

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Relevant Soldier's Play; Dated Bob and Carol

David Sheward · Wednesday, February 5th, 2020

The twisted legacy of racism and shifting attitudes on sexuality are the diverse topics of two current New York stage offerings—a revival of *A Soldier's Play* presented on Broadway by the Roundabout Theatre Company and a musical version of *Bob & Carol & Ted & Alice* produced by The New Group at the Pershing Square Signature Center Off-Broadway. Both present material from previous eras with stark perspectives on how relevant they may still be. While one is still shockingly immediate, the other seems quaint and laughable. What's not too surprising is that race remains a hot-button issue while unabashed examinations of carnality have passed into the passe.



Blair Underwood in *A Soldier's Play*.

Credit: Joan Marcus

Charles Fuller's *A Soldier's Play* won the Pulitzer Prize in 1982 and searingly focuses on the corrosive effect of bigotry in the military and American society at large. After a hit Off-Broadway run presented by the Negro Ensemble Company, the suspense drama was adapted into a film called *A Soldier's Story*, and then revived Off-Broadway in 2005. Fuller skillfully wraps his unflinching observations on racial animus and its poisonous influence into a taut murder mystery. In a 1944 training camp in the deep south, African-American officer Richard Davenport has been assigned to investigate the unsolved killing of career Army black sergeant Vernon Waters. At first, it appears white supremacists are the culprits since lynchings of African-American servicemen were not uncommon, but as Davenport delves deeper into the details of the case, he discovers a complex web of hate and resentment among the black soldiers fueled by institutional discrimination.

Kenny Leon delivers a taut, crackling staging, infused with the lava of rage bubbling just beneath the surface. The tension is expressed and balanced by musical moments, sometimes a riveting pastiche of tap routines, sometimes a roiling gospel choral number, rising and crashing on stage like a great wave.



David Alan Grier in *A Soldier's Play*.

Credit: Joan Marcus

The cast is mostly pitch perfect, infusing their roles with equal measures of dignity, rancor, and humor. However, Blair Underwood as the determined Davenport, pushes too hard and erupts too often and with forced fervor. David Alan Grier delivers a more convincing portrait of suppressed outrage as Waters. Racism has corroded Waters' moral compass, turning him into a tyrant as he

persecutes African-American soldiers he perceives as too subservient for “holding the race back.” Grier makes Waters’ twisted agenda believable and, if not sympathetic, at least understandable. There is also memorable work from Jerry O’Connell as a conflicted white officer, Nnamdi Asomugha as a private who rebels against Waters, and J. Alphonse Nicholson as Waters’ guitar-playing victim. This is a crack squad of actors. Derek McLane’s flexible barracks set and Allen Lee Hughes’ atmospheric lighting create the appropriate setting of confined military quarters with a menacing backwoods right outside.



Michael Zegen, Jennifer Damiano, Joel Perez, and Ana Nogueira in *Bob & Carol & Ted & Alice*.
Credit: Monique Carboni

While racism is still a burning issue today, unabashed sexuality is no longer shocking. (Even Edward Albee’s *The Goat* which metaphorically employed bestiality barely raised an eyebrow in 2000.) When it first opened in 1969, Paul Mazursky’s film comedy *Bob & Carol & Ted & Alice* was a seismic earthquake of libido, becoming synonymous with the sexual revolution. The loose plot focuses on two middle-class California couples experimenting with adultery and orgies, revealing their own repressions. Trendy psychology was also lampooned as Bob and Carol attend a marathon weekend of therapy sessions, stripping their inhibitions and acquiring pretensions. The couple then impose their open-marriage lifestyle on their uptight best friends, Ted and Alice with comic outcomes.

Jonathan Marc Sherman’s book hews closely to the original screenplay by Mazursky and Larry Tucker. But while the film was wildly funny and pointedly satiric, the new musical version pokes fun at the fashions and attitudes of the era in a mild, elbow-nudging manner. The music by Duncan Sheik eschews the vital folk-rock sound of the era in favor of easy-listening pop with simplistic lyrics by Sheik and Amanda Green. There is an occasional witty number such as Alice’s angry, Latin-flavored declaration that all men are idiots. Unfortunately, for the most part, the songs are sleepily similar. It’s like tuning into a light-music station playing a Burt Bacharach marathon. Scott Elliott’s staging is just as tepid and soporific with no real fire or passion.



Jennifer Damiano, Joel Perez, Ana Nogueira, and Michael Zegen in *Bob & Carol & Ted & Alice*.
Credit: Monique Carboni

The creative team seem only intent on replicating the movie without delivering a 2020 perspective on it. (Only Jeff Mahsie’s mod costumes are a total success.) The material is dated and apart from Alice and Ted’s hilarious bedtime negotiations over intercourse (he wants it, she doesn’t) which plays like a blue version of a Mike Nichols and Elaine May routine, the formerly risqué humor falls flat. This saving grace is largely due to the witty performances of Ana Nogueira and Michael Zegen as Alice and Ted. Joel Perez and Jennifer Damiano capture the goofy, blissed out obliviousness of the newly liberated Bob and Carol.

There is an onstage band, led by a mellow Suzanne Vega who takes on all the supporting roles and serves as a laid-back narrator. The Grammy-nominated singer-songwriter has a lovely voice, but she seems uncomfortable in her multiple parts. Similarly, members of the audience are called on stage to take part as therapy participants and in an awkward finale, as close-dancing partners with the cast. They looked as tense and unsexy as the show itself.

A Solider’s Play: Jan. 21—March 15. Roundabout Theatre Company at the American Airlines

Theatre, 227 W. 42nd St., NYC. Tue 7pm, Wed 2PM & 8pm, Thu—Fri 8pm, Sat 2pm & 8pm, Sun 3pm. Running time: two hours including intermission. \$59—\$299. (212) 719-1300. www.roundabouttheatre.org.

Bob & Carol & Ted & Alice: Feb. 4—March 22. The New Group at the Pershing Square Signature Center, 480 W. 42nd St., NYC. Tue 7:30pm, Wed 2pm & 7:30pm, Thu—Fri 7:30pm, Sat 2pm & 8pm, Sun 2pm. Running time: 90 minutes with no intermission. \$48—\$113. (917) 935-4242. www.thenewgroup.org.

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