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COMMENTARY

Palaima: No intermissions or applause in real stages of war

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At the Red River Rivalry, 92,000 fans packed into the Cotton Bowl for an hour of football. Later in Austin, a few dozen veterans of America's larger-scale shootouts in Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan and their families crowded into a small theater space on Congress Avenue appropriately called the Hideout.

We were there because of VFW Post 856, the ZACH Theatre and Humanities Texas. We were there because of psychologist and documentary film-maker Ricardo Ainslie, because of Daphny Dominguez and Sharon Willis of the Central Texas Veterans Health Care System, and Don Dorsey, president of the Texas Association of Vietnam Veterans, Austin Chapter. The veterans were there for their own very special reasons.

All these veterans sought further healing. They wanted to share with others, veterans and non-veterans, what they had learned during their long struggles to recover their lives after what psychiatrist, veterans counselor (and champion of veterans issues), and post-traumatic stress expert Jonathan Shay calls the ruin of their good characters. Shay came down, too, from Boston to talk with them.

They were there because playwright Nick Schweitzer of Wisconsin cared enough about these former soldiers to convert Shay's famous book "Achilles in Vietnam" into a powerful 90-minute play. They were there because director Dante Dominguez crafted the talents of 13 actors who lent their time and skills to two performances.

Michael Amendola played with formidable empathy a young veteran named Achilles, haunted by his memories of what Shay calls "betrayal of what is right" in Vietnam. Other lives intersect with Achilles' and are affected by the human being he has become.

His wife Brenda's parents are well-meaning. His father-in-law is a World War II vet who never saw action. His mother-in-law believes that the more enemies Achilles killed, the greater hero he was. They offer church and manly platitudes. But Achilles has lost his faith in God, and he knows he is not a hero as she uses the word. The soldiers with him in Vietnam were 'just doing their jobs' and trying to keep themselves and their buddies alive.

Jaime Keener made us feel the near-futility in Brenda's patient, cautious and persevering love, as she tries to take herself and the virtual stranger her husband has become back home from Vietnam. We see the group therapy counselor and her veterans who talk truthfully and listen and start to heal.

But most of all we heard the vets themselves afterwards. "I came home after 12 months in '68-'69 and had 30 days to get ready again. Thirty days is not enough. It's not enough now in Iraq and Afghanistan."

"Two years ago I went to see a counselor. It took me almost 40 years."

"I know what that Afghanistan vet is saying. They are 18-19 years old. Still babies."

"I put my wife through a hell. Why she married me and stayed with me I don't know." His wife stared stoically straight ahead.

"We were infantry men, incredibly skilled at a narrow part of life, at keeping people alive. Then we come back and they say we are only qualified for menial jobs."

A whole society can betray what's right by not listening and not caring. Get in touch with any of the people and organizations I named above. Tell them Achilles in America sent you.

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