

# 'Letters Home' brings personal context to wars

By **JEREMY D. BONFIGLIO**  
Sight & Sound Editor

**BENTON HARBOR** — When Jason VonRohn received the monologues for the Griffin Theatre Company's production of "Letters Home," he immediately recognized the weight he was being asked to carry.

"It's not like any other monologue you've ever worked on because there is that importance connected to it," VonRohn says. "These are real-life people. None of this show is made up. ... So right there you have a responsibility as an actor to get these down word for word because some of these soldiers don't end up making it through the war. They lose their lives. So you are tasked with keeping their memory strong. There's an awful importance to giving a voice to someone who may no longer have a voice to give."

As the title implies, "Letters Home," the production, adapted and directed by Griffin Theatre's artistic director William Massolia, brings personal context to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan with actual letters written by troops serving in the Middle East.

Since its original run at the Chicago Cultural Center in January 2007, the production has toured nationally and has been seen by more than 50,000 people. "Letters Home" will be staged Sunday afternoon in the season finale at the Lake Michigan College Mendel Center Mainstage Theatre.

The production is inspired by the New York Times series "The Things They Wrote" and the subsequent HBO documentary "Last Letters Home."

"I was only a kid when Vietnam was happening, and you don't understand issues of war when you are small," Massolia says by phone from Chicago. "When all of this happened, and we went into Afghanistan and Iraq, I think for a lot of people in this country it was very eye-opening. There were several generations who didn't even understand what that was like. When I came across the documentary and these letters I found them to be very noble. And I think that reflecting nobility in storytelling is one of the most powerful things you can put into a play. People can connect to that because it represents what we all aspire to be."



Photo provided

**The Chicago-based Griffin Theatre Company presents its production "Letters Home," bringing to life actual letters written by troops serving in the Middle East during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, at 4 p.m. Sunday at Lake Michigan College.**

Massolia contacted the families of two soldiers depicted in the HBO documentary for permission to use the letters, and began culling additional correspondences from Frank Schaeffer's books, "Voices From the Front," "Letters Home From America's Military Family," "Faith of Our Sons" and "Keeping Faith."

"They are from newspapers and a number of books that have letters in there, so it was really a large variety of sources available," Massolia says. "I tried to find pieces that spoke to different issues and personal feelings of those in combat in contemporary times. Some are very funny. Others are very serious. Some touch on historical events in the war. ... They really represent a broad spectrum of experiences, which is what I was looking for. If anything, the one universal message or theme is that the person fighting next to you is more important than you are."

Each actor in the production delivers letters from two different soldiers or Marines. In VonRohn's case, they are two very different men sharing two very dif-

ferent tales.

He describes one soldier Matthew Mertz as a young "gung-ho guy." But his letter is all about reminiscing about civilian life, how excited he was for baseball season and how his family always supported him. Then there's Aaron White.

"I felt a responsibility to look into their stories and who they were so I could capture the tonality of them," VonRohn says. "Some people have contacted family members, which can be really helpful, but I didn't contact the spouse of Aaron White. Everything I needed was in the text. He's writing back to his daughter whose first birthday is fast approaching, and he is writing these letters in the hopes they can sit down in 10 years and read them together and explain what he was doing over in Iraq and why he missed out on birthdays and taking first steps."

Although the title of the play implies that all the letters are from soldiers, the production chooses to include a small number of correspondences from parents, Massolia says, "because their words are no less important."

## IF YOU GO

**What:** Griffin Theatre Company presents "Letters Home"

**When:** 4 p.m. Sunday

**Where:** Lake Michigan College Mendel Center Mainstage Theatre, 2755 E. Napier Ave., Benton Harbor

**How much:** \$25-\$35

**Contact:** 927-8700 or themendelcenter.com

**Artist info:** griffintheatre.com

While there are few props, a screen showing images of both fronts helps set the backdrop for each letter.

In addition to VonRohn the cast includes Juanita Andersen, Peter Byrne, Elliot Cruz, Nick Delehanty, Margaret Kellas, Will Kiley, Jennifer Lowe, Adam Marcantoni and Andrew Muwonge.

"We've met so many veterans and people working with the VA and the Red Cross who are trying to make a difference," VonRohn says. "They share their stories and it is indescribable how affected you get by the veterans and families of veterans who see this show. Some of the things are life changing."

A special part of Sunday's production will happen before and after the play. Medal of Honor recipient-in-waiting Jim McCloughan of South Haven will be honored by members of Lest We Forget. He will perform a rendition of "Home" by Michael Bubl .

Following the performance, McCloughan will participate in a question-and-answer session. He was a U.S. Army combat medic in Vietnam. In one battle alone, he was credited with saving the lives of 10 Americans and one Vietnamese soldier.

"That's what is so special about doing this show," VonRohn says. "A lot of family members will come up and say thank you because their spouse won't talk about this. ... Then to have veterans come up to us and say, 'You guys nailed it.' I think that is the biggest compliment that we can receive. None of us are not veterans, we're just actors doing the best we can."

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