and seeing the inside of that Humvee... all soaked with...”

Mary Jean knows the truth of what happened in Iraq and while Rob is glad to put her up for a little while, she poses a danger to the pride, stability and relationship with his daughter that he has built.

And from there, things get complicated. Much of this moves at a steady but deliberate pace like the deceptively contained exterior of a volcano. But when the eruption occurs, destruction is everywhere including our own perceptions of what has come before.

Without spoiling anything, we hope, much of the play is about betrayals among people and institutions who are trusted or we trust or who trust each other with this article of faith, "I've got your back." Rucker Stephen Stills said during the socio-political revolution of the 1960s that it had to be done with integrity "because we're supposed to be some kind of different." But Demos-Brown seems to say that we aren't; we are all flawed human being simultaneously housing the seeds of heroism and betrayal.

South Florida resident and Zoetic co-founder Demos-Brown, who last wrote *Captiva* for Zoetic, seems to grow steadily in his assured command of playwriting expertise. Armed with prosaic language carefully crafted to seem naturalistic, Demos-Brown creates real recognizable characters and puts them in stressful situations. The rhythm of his language is especially impressive: the snappy banter between Shawn and Mary Jean, Mary Jean's halting recollection of the central tragedy or the steamrolling pressure from military brass on Rob. In the vetting sessions, Demos-Brown and Meltzer have the brass continually ask questions of Rob, then ignore the answers or cut him off before he can object.

But Demos-Brown's work may not be lovelier, more evocative, funnier and more moving than as Mary Jean recalls coming home to her beloved Priscilla.

"She was one of them people you curl up in they arms, you think Jesus might be real. Soft as sour cream. Beautiful. And sexy! Lawd... Girl was kinkier than a five dollar garden hose, you know? I'd wake up in the morning next to her... her pretty sour breath rising up and down real slow. Blowing finna make a pall of love over me.... I'd lie there afraid to break the spell of being so happy. 'Till I had to pee so bad I'd waddle to the bathroom, you know... The thing is... When I came home from the war... I didn't feel a thing for her no more. That girl's sour breath just sour breath now. Never knew I could miss someone so bad lying right there with 'em."

Great performances, as most actors will tell you, are usually a collaboration of actor, playwright and director – certainly this one is. But having watched Stephens in several other works, her innate talent and acquired skill almost always triumphs even when the script and direction are problematic. (Full disclosure: Stephens is a co-host with this critic on BECON-TV's *Spotlight On The Arts* program.) Anyone who has seen her in her solo turn inhabiting a dozen characters in *Bridge & Tunnel* or her pragmatic mother in the Maltz Jupiter Theatre's *Doubt* knows what she can do.

A stereotype has evolved of a sassy black woman with an acerbic wit, quick intelligence and hyper-articulate forged from a pragmatic life on the mean streets. Demos-Brown has not written a stereotype, but those same qualities are, indeed, part of Boudreau's character. So credit the Stephens/Demos-Brown/Meltzer triumvirate for keeping it real in the literal sense.

Stephens delivers Mary Jean's curse of knowing the truth and being unable to escape its permanent blowback. She also creates the tragic division between the world of warfare and the world back home, a disconnect so massive that the sometimes facile sentiment "Thank you for your service" cannot bridge. The result is a bluntness that has no respect for polite niceties.

Tanner, often erroneously pigeonholed as a musical theater actor, nails the difficult task of melding Wellman's ambivalence, pride, love for his daughter, fear, guilt and half-dozen other warring qualities. Tanner and Demos-Brown make it clear that Wellman is, indeed, literally in deed, a hero, but also an imperfect human being. You sense that Wellman is holding back secrets, but Tanner stoically never lets you see the pain until his furious outburst near the finale.

Newcomer Sanford, a recent New World grad, is fine as the teenager who adores her father and shares many of his traditional values, but who harbors a secret desire to be a punk rock musician. One of the funniest moments in this drama laced with humor is her rendition of a terrible song that her band plays.

Anthony plays probably a half dozen military types up and down the command chain, making each one absolutely different from the other and yet obviously all cut from the same cloth of bureaucracy.

Demos-Brown did not serve in the military (Tanner did) but he consulted with those who did and he has produced clear-eyed reportage. In one scene back stateside, a comrade who lost an eye tells Rob he has been ordered to sanitize his account of the action in question. The colleague is willing but he says with a bemused resentment and acceptance of the way the system works:

“We’re all goddamned heroes. Just for enlisting. I could be back in San Jose right now killing it as a real estate broker....Instead... just like every other asshole jarhead over here—just like you— My... you know (indicating the center of his torso) my “me place” went all jello-y when those fuckin’ towers fell.... And next thing you know— we were all: “Sign me up! Sign me up!” All of us jerking off to pictures of Pat Tillman. Shit... My first leave... when I got off the plane in Atlanta and the people in the airport terminal stood up and clapped? I thought it was the greatest moment of my life. How big a dumbass was I?... I’m gonna write a nice, clean narrative. Know why? ‘Cause I’ve faced down death in combat with about half a dozen other human beings— and you happen to be one of ‘em. We’ve worn blood together. I love you. In a way I’ll never love my own fuckin’ wife. But I know... and you know... that you were just looking out for the guy right next to you. Same as all of us. Nothing more special than that.”

The show is presented with the audience surrounding a thrust platform on three sides. Jodi Dellaventura’s design surrounds the platform with drone-pummeled debris, broken cinderblocks and tops it with an elegant chandelier hung from the rafters. A backdrop depicts what looks like a bullet-shattered windshield with spider cracks rippling outward. The result is that although few scenes occur overseas, the war remains in the audience’s consciousness as well as the characters’.

Between the audience and the platform on all three sides is a wide aisle that doubles as a playing area. Meltzer uses all of these areas, so that a character may be on stage conversing with another character circling the stage in the aisles. He also often places Wellman in his wheelchair with his back to the audience in the vetting scenes, as if things are happening to him.

FYI: The title is a military term referring to mild form of torture in field interrogations authorized by the Defense Department.

Earlier this year, we raved about the draft of this script at a staged reading with Stephens, Anthony, Arielle Hoffman and Clive Cholerton. Anytime you enthuse about something – as we did citing this as one of the shows we most wanted to see – you fear you’ve oversold the promise. There’s no fear of that here.

***Fear Up Harsh* from Zoetic Stage, part of the Theater Up Close series, runs through Nov. 24 at the Carnival Studio Theater, Ziff Ballet Opera House, Adrienne Arsht Center, 1300 Biscayne Boulevard, Miami. Performances are 7:30 p.m. Wednesday-Saturday, 4 p.m. Sunday. Running time 95 minutes with no intermission. Tickets are \$45. Call (305) 949-6672 or visit www.arshtcenter.org.**