

# SCENE

## FROM THE HOUSE

DEC.  
2022

**NORM LEWIS**

in Roundabout Theatre Company's production of

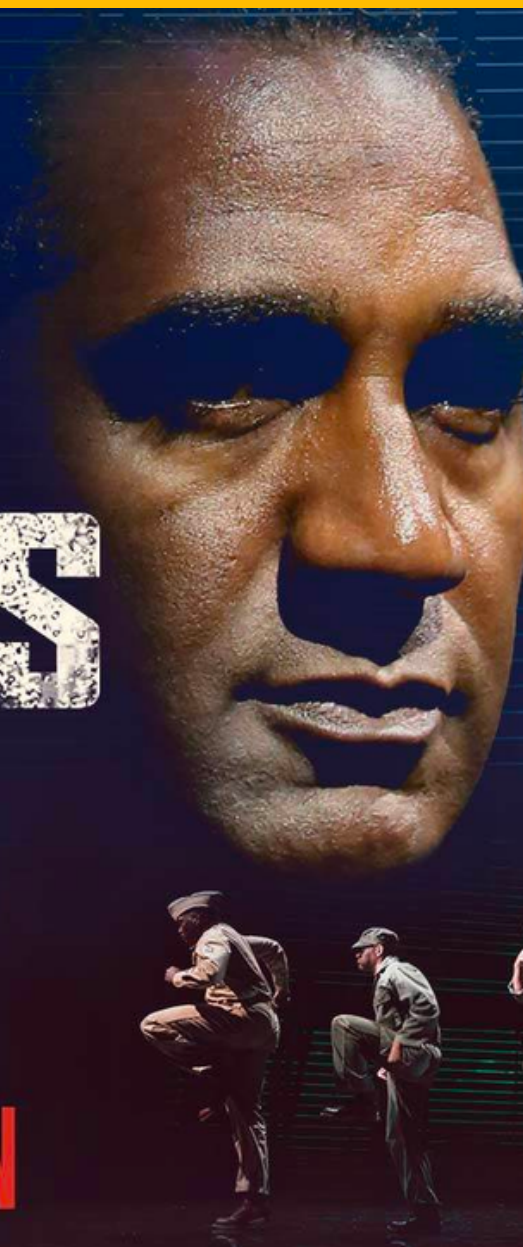
★ ★ ★ **A** ★ ★ ★

# SOLDIER'S PLAY

BY **CHARLES FULLER**

**ROUNDABOUT  
THEATRE  
COMPANY**

DIRECTED BY  
**KENNY LEON**



A Creative Stage Review  
by  
Naelis A. Ervin

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### A SOLDIER'S PLAY

Playwright Charles Fuller, drafts us into the barracks of Black soldiers during the 1940s and has us at full attention while we follow a military mystery surrounding the death of Sergeant Vernon Waters.

As discussions and rumors spread across the base about Whodunit, Fuller introduces us to the complexities of race, ranks, and the representation of Black soldiers fighting for their country and their voice in a broken system.

Originally presented in an Off-Broadway production by the Negro Ensemble Company in 1981, *A Soldier's Play* continues to expand its reach and conversation with audiences everywhere, including this North American tour featuring esteemed actor, Norm Lewis and several talented cast members.



*When I did A Soldier's Story, I was very young and green and thought I knew everything-now I know I know everything!*

-Denzel Washington

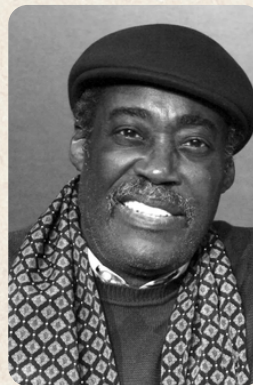
**Run Time:**

1 hr. 50 min.

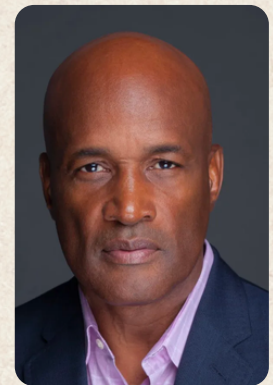
15-minute intermission

**Theatre/Company/Venue**

The Kennedy Center  
Eisenhower Theater  
Washington, DC



Playwright  
Charles Fuller



Director  
Kenny Leon

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### JUST A LITTLE BACKSTORY

A few weeks ago, I received an Instagram message from a friend who had a TravelZoo promotion for The Kennedy Center's premiere of *A Soldier's Play*. I am probably one of the few who still hadn't seen any rendition of this production, stage, or screen, but I was excited to break that streak with my first show.

Within a couple of hours, I secured my mobile ticket for one to an evening show and prepaid for parking, (*which I always highly suggest for this venue.*) After checking in, patrons were faced with a beautiful installation of costume/set pieces from the performance (as seen above).

Orchestra G Seat 1 set me up with an optimal view that evening. Anything closer or further left would've lessened the experience. I eagerly awaited as the house filled with a much older crowd, predominantly white women, who uttered Denzel's name every other breath.

A Soldier's Play Theatre Exhibit  
Photo Cred. -Naelis A. Ervin

### HOUSE LIGHTS OFF

The scene opens with a military chant, as a silhouette of singing soldiers is featured downstage. Imagine a fraternity's soulful song or chant on the yard calling out to his brothers. The voices of this cast instantly resonated throughout the venue and within minutes, the murder of a seemingly drunken soldier occurs right before us. An instant game of CLUE reveals itself as we're left to wonder if it was Col. Mustard in the barracks with a Revolver.

The unique device of non-linear storytelling, using flashbacks of each soldier's recount helped us not only explore the motives of the newly introduced characters but past relationships between soldiers as well. Set transitions moved each accusation closer to us from the Captain's quarters to the bedside of key military men. The simplicity of each wooden plank drifted us into a rigid yet neutral feeling, as we awaited the reveal of Sergeant Vernon C. Waters.

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### TAKE A BOW

Every player on that stage played their part well. Sergeant Waters, portrayed by Eugene Lee, commanded his well-deserved spotlight every time he stepped into it. Lee's fast-talking portrayal of Waters was just as crude as he was described in each soldier's recollection. Imagine Uncle Ruckus from the Boondocks, with a swirl of today's Kanye, professionally seeking approval from his white counterparts. All of this while undermining those who looked like him in their efforts to unify in a system where they didn't already find value.

The contrast in how respect was demonstrated from the lower ranks toward gentlemen like Sgt. Waters and Captain Davenport, portrayed by Norm Lewis, was vast. Captain Davenport's command of the stage was gracefully engaging and approachable even when other officers couldn't fathom a man of color with his rank. Fuller's well-crafted dialogue highlighted the ebbs and flows of Black men in power. As an audience, we watch how representation in the military doesn't go unnoticed. "It sure feels good seeing one of us wearing those bars." The emphasis on rank here reveals not only promise to Black officers but a sense of inferiority and fear when Captain Taylor, portrayed by William Connell, shares, "Being in charge just doesn't look right on Negroes." A concept that unfortunately remains prevalent in many systems to date.

Closing set of *A Soldier's Play*  
Photo Cred. -Naelis A. Ervin

Amid the drama, we get a sprinkle of comedic relief, primarily to shift our focus from pain to perseverance. Awkwardly still relatable in today's Black community. With stellar performances from Tarik Lowe as Private First Class Peterson, Branden Davon Lindsay as Private Henson, and the beautiful work of Sheldon D. Brown as Private C.J. Memphis, I could not keep my eyes off of them during their scenes. Lowe's Malcolm X demeanor and sharp tongue, Lindsay's cultural quips, and Brown's calming tones of music in his voice and instrument were the clashing symphony of dialogue and conflict that audiences needed.

#### Things I loved-

Norm's buttery voice. The Military Grade A bodies. The very natural chemistry between all Black members of the cast. The villainous portrayal of Sgt. Waters by Lee and the songs that rang throughout the set. Let's not forget the use of Nipsey Hussle's Perfect Timing, during the curtain call.

#### Things I Questioned-

The use of the word homie during this piece. Before, I'd not heard or seen a reference to this term in anything before the 70s. It seems that after further research, this term of endearment has significantly evolved in the African-American community. The more you know!

#### FINAL THOUGHTS-

I love going to a play with no expectations only to be blown away by all its elements. Dir. Leon gave us a continued cultural piece that invites us to the conversation of institutional racism and brotherhood in Black communities. I would love to see this work alongside a well-moderated Q&A with a younger Black audience, as they dissect how these elements show up in their personal and professional lives.

**RATING 10**