

“You Can Clean a Gun With a Tampon”

In Their Footsteps, tells the stories of five American women who volunteered to serve in the Viet Nam War. After a comical cursory screening process, it seems any woman who was young and foolish enough to volunteer could hop on a plane and land in what they thought was an exciting far away place. Their stories made me laugh, you can clean a gun with a tampon. They also made me sad when we learn these stories have been waiting to be told for 50 years.

Writer and Director, Ashley Adelman, weaves these stories created from the interviews of just five of the thousands of women who served in Viet Nam. Seamless transitions take us from present, to past, to flashback and back again. The sequences jump to the past with the use of sound effects by the actors. A crate falling to the floor becomes a bomb, a hand slap on a thigh becomes a gunshot and a hand fan becomes the whirl of an incoming chopper.

Kate Szekely, as Ann Kelsey the librarian, plays the part with subtle humor as she selects reading material that may be of interest to a young man. He seems to agree as he holds it sideways to drop a centerfold. Szekely switches easily from librarian to MP to Bob Hope swinging a golf club on stage and making a joke about hemlines and taxes. Her voice is rich and defines her different roles so clearly.

The complicated Intelligence Specialist “Lucki” Allen, is played by Chrystal Bethell. Bethell shows a range of ability as she shows us a brave, loved little girl, a serious, dedicated soldier and a frustrated and crushed woman trying to be heard in a man’s world. She manages to hold all of these aspects of her character on her face simultaneously.

Criena House, plays Lily Adams, a tough Army Nurse who loves rock music and flying. In an especially poignant scene, she shares a tender moment with a soldier. We see the depth of her tough nurse demeanor melt as House moves and speaks with a palpable tenderness. Her character does the forbidden and shares her first name with a soldier in pain.

Co-writer Caroline Peters plays Recreational Employee, Judy Jenkins Gaudino. Peters plays this serious and silly all at once. Her voice is girlish as she describes her first day in Viet Nam on a romantic roof-top date with a superior officer. Her physicality and clueless facial expressions are hilarious as she tells of surprising soldiers on guard at Christmastime dressed as Santa. She ages before our eyes as she tells of scissors held to her neck by a Viet Cong and being hunkered down for a week during the Tet Offensive.

Plucky, Jeanne “Sam” Christie’s story touched me the most. Niki Hatzidis lets her character slowly grow from Red Cross Doughnut Dolly who mistakes shrapnel for pepper

in the wound of a writhing soldier, to a burned out war veteran. Hatzidis gives a stunning performance as a stateside mother trying to convince herself that the crying she hears is her own child and not the desperate pleading of a young Vietnamese child she had reported for stealing guns.

Homecomings were disappointing and confusing. No one wanted to hear their stories. No one could use their skill sets. They finally find some comfort in the gratitude of other Vets and being able to tell their stories. At one point, the actors voices stop and voice recordings of the women they portray are played. We know them, we've heard these stories and the reality of it all is a gut punch. I cried.

In Their Footsteps was performed as part of the BorderLight International Theatre + Fringe Festival on Friday at Cleveland's Old Stone Church. It was written by Ashley Adelman, Kelly Teaford and Caroline Peters of Infinite Variety Productions.

Review by Bonne Blair
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