



## Area author's play gets transposed to foreign stages

BY KEVIN KINDER

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FAYETTEVILLE — Watching a group of actors he'd barely met performing in a language he barely understands, Bob Ford could still recognize the story.

After all, it was one he authored.

Ford, playwright in residence and artistic director for local company TheatreSquared, wrote "My Father's War" with the idea that it might have universal appeal.

But he couldn't imagine how much it would mean to audiences in Germany and Italy or how well it would translate.

Amy Herzberg, Ford's wife, made the European trip with him.

"It didn't seem like it was in Italian ... You could understand what was going on in need and feeling," she said.

The play centers on the story of a woman who is transported into the same foxholes and front lines her father endured during World War II as she relives his battlefield exploits. The accounts of the war are based on the real life experiences of U.S. Army Pvt.

Arthur Herzberg.

It was several years ago while Ford was on a trip to Normandy Beach with his wife - Pvt. Herzberg's daughter - that the inspiration for the play struck. She was chatting with her father via pay phone while on the beach, and watching her verbally walk through her father's war narrative created the basic storytelling device Ford would employ in "My Father's War," which debuted in May 2008 as a TheatreSquared production.

The local staging included Amy Herzberg, a partner in TheatreSquared who also teaches drama at the University of Arkansas, in the starring role.

Through a grant, and the couple's connections in the theater world, they arranged for two staged readings in Germany and a fully staged and costumed production at a theater festival in Italy.

Herzberg and Ford were aided in finding German theater contacts by former Fayetteville resident Erimar Vonder-Osten, who saw the play when it debuted locally.

Like Herzberg's father, Vonder-Osten's father was the last man standing in his platoon, except he was fighting on the German side of the conflict. After Vonder-Osten moved back to Germany, he encouraged the Fayetteville couple to present the show there.

More than a year later, that became reality when "My Father's War" was presented as a staged reading in two German cities, first in Casekow, deep into what would have been East Germany, and the second evening in Berlin.

Both readings were conducted with Amy Herzberg reprising her role with a company of English-speaking actors based in Germany occupying the other parts.

The crowd there responded differently from those here in Fayetteville, Ford and Herzberg agreed, perhaps in part because they have a different perspective on a war that was fought on their own turf.

"There were people who were touched, and are continuously touched, by the war," Herzberg said.

The German reaction, one that the playwright in Ford very much wanted to see, was much quieter and somber

It wasn't all sullen, however. The German audiences particularly laughed at the American soldiers characterized in the show's bastardized attempts at the German language.

After the German performances concluded, Herzberg and Ford met with University of Arkansas professor and piano virtuoso Jura Margulis, who they watched perform a concert in southern Germany.

Ford and Herzberg then traveled to Italy and were for several weeks based in Genoa. "My Father's War," or, when translated into Italian, "La guerra di mi padre," was staged in late July in the nearby port city Rapallo, Italy, by an Italian company as part of the Valle Christi Theatre Festival.

Company producer Kiara Pipino translated Ford's script into Italian for the production. It used an all-Italian cast with one exception - a part was written for Herzberg, who has only a passing understanding of the Italian language.

She began the production by reciting the opening monologue in English as the woman who would eventually play the role Herzberg first created waited just offstage. They then met onstage, with Christina Pasino, the Italian actress, accepting a flower and a red blazer from Herzberg, who then left the stage and sat in the audience. The show then continued in Italian.

Although it wasn't announced, the crowd understood Amy's connection to the story, Ford said.

"They knew, implicitly, that Amy was Amy," he said.

"It was really lovely."

Likewise, the play was interpreted differently in Italy than it was in Germany or America. Some of the humor that American audiences might have understood, such as a cameo by a John Wayne-type character, was lost on the Italian crowd, as were some of the jokes that were inspired by Arthur Herzberg, a natural born storyteller and jokester.

More importantly, however, Ford learned that despite the differences in appearances, takes and stage constraints, "My Father's War" still had a message, whatever the language and country.

"They had a different slant," he said of the foreign productions. "They play lived and we [he and Herzberg] absolutely loved it.

There is a lot of malleability in this play."

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