

June 14, 2007

Unwelcome at Home, Student Play About Iraq Is a Hit Off Broadway

By **MELENA RYZIK**

Backstage at the Vineyard Theater, Taylor Telyan, 18, was bent over an ironing board, ironing her hair. A few feet away, her friend and castmate Tara Ross, also 18, was applying makeup; outside their door, a couple of boys were sacked out on a couch, studying notes in binders. They had 35 minutes until their Off Broadway debut.

"The fact that New York City wanted to see our show, I was just blown away," said Erin Clancy, 18, another castmate.

"It's been so surreal," added Michael Ward, 17. "There are actors who spend their entire lives getting here."

They are all Connecticut high school students and performers in "Voices in Conflict," a 45-minute show that caused more than three months of controversy. The result is a kind of victory march through three prestigious New York theaters that culminates Friday night at the Public Theater.

It began as a project in Bonnie Dickinson's advanced drama class at Wilton High School, with students and teacher working together to create a play about the Iraq war. The show was largely a series of monologues, telling the stories of actual soldiers in their own words, drawn from blogs, documentaries and a book of interviews.

But in March, the school's principal, Timothy H. Canty, canceled the production, citing concerns about balance and sourcing and fear that it would disturb local military families. After an article about the ban appeared in The New York Times, "the whole New York theater community called," Ms. Dickinson said.

Last weekend, the 16 student actors, plus a stage manager; a makeup artist; a sound technician; two adult musicians; a dramaturge, Willie Holtzman; and Ms. Dickinson traveled by train and carpools from Fairfield County to New York for two performances, Saturday at the Vineyard Theater and Sunday at the Culture Project.

The final show -- "the big one," as the students refer to it -- at the Public Theater sold out in one day; there is a waiting list.

The students have appeared on the network morning news programs, on CNN and on National Public Radio. They have received awards and support from theater organizations like the Dramatists Guild of America and boldface names like Edward Albee. A Russian TV crew trailed them at the Vineyard on

Saturday. As part of a PBS series with the documentarian Morgan Spurlock, the actor and director Stanley Tucci has been filming and interviewing them.

Pretty heady stuff for a cast of teenagers who might be expected to be more focused on summer vacation than on foreign policy. But that, they say, is exactly the attitude they are trying to combat.

"Most of this cast can vote in the next election," said Cameron Nadler, 16. "If they don't think we're mature enough to do a play about Iraq, why should we vote?"

To prepare for the show, they said, the students read extra interviews with military personnel and watched news reports. Their identification with their characters is so visceral that many said they tear up in the final scene, a salute.

James Presson, 16, studied online playlists of music popular with the troops. "I've been listening to a lot of Linkin Park," he said, and winced. But he added: "These are characters that are not that different from our everyday selves, which is part of the power of the piece. They've just been placed in difficult situations."

And so, in a way, have the students portraying them. The controversy in Wilton led to name-calling and hazing at school and online, which in turn led to a bond among cast members. "We come from different cliques in high school, but now we all hang out," Ms. Clancy said.

That the show at the Public is the night before seven of the cast members are to graduate from high school (and coincides with a graduation rehearsal) reflects their dedication. They rehearsed intensely for a month -- three hours a day, five days a week -- negotiating around school and jobs and sports and parts in the school musical. Two students took the A.C.T. college exam the morning of the Vineyard performance.

"It stunk," said one of them, Chris Kozlowski, 17. "It was the worst thing I've ever done, test-wise."

Backstage at the Vineyard on Saturday afternoon, some students caught up on homework. Mr. Nadler, a junior, was working on an essay for a college application before the curtain went up. And the entire Off Broadway run came during finals.

"It definitely distracted me for a long while from my schoolwork," said Sarah Anderson, 17.

But parents and other family members were supportive of the production. "I think they're perfectly right to want to do it," said Sabine Rosenberg, the grandmother of Natalie Kropf, a performer, who attended the Saturday show. "It's hit a nerve with America."

Despite stiff competition from the weekend's parades, awards shows and the "Sopranos" finale, "Voices in Conflict" played to nearly full houses both nights. In the audience were friends, family, Wilton alumni and a few theater professionals. (Bob Stillman, a friend of one performer's family, who came to the Vineyard show between his own performances in "Grey Gardens," said he found the acting impressive, an opinion Mr. Tucci echoed.)

The students have done the show twice in Fairfield, though few of their schoolmates attended, they said. But at one show, a Reserve sergeant who had served in Iraq told them they had gotten the experience "200 percent right," Ms. Dickinson said. And at a discussion after the Vineyard show, a man in the audience stood up.

"I'm a Vietnam vet," he said. "When I got back after that war, I majored in theater. I don't know what other people wore the uniform for this country for, but I wore it so you could do exactly what you're doing."

Though some of the students hope to pursue a career in theater -- "I hope there's agents out there," Ms. Ross said -- many were involved for more idealistic reasons.

"I'll probably look back on this in 20, 30 years and say, 'I can't believe I did this,' " Dagan Rossini, 16, said Sunday. "It was a huge, overwhelming experience. It's changed me."

Then he got in the car with his parents and headed home. It was, after all, a school night.