

Speaking Simply of War and the True Courage of Heroes

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In “Beyond Glory,” a solo show about war veterans that opened last night at the Laura Pels Theater, Stephen Lang portrays a series of former servicemen recollecting their combat experiences and the acts of courage that won them the United States military’s highest laurel, the Medal of Honor.



Does that make it sound like a talking war memorial? Well, sorry about that, but it more or less is. No disparagement intended: Unearthing and airing for public contemplation the flesh-and-blood stories that are celebrated in stone and bronze by the country’s many statues honoring its soldiers is a worthwhile enterprise. Mr. Lang and his director, Robert Falls, do it with their own fine measure of honor.

“Beyond Glory,” which has toured military installations and been seen at the Goodman Theater in Chicago, is certainly not obvious fare for a warm summer evening in New York. But with American soldiers facing deadly combat overseas every day, this modest show provides a powerful reminder of the hardships, psychic stresses and physical dangers that men and women endure on the front lines. The Medal of Honor is not awarded for congeniality or well-shined shoes, after all, but for courageous action in the most harrowing of circumstances.



Adapted by Mr. Lang from a book by the journalist Larry Smith containing the oral histories of veterans of several wars, “Beyond Glory” allows the voices of servicemen to be heard without the filter of the conventions of drama or the prerogatives of deadline-driven journalism. Its sobriety, simplicity and lack of histrionics are the show’s signal strengths.

Although video screens behind Mr. Lang are used occasionally to evoke the turmoil of combat, and a (thankfully subtle) musical score adds a sentimental note of underscoring here and there, “Beyond Glory” is really beyond reproach in its no-frills treatment to the material. Even Mr. Lang’s forceful performance, impressive as it is, never calls attention to itself in a self-aggrandizing way.



With his chiseled physique, commanding square jaw and sharp buzz cut, Mr. Lang might almost seem carved from a block of granite. But he individualizes each of the eight portraits here with precision and economy, a new man by a subtle adjustment of posture that alters his physical presence, evoking a new personality through the coloring of his voice.

A couple of the men we meet are already familiar. Vice Adm. James B. Stockdale, a veteran of combat in Vietnam who spent more than seven years as a prisoner of war, was H. Ross Perot's running mate in the 1992 presidential election. The highest-ranking Naval officer incarcerated in the "Hanoi Hilton," as the Hoa La prison came to be sardonically known, then-Commander Stockdale describes, in gruff, sober tones the gruesome tortures he endured and the quiet defiance he displayed toward his captors, cognizant as he was of the need to set an example for the troops. "I got to be quite a thorn in their side," he says with a flicker of pride, before going on to recall a desperate suicide attempt that finally shamed the prison guards into treating the Americans with less brutality.

Daniel K. Inouye, the senator from Hawaii who was awarded his medal as a second lieutenant in the Army, reminisces about the ferocity of his outrage as an American of Japanese descent when the skies rained horror on Pearl Harbor in World War II. "My own people were just a generation removed from the land that spawned these bombers and sent them to drop death on Hawaii, on my own home," he says. "I screamed at the sky, 'Your dirty Japs!' I wanted to kill them."

But most of the veterans represented here are unknown to the general public, and their exploits are no less worthy of rediscovery. Among the most interesting is First Lt. Vernon Baker, another World War II vet who was part of the all-black "Buffalo" division that fought in Italy. His story of leading his men in a brutal battle to take a hilltop castle is full of gritty, powerful details. "Every time a man died, I took the dog tags off him," he recalls. "I had a pocketful when I got back." Most sobering is the news that no black soldier received a Medal of Honor during the war. Lieutenant Baker didn't receive his until the Army began investigating the oversight decades later.

Mr. Lang also portrays another African-American veteran, Specialist Clarence Sasser, a medic who recalls the horror of a brutal slaughter in a rice paddy in Vietnam in which only about a dozen soldiers of more than a hundred survived. "The hardest thing was lying there all night, listening to them beg for their mamas," he says.

The sources of the courage that the men draw on in the nerve-shredding heat of battle remain mysterious, a mixture of loyalty to their fellow soldiers, intense training and natural instinct. Detachment seems to help, too.

"I never, ever felt anything about killing the enemy," says Staff Sgt. Nick Bacon, an Arkansan honored for service in Vietnam. "I have compassion for the people, the women and the children. I like the Vietnamese people. I've been over there since. I got to hatred. The war was never personal with me. It was absolutely a game of survival."

The soldiers in "Beyond Glory" all survived, some with disfigured bodies, but all with their moral and psychological faculties intact. That is not always the case, sadly, and this quietly celebratory show may leave you wondering whether today's Medal of Honor recipients, who have faced a new kind of enemy and endured insidious new combat tactics in the Middle East, will be equally fortunate.