

Home Front



Photo by Tim Sullins

Victory Theatre Center

I have to say if 2023 continues to be as propitious as it's starting out to be, this is going to be one heckuva amazing year.

The premiere of *Home Front* at the Victory received an opening night standing ovation so long and enthusiastic that the cast, joined by a most reluctant playwright, had to return to the stage for a second round of ovations.

The play not only heralds the debut of a major work of theatrical literature deserving a long and auspicious future, it also marks the return to the stage of Warren Leight: master wordsmith, Tony winner, and Pulitzer finalist in 1999 for his gritty and compelling masterpiece *Side Man*.

Leight, as so many uber-promising contemporary playwrights, was immediately snapped up and thrust headlong into a successful career writing and producing for television, most notably for *Law & Order: SVU*. "I've worked enough in TV," he admits with tongue characteristically firmly in cheek, "that I can finally return to the theatre."

Lucky us.

Obviously a man with exceptional taste, it seems Leight was already a major fan of the work of award-winning director Maria Gobetti and what she and her husband Tom Ormeny have accomplished as founders and co-artistic directors of the Victory for the past highly prolific 43 years—especially their continuing unstoppable passion for championing and developing works by new artists at their two adjacent former storefront spaces physically created almost single-handedly from scratch by Ormeny all those years ago.

To say *Home Front*, which begins on V-J Day in 1945, is a cautionary tale is something of an understatement. War-widowed Annie Overton (Austin Highsmith Garces) by chance meets returning Lt. James Aurelius Walker (C.J. Lindsey) as they celebrate on the streets of New York City and while sharing a victory dance, they quickly fall in love.

It's said love can conquer anything, but if you're a young naive Caucasian girl transplanted from the midwest and your heart is zapped by a Black man several years before the birth of the Civil Rights movement, the future is bound to be incredibly difficult at best.

Leight grew up on the upper west side of Manhattan as the son of a jazz musician in a culture where interracial relationships were more common than in other echelons of society at the time and he early on became aware of the hefty problems such love stories endure. It was that personal experience which led to the creation of this riveting play.

There was a feeling of infinite possibilities for our society as our "boys" returned triumphant from the war, something especially felt by Lt. Walker, a highly decorated soldier and one of the celebrated Golden Thirteen, the select group of African-Americans who were commissioned by the Navy to achieve officer status, receiving public honors and a chest-ful of medals.

Lt. Walker firmly believes he has proven his worth and has returned to a more tolerant world for minorities in our country, only to find that the Jim Crow era was as unyielding and vile back then as ever—particularly for a dark-skinned man and his white-skinned bride.

"Time does not move backwards" he proudly tells his Annie, but after returning for a visit to his home in Goose Creek, South Carolina without his love since such relationships were not only illegal but dangerous there, he quickly realizes he forgot how slowly things change, especially in the backward American South of the late 1940s.

He ends up in jail for defending a young woman from a racist attack while Annie sits in their New York City basement tenement apartment awaiting the birth of their daughter. As her upstairs neighbor and soon fast friend Edward (Jonathan Slavin) warns about her future as the wife of a "colored" man and mother of a mixed baby in a still unforgiving world, "Your privileges were revoked on the night you danced—privileges you never knew you had."

Gobetti brilliantly leads her dynamic trio of actors with her usual sure hand and the aid of a dynamic team of designers and collaborators.

Evan Bartoletti's simple but effective set proves surprisingly versatile on what was surely a modest budget, from the back concrete wall which, thanks to Jermaine Alexander's video projections can alter into the other many diverse settings in Leight's demandingly filmic script or disappear altogether to reveal Walker's starkly austere prison cell, to a secret wall that can open to swallow up repossessed furniture.

Gobetti's trio of veteran performers are exceptional and subtly able to draw us into their eventually heartbreaking story. The descent from a love-dazzled young couple thinking they can conquer all odds to angry, defeated people devastated by the ugly narrow-minded tribalism and unfounded sense of superiority of our country's shameful past, is assayed to perfection by Highsmith Garces and

Lindsey.

Slavin contributes mightily as the separately-but-equally oppressed gay man without for a moment resorting to the usual stereotypical cliches found when actors portray such a colorful character.

It was not lost to me that, although Annie and James have gone through such devastating intolerance in their own lives, they—especially James—rather shamefully react to Edward’s own societal challenges. This is something sadly indicative of our species’ most horrendously unfair trait: the genetic demand to feel superior to someone, to anyone, to fulfill a need to elevate our own sense of worth.

Sadly, the most omnipresent takeaway from *Home Front* is that despite the advent of civil rights and the tenuous acceptance of the lifestyles and choices of others who are different from us, deep down the jury is still out about how we truly feel about one another.

This is particularly true right at this messy and divisive period in the growth of our poor country shattered by the Orange Nightmare and a once-noble political party now appearing as a body to embrace the archaic tenets of the KKK I thought were basically snuffed out a half-century ago.

“It’s a story about a long time ago,” says Leight, “but which many people don’t realize we’ve come perilously close to repeating in the last few years.”

This perspective is the reason why, as someone who has spent the majority of my life fighting with all my heart for equality and justice for all, left the Victory moved to the point of tears when I tried to open my mouth and tell Gobetti what a towering achievement she has guided to fruition.

The final revelation here is not only for us all to watch our backs and keep our guard up, but to fight for our beliefs and our rights even more fiercely than ever.

“It is complicated writing about this topic,” Leight admits about creating his transcendent and important new play, something that had been rattling around in his head for 20 years, “but I feel very protected by [the team at the Victory]. They help you figure out your vision then make that vision happen. That’s as good as it gets in theatre.”

Having experienced the encouragement and expertise of Gobetti and Ormeny firsthand when my own first play debuted at the Victory in 1994, I know exactly how Leight feels. *Surprise Surprise* went on to great success and a feature film version, something that I don’t believe would have happened without the Ormenys’ initial encouragement and adroit professionalism.

Home Front, Warren Leight’s long-awaited return to his theatrical roots, has found the perfect home at the Victory and under the talented directorial leadership of Maria Gobetti—and the LA theatre community has been gifted with an indelibly moving production to inaugurate this fresh new and, as always, surely challenging year.

THROUGH FEB. 19: Victory Theatre Center, 3326 W. Victory Blvd., Burbank.

www.thevictorytheatrecenter.org or 818.841.5421

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