

Stage Preview: Open Stage rallies for human rights with 'Guantanamo'
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By Christopher Rawson, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

It's a coincidence that the three fully-staged readings of "Guantanamo: Honor Bound to Defend Freedom," originally scheduled for last weekend, instead starts Friday, Veterans Day. But everyone connected with the project, staged as a joint benefit for the Center for Constitutional Rights and Open Stage Theatre, is pleased, since the play's issues speak directly to the ideals America's veterans have sacrificed to defend.

A docudrama by British journalist Victoria Brittain and South African novelist Gillian Slovo, "Guantanamo" is based on the personal testimony of four British citizens incarcerated by the United States at Guantanamo Bay. The Center for Constitutional Rights is the primary legal advocate for Guantanamo detainees.

In a mailing about "Guantanamo," producer Jerry Starr calls the current times "a moment that may well define the kind of America future generations will inherit." With the balance on the Supreme Court in play, he says, "the Bush administration threatens to veto a defense spending bill if it includes language supporting international agreements condemning torture. It is not just women's reproductive rights that are in jeopardy, but the rights to privacy, the rights of the accused and human rights generally."

Previous productions in London, New York, Washington, San Francisco and elsewhere have received praise for the stark power of the material.

Director Marci Woodruff, who frequently directs for Unseam'd Shakespeare and the Jewish Theatre, is a little more realistic about what it takes to turn what she calls "print journalists' stuff, all taken from transcripts and not necessarily dramatic, into a play." In a short rehearsal period, she's been cutting and shaping the original three acts down to two, which will run, altogether, "about 100 minutes, from my mouth to God's ear."



Producer Jerry Starr, left, brings to the stage "Guantanamo: Honor Bound to Defend Freedom," a tale about human rights, with Ron Siebert in the cast.

'Guantanamo: Honor Bound to Defend Freedom'

- **Where:** Open Stage Theatre at 2835 Smallman St., Strip District.
 - **When:** Fri.-Sat. 8 p.m.; Sun. 2 p.m.
 - **Tickets:** \$50 at ProArts, 412-394-3353; for more information, 412-257-4056.
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The intensity of Woodruff's commitment to "Guantanamo" is such that she is directing even while recovering from an operation for breast cancer. "I pulled out of everything else," she says, but "this is the one thing I was not going to let go. Politically, it couldn't be more important."

She praises the local theater community for rallying around. She was able quickly to enlist Doug Mertz, Ron Siebert and Chris Josephs to lead her cast, which includes Starr and has grown to 14 in all, so far.

Her only disappointment is not being able to get a more ethnically diverse cast. "We wanted a microcosm of what Guantanamo is, but that's not easy to do in Pittsburgh, or in many cities."

Open Stage artistic director Ruth Willis says this special offering fits the company's mission because "as a theater company we want to portray a broad spectrum of ideas. And without justice, you cannot have freedom."

She points out that Open Stage's next regularly scheduled play, Corey Fischer's "See Under: Love," pays tribute to the great American effort in preserving freedom in World War II and uncovering the Holocaust. It shows the essential role art can have in times of crisis.

There are only 80 seats for each "Gunatanamo" performance. The \$50 ticket (half deductible) includes a post-show buffet reception, and Jules Lobel, National Vice President of the Center for Constitutional Rights, will be available to discuss the issues involved.

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