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Two Writers In on a Power Play

'Guantanamo's' Authors Have A Message for D.C.

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British journalist Victoria Brittain and South African-born novelist Gillian Slovo feel passionately that their documentary play should be heard in Washington -- at the doorstep of an administration they believe flouts the rule of law regarding captured terror suspects at the U.S. naval base in Cuba. "Guantanamo: Honor Bound to Defend Freedom" runs at Studio Theatre through Dec. 11.

"When you hear Rumsfeld say these people were all picked up on the battlefield, it's a complete lie, and he must know it's a lie," Brittain says.

"Guantanamo" is built around interviews with the families of three British citizens and a British resident, all young Muslim men arrested in Africa, Afghanistan and Pakistan in 2001 and 2002 and transferred to Guantanamo. The four detainees said they were overseas on business or charitable ventures.

Brittain and Slovo weave in excerpts from Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld's news conferences and statements by British and U.S. officials.

The families interviewed for "Guantanamo" had been reluctant to speak in public or to one another, says Brittain. "The tabloid press had been terrible and written things about 'Taliban children' " to characterize the detainees, she says. "It's interesting how the play has gotten the families in contact with each other. There was a lot of isolation -- a lot of fear."

Slovo, whose parents were leading antiapartheid activists, hopes "to make people understand if you think people have committed a crime, you should charge them . . . and the world needs to see that the trials they give them are fair."

Some of the detainees had hard lives in England, surrounded by blue-collar whites and "a sea of far-right activity," Slovo says. Now they sit in what she calls "this black hole that is Guantanamo."

"That intersection of such difficult lives, caught up in these world events that they couldn't control, is what the play is about," Slovo says.

Hungry for Change

Listening to a CD of Eartha Kitt singing "Lazy Afternoon" one day, playwright S.M. Shephard-Massat was

reminded of segregated Atlanta. "It just took me right back to these people and this day and this building where my mother's family lived in 1947 up until 1972," she says.

The memories and remembered stories it stirred led to "Starving," which had its world premiere at Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company and continues through Dec. 18. The title refers to people hemmed in by society and starving "for opportunity, freedom of soul, freedom of heart, freedom of feeling, just starving for the basics," Shephard-Massat says.

In her play "Waiting to Be Invited," produced here by African Continuum Theatre Company a couple of seasons ago, a group of African American women get up the courage to patronize a newly integrated department store in 1964 Atlanta.

"Starving" unfolds in 1950, in a middle-class black neighborhood where a cross section of residents -- a Pullman porter, a teacher, a bakery worker -- struggle with basic issues that take on added weight in a segregated city.

"What these people are going through does come from them being socially where they are, because of their color, because of their skin, and the inner turmoil that it causes," Shephard-Massat says.

Seret Scott, who recently directed August Wilson's "The Piano Lesson" at Arena Stage, says "Starving" is "an incredible script, in that we enter the lives of these people. . . . You realize how each one of us has such a story to tell."

Double the Fun

Doug Wager is back in town. Arena Stage's former artistic director (1991 to 1998) has been stirring up "The Comedy of Errors" at the Shakespeare Theatre Company. It opens this week and runs till Jan. 8.

The physical production, Wager says, will offer "echoes of early 20th-century surrealism meets the Ottoman Empire." Or, in the form of a slightly less erudite Hollywood movie pitch, he offers, " 'A Winter's Tale' meets 'A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum' by way of 'Aladdin.' "

The farcical "Comedy of Errors" hinges upon mistaken identities between two sets of twins from two hostile cities. But it also has dark shifts in tone. Some directors choose to cut it to "excise some of the more dark romantic elements that I think are a key part of this play," Wager says.

"This production is trying very hard to embrace . . . the contradictions and explore them, not just in a literary context, but in a theatrical and a visual context as well."

Wager and his family now live in Philadelphia. After four years in Los Angeles working in television and film, he has started a production company, Fat Chance Films. He also is an associate professor at Temple University and freelances at venues, including the Shakespeare.

More Than Words

"There's so much more to us than hip-hop," says Steven Sapp of the poetry-and-music works he and his wife, Mildred Ruiz, perform with Universes, their Bronx-bred multiculti group.

Their signature show, "Slanguage," which GALA Hispanic Theatre brought to Washington in 2003, has a hip-hop aesthetic. Their new effort, "Eyewitness Blues," at GALA's new Tivoli space Friday through Sunday, is about jazz, filtered through a hip-hop lens.

"Mildred and I really, really wanted to look at and investigate characters and people who were sort of our contemporaries, who were not necessarily hip-hop artists, or overtly influenced by it. There are a lot of young musicians who, that's part of what they do, but there's other things connected to them, sort of like ourselves," Sapp says.

The 80-minute piece imagines a jazz trumpeter, Junior, whose creative fire has fizzled. His muse visits and they wrestle and argue -- in poetry and song, recalling the trumpet greats, right back to the angel Gabriel. Junior's mythic journey (the script even mentions Joseph Campbell) with his muse eventually reconnects him with his art.

"We took a chance with this particular piece," says Sapp. "We were trying to make it a sort of fusion. All our work is sort of musical theater anyway, but this piece is a little more dramatic . . . this fight for the trumpet player's soul, so to speak."