

Home is where the 'Heartland' is

MCC theatre produces world premiere performance

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The house lights dim to darkness. The sound of planes and bombs break the silence. On the radio, news of the war comes over the airwaves. A dim lit spotlight on a young woman listening intently, then more lights reveal the setting for a masterpiece. "Heartland" was presented at a special red carpet premiere event hosted by the MiraCosta Theatre Spotlight Circle on November 15. The award winning play, written by local playwrights Anita Simons and Lauren Simon, is based on true stories of German-American families during World War II.

Presented in an intimate "Black Box" seating arrangement, the performance earned a standing ovation. In attendance were playwrights Simons and Simon and special guest Lothar Eiserloh, whose personal experiences of the time were used in conjunction with other stories to create "Heartland."

From 1943 to 1946, prisoners of war held in internment camps throughout the United States included not only Japanese soldiers, but German and Italian soldiers as well. Some of these prisoners were held in captivity even after World War II had ended. "It teaches part of history that typically isn't taught and that most people know nothing about," said Simons. "Our government has yet to acknowledge that they did this." These men were often permitted to work in factories and on farms as a way to re-educate them in the American way of life.

The play is set in Wisconsin on a small, family-run dairy farm where a German-born widow and her children are struggling to keep the farm productive and make ends meet. Amanda Dane played the powerful eldest daughter Sonya Gertzoff, who has taken over the business of the farm after her father's death. The farm is approved to host a couple of young German prisoners of war. The men were to work as farm laborers, just what the family needed to get the farm up and running again, but the events that ensue change their lives. "POWs were put on farms with farmers' daughters," said Simons. "Maybe there is a love story there."

The playwrights wanted to create strong female parts that were all strong in different ways. Cast members superbly portrayed these miraculous women. Amanda Dane, Mary Tarantino-Relator and Aimee Burdette star in the compelling story. "Being part of this production has made me grow as a person and as an actress," said Dane.

Meg Johnson is brilliant as Peggy Downing, who is utterly detestable, yet she adds some humor to "Heartland," making the play's underlying issue of discrimination an easier pill to swallow. "[The play is] Relevant today, of course, with prejudice against Arab-Americans," said Simon. "Where there is a war environment it brings out the worst in neighbors."

Two years in the making, the playwrights chose MCC to host the "Heartland" world premiere, after meeting Director Eric Bishop at San Diego's Patté Awards. Bishop won "Outstanding Direction" for the MCC production of "Electra."

"When we handed it off to Eric, we knew our baby was in the right hands," said Simons.

"Creative theater is a very collaborative process," said Simon. The students had a unique opportunity to interact with the playwrights and Eiserloh, who lived through these events. "Heartland" gave students an educational opportunity. Students were able to ask questions, discuss themes and offer feedback to the playwrights about their lines of dialogue. They also got first-hand experience with rewrites and could play a role in the evolution of the production.

"The play is very relevant to me," said Eiserloh who went on to tell his story that is very similar to the events of the play. His family was among other German-Americans who were expatriated to Germany, where they were also considered enemies of the state. "507 American citizen children were shipped to Germany," he said. The children were eventually allowed to return to America, but it took many more years before he would see his parents again.

Eiserloh told his story at a special question and answer session following the red carpet premiere. He spoke of his immigrant parents who attempted to become citizens, but in the wake of Pearl Harbor, the FBI began to round up non-citizens, including Eiserloh's family. His father was imprisoned, his mother was assaulted and the whole family was eventually shipped off to Germany where they

were under constant suspicion and harassed by the Gestapo. Eventually, Eiserloh's father was arrested and remained imprisoned until the end of the war.

The "Heartland" cast had to learn German for their roles. Tarantino-Relator's character, Berta Gertzoff, the matriarch of the family, exchanged dialog in German with the two POWs, Gunther, played by Micheal Phillip Thomas, and Rolf, played by Ryan Kidd. Especially impressive were their authentic accents. Former MCC student Gedaly

Guberek coached them on their accents. The exchange between characters brings humanity to the play.

"Heartland" is a story of fear and discrimination, but it is also a story of love—strong love between family members and young love between Burdette's character, Emma Gertzoff, and Rolf, played by Kidd.

"We've had a lot of success with the play and I think we have really touched a nerve with our audiences," says Simon. This sentiment was validated when the cast received a standing ovation. There were many older guests at the premiere, a number of whom were visibly touched by the play. A few were in tears. "I was entranced by the entire production," said one of the guests.

"Heartland" stars Mary Relator, Amanda Dane, Aimee Burdette, Teddy Blessing, Meg Johnson, Bernie Kopsho, Ryan Kidd, Michael Thomas, Sassan Saffari and Kyle Lucy. "Heartland" has been entered in the Kennedy Center American College Theater Festival and will be featured as part of a playwriting documentary that will run on Del Mar Community Television, and possibly PBS.

