

Strong drama, top-notch cast

Performances of the Meadow Brook Theatre production of "The Andersonville Trial" by Saul Levitt continue through Sunday, Feb. 26, on the Oakland University campus in Rochester Hills. For ticket information call the box office at 377-3300.

"The Andersonville Trial," playing at Meadow Brook Theatre, grapples with the age-old conundrum of whether soldiers should obey inhumane orders from their commanding officers or dare to defy military commands which are in conflict with higher moral authority.

With a superb cast and a set worthy of the fiery questions on trial, Meadow Brook more than does justice to Saul Levitt's drama. The play, however, follows the prescribed protocol of a court trial and consequently suffers from the predictable and rigid stage movements common to dramas set in courtrooms.

Despite a fine sense of history, "The Andersonville Trial" offers no new insights on a moral question that literally goes on trial following nearly every war in recent memory.

During the Civil War, 14,000 Yankee soldiers died at Andersonville, a festering, overcrowded prisoner of war camp in Georgia. In 1865, Henry Wirz, the commander of the Andersonville war camp was tried before a military court and sentenced to

death for not defying or circumventing orders.

AFTER WORLD WAR II, the Nuremberg Trials sentenced Nazi war criminals for the murder of six million people. In the wake of Vietnam, a military court wrestled with the question of responsibility in the My Lai massacre. Notwithstanding our need to be reminded that "we cling to humanity by our fingernails," "The Andersonville Trial," written in 1957, releases first old truths and provides no new answers.

Director Carl Schurr expertly probes motivation in this chewy bit of bona fide American history. He capitalizes on the inherent drama of the times with drum rolls for entrances, snappy Yankee uniforms, and men in boots and beards.

Booth Colman as the defendant, Henry Wirz, turns in an outstanding performance, complete with a believable Swiss accent. He flushes red with agitation and cries real tears in his moving portrayal of a decent, ordinary man caught in extraordinary circumstances.

The real Henry Wirz, when he was tried, was 30 or 40 years younger than Colman. In Colman's expert hands, the age discrepancy pales before the larger drama of a man trapped by history and condemned as much by the needs of the times as by his own actions.



Cathie Breidenbach

During the Civil War, 14,000 Yankee soldiers died at Andersonville, a festering, overcrowded prisoner of war camp in Georgia.

James Anthony portrays the efficient and pragmatic General Lew Wallace with a perceptiveness that gives depth to a role that could easily become a cardboard supporting part.

TOM SPACKMAN, last seen on the Meadow Brook stage as the wicked hunchback, Richard III, does an about-face and plays the judge advocate, Lt. Col. Chipman, a moral man haunted by the ethical questions of the case. He creates Chipman as a ravaged, romantic idealist who duels in court with his alter ego, defense attorney and realist, Otis Baker.

David Regal as Otis Baker turns in the most intriguing characterization in the production. Imagine Rhett Butler with a rumped suit, a scruffy beard and a piercing turn of his pragmatic mind.

Regal plays Otis Baker as a man with a pragmatic intelligence, a spreading waistline and an irritating little laugh, a lawyer who sidesteps declaring allegiance to either the North or the South and gets away with it, a man who brilliantly defends the commander of a loathsome Confederate war camp. Others in the fine 25-person cast, who give particularly memorable performances, include Phillip Locker, Alexander Webb and James Otis.

Peter Hicks' dramatic set of tall arched windows silhouetted against a backdrop ablaze with orange/red leads emotional impact to the production. The hot glow behind the crisp military proceedings creates the aura, not only of the war just over, but of the tumultuous, vengeful time of carpetbaggers just beginning. The set also captures with flaming color the scorching heat of Washington during the summer of 1865 when the Army of the United States tried and convicted Henry Wirz for war crimes.

Cathie Breidenbach of West Bloomfield teaches college writing classes and works as a freelance writer.



Booth Colman is the defendant, Henry Wirz, and Tom Spackman is the judge advocate, Lt. Col. Chipman, in "The Andersonville Trial."

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