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All Eyes on 'Guantanamo'

"Guantanamo: Honor Bound to Defend Freedom" Through Dec. 11 Studio Theatre 202-332-3300

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"THERE HAVE been a few theater pieces on the war on terror," Studio Theatre's Serge Seiden acknowledges. "But 'Guantanamo,' is, I think, the first such work to coalesce in a successful way." Seiden directs Studio's production of the play about the notorious detention center in Cuba, and he's pleased that it has attracted the attention of Washington's power elite: congressional staffers, lawyers and advisers to decision makers.

Playwrights Victoria Brittain, a journalist, and Gillian Slovo, a South African novelist, conducted multiple interviews with family members, lawyers and human rights activists, their efforts culminating in a play centered on four detainees: Moazzam Begg (Kaveh Haerian), Jamal al-Harith (Andrew Stewart-Jones), Ruhel Ahmed (Nafees Hamid) and Bisher al-Rawi (Ramiz Monsef). All are either residents or citizens of the United Kingdom, where the play premiered last year, and some remain incarcerated at Guantanamo to this day. The script of the play, whose subtitle is "Honor Bound to Defend Freedom," is constructed from interview transcripts, as well as public statements by figures such as Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld.

Seiden declares the topicality of the work an "interesting challenge." First, he says, the cast needed to understand the rules of the Geneva Conventions, which apply to prisoners of war, but not to Guantanamo detainees, whom the Bush administration considers not prisoners of war but "unlawful combatants." Seiden and his 11 actors relied heavily on the research skills of Danielle Mages Amato, Studio's dramaturg, who serves as a sort of scholar-in-residence. Typically, Amato, who is in her second year at Studio, finds that her work is done by the time a production opens. Not so with "Guantanamo."

"It's not a situation that history has passed judgment on yet," says Amato, who regularly e-mails the cast updates by news media on pending court cases. For example, just a day after the play opened, the Supreme Court ruled that it would hear the case of Hamdan v. Rumsfeld, which centers on a Yemeni national and former aide to Osama bin Laden held at Guantanamo. The justices will decide whether the Bush administration has the power to set up military commissions for suspected terrorists, of whom there are currently 500 held at Guantanamo. Neal Katyal, a Georgetown University law professor and attorney for Salim Ahmed Hamdan, met with the cast to describe his experiences traveling to and meeting with prisoners at the detention center.

On at least one occasion the play has proved eerily prescient. One of "Guantanamo's" claims, that there are secret CIA-run prisons around the world, formerly the stuff of rumor, has since been reported on recently in The Washington Post.

Amato continues to cull newspapers and other media daily, striving, she says, for a balance of conservative and liberal viewpoints on the topic, but also seeking both American and foreign opinions, including those of the English-language version of the TV network al-Jazeera.

As intrigued as she is by the ongoing nature of her dramaturgical work for "Guantanamo," Amato also pronounces it troubling. "In a play like this, you would rather want to say that the issue is now [solved]. But it is exciting because I think there's a growing confluence of public energy around 'Guantanamo.'