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Telling it like it is

Powerful play tells the story of Lansing's veterans

By Paul Wozniak for the Lansing City Pulse

It's so simple: interview a group of people about their lives and assemble their stories into a script. That's the basic premise and structure of Peppermint Creek Theatre Co.'s latest production, "Telling: Lansing." But the production has an emotional depth that transcends the project's simplicity.

Max Rayneard, playwright and cofounder of the Telling Project, interviewed eight military veterans and family members of veterans from the Lansing

area about their experiences and wove their accounts into a fascinating and powerful collage of bravery, sorrow and pride. Combined with staging, lights and sound, the result is a must-see experience for veterans and civilians alike.

Part of the emotional power in "Telling: Lansing" comes from the fact that the stories are real and they're told by the people who lived them. Their experiences weave through every foreign war and conflict since World War II. Each story is rich with details, and many are stranger and more incredible than fiction.

Near the beginning of the production, Vietnam veteran Jim Dunn, who served as an artillery officer, talks about "calling in the artillery" for the first time and the experience of being shot out of the sky by enemy machine guns. Jason Evans, who served as a lawyer in the biggest military prison in Afghanistan, recalls the cultural whiplash of going from a desert war zone to meeting up with his wife for a two-week vacation.

"I went from Afghanistan to Disney World," he says.

Another important aspect is the theatrical format. The script moves like a play, complete with actors recreating memories from their own lives. A giant screen behind the actors displaying their pictures and letters gives the feel of a Ken Burns documentary on stage. Slick, yet sparing lighting and sound design from Joseph Dickson completes the illusion of being there. When Army and Navy veteran David L. Dunckel recounts



his Humvee driving over an I.E.D., the sound of an explosion rips through the speakers, and the screen turns white. The effect gives the audience a taste of Dunckel's terror in that moment.

The combined experiences unfold chronologically, starting with WWII and ending with the conflict in Afghanistan. Because the script isn't advancing a single narrative, each individual gets a chance to show how their experiences shaped them. (For the full experience, be sure to stick around for the talkback after every show.)

Most of the actors are brand new to the stage, but you can hardly tell. The stories are so rich and real that you forget they're reading a script. When Jodi Hancock remembers her father dying from cancer related to Agent Orange exposure just a week before she turned 13, it's clear she's back in her 12-year-old self again.

"He went in for exploratory surgery and they found cancer in every major organ of his body," she says, obviously holding back tears.

Director Blake Bowen keeps the staging simple and clear. There's no clunky blocking to trip up the actors, but their movement physically ties each story to the next. Most important, there's no preaching or politics to be found. Just honesty, humanity and an unbreakable sense of duty.

"Telling: Lansing"

Peppermint Creek Theatre Co. 8 p.m. Thursday, Nov. 12 - Saturday, Nov. 14; 2 p.m. Sunday, Nov. 15 \$15/\$10
veteran, student or senior Miller Performing Arts Center 6025 Curry Lane, Lansing. (517) 927-3016,
peppermintcreek.org

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