



Women in Civil War pose perplexing dilemma

By Bob Evans

Robert Schrader/The Coterie Theatre



Kansas City's Coterie Theatre, now in its 40th season, joined forces again with UMKC's MFA students to create an interactive dramatization of a Civil War problem that American history classes fail to discuss—women serving beside men in the war.

According to the play, "Secret Soldiers" by Wendy Lement, over 250 women fought in the Union Army, dressed as men. Similarly, Confederate women also camouflaged as men to fight for their beliefs. "Secret Soldiers: Heroines in Disguise" tells the story of one particular soldier who causes a problem at a hospital because her sex is discovered during her treatment and her name was recorded as her male alias and not her given name. As a result, no medical record of the female soldier would exist.

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Not only that, if discovered, she would be expelled from the military; she would no longer receive military pay; and she would forfeit her soldier pension rights. If not reported as a woman, she could return to her regiment, continue to receive pay, and continue her eligibility for a pension. Quite a dilemma for the time and completely subject to a nurse's compassion as to what name to record.

"Secret Soldiers" proposes a morality question to the audience. Should the soldier be identified by her real name or the masculine name she adopted? If a female soldier died in the hospital and was recorded as a male, her family would never know of her passing because there would be no record of a female in combat. What should happen? That's the problem presented to the audience.



Theatre

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This interactive dramatization tells a story and then opens a group discussion with the audience where they can ask questions and formulate their own answers. The audience hears

the position of the persons involved in the play and their critical thinking begins to evaluate the situation. As the young audience poses questions to the actors, the actors display their research and answer what happened to their characters in real life. To create the validity of characters, the actors must research and know everything they can about their character in order to give real and factual information to the audience. This process gives both audience and actors a reason to think critically, evaluate, and present their findings.



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The Coterie has presented several of these interactive plays in the past and the results can change depending on the day's audience. For the students, this presents a good activity to develop critical thinking skills and for the MFA students, they firmly understand the reason to study and know the characters they portray. This type of activity gives students a wonderful connection with live theatre, and it gives the teachers a wealth of topics for further critical analysis once students return to the classrooms.

The play, directed by Jeff Church and Bree Elrod runs through Feb. 10 and is appropriate for ages 10 and up. The play serves as a history lesson for the students getting their first introduction to American history and the Civil War.

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“The U.S. military recorded over 250 cases of women who fought in the Union Army disguised as men,” The Coterie said. “At least three African American women are known to have fought in “colored” regiments. Cases of Confederate women who fought in disguise are also known. ‘Secret Soldiers: Heroines in Disguise’ details the true accounts of four brave women who, for varying reasons, served as men during the Civil War. The interactive drama begins with the audience being sworn in as medical officers who are asked to advise a nurse who has been treating a woman injured in combat fighting as a man. The nurse is faced with the dilemma of recording her patient’s alias or revealing her true identity, knowing severe consequences may follow.”



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With a cast and crew headed by UMKC students, the quality associated with Coterie productions continues. This production provides factual information, poses questions, educates, and facilitates further discussions. The play is well-written, well paced, well-staged in a small performance area, and

brings the audience into the action in the first lines. The actors give strong performances and get the opportunity to portray several characters within the same play, giving them a chance to present different accents, vocal alterations, different speech patterns, and more. "Secret Soldiers" provides great opportunity for the actors to build their skills and resumes.

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The cast is: Freddy Acevedo, Yetunde Felix-Ukwu, Jason Francescon, Khalif Gillett, Emilie Karas, Chelsea Kinser, Marianne McKenzie, Roan Ricker. The artistic and production team includes Jeff Church, director; Bree Elrod, director; Danielle Renee, production stage manager; Scott Hobart, Coterie technical director, Hunter Andrews, UMKC technical director; Kelli Harrod, set designer; Stephen Jarvis, sound designer; Bryce Foster, lighting designer; Jordan New, costume designer; Lee Barker, properties/set dressing; Zan deSpelder, assistant lighting; Christian Taylor, scenic charge artist; Zoie Perahoritis, Coterie production assistant; Sheridan Mc Kinley, UMKC production assistant.

The Coterie, continues its presentation of "Secret Soldiers: Heroines in Disguise" through Feb. 10 on level one of the Crown Center shops. Individual tickets are \$12 for students

under 18 and seniors over 60. Adult tickets are \$15. Special group pricing for 20 or more are available throughout the production. Tickets may be purchased by calling The Coterie's box office at (816) 474-6552, dropping by the box office on level one of the Crown Center Shops, or by visiting [The Coterie website](#).

Tags: The Coterie Theatre, Secret Soldiers: Heroines in Disguise review, Kansas City, Crown Center, Kansas City theatre, Kansas City Performing Arts, Kansas City Arts & Entertainment

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