

# Changing Culture

## *Eulogy for a Warrior*

*You don't give a man a weapon until you have taught him to dance.* This Celtic proverb was featured prominently in the program for *Eulogy for a Warrior*, an original play by Ellen Hemphill and Nor Hall, produced by Archipelago Theatre Company of Chapel Hill. Hemphill, artistic director and co-founder of Archipelago, worked with Hall, a Jungian psychotherapist and writer from Minnesota, and musicians Christopher Adler and Sam Piperato to produce a “never less than riveting” (Bill Morrison, *The News and Observer*) play set in Vietnam. It was performed at Duke University in May as part of Manbites Dog Theater’s *Other Voices Series*.

### ... art is a vehicle for delivering humanity to the heart.

On first reading, you might guess that the Celtic proverb is meant to reflect an idea espoused by African-American Dance Ensemble’s founder Chuck Davis — “If everyone is dancing, they don’t have time to hate.” But the subject matter of the play digs deeper, touching on the significance of culture and community and the ensuing destruction when culture and community aren’t woven firmly into the fabric of a life.

It is no accident that the play is not titled *Eulogy for a Soldier*. Webster’s Dictionary defines a soldier as “a person engaged in military service,” but a warrior as “a person of demonstrated courage, fortitude, zeal and pugnacity.” Warriors are soldiers with heart. The Celts understood that art is a vehicle for delivering humanity to the heart. It doesn’t just happen — communities must play a role in the initiation of young people.

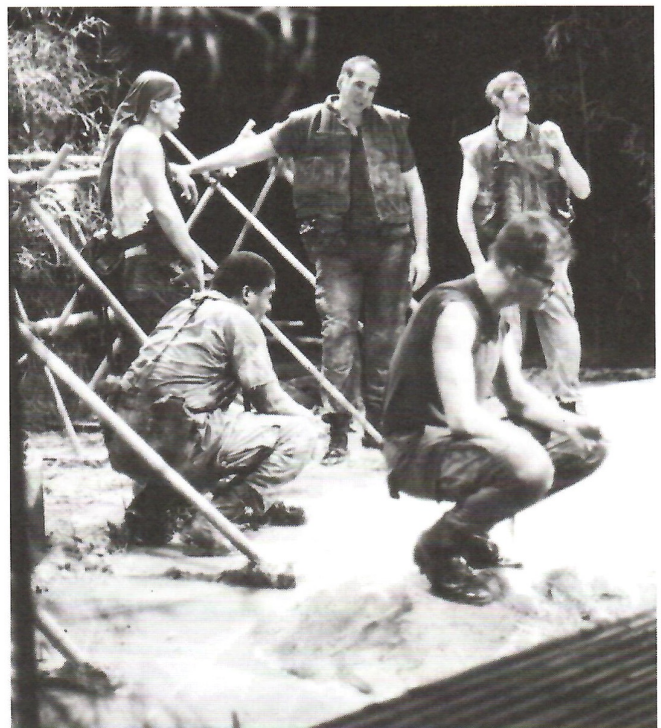
The play explores the confusion surrounding the war, both for the soldiers and their families. From the writers’ notes in the program: “we decided that the setting had to be Vietnam, because that is the wound that is still unhealed in this country as we approach the end of the Millennium.... After Vietnam, disillusionment was rampant in this country: for the returning veterans, for the young men who did not go, for the families who lost their sons, either through death or through the trauma that came from fighting the war or fighting not to fight.”

Hemphill and Hall began to connect with such writers as Michael Meade in their research. Meade wrote in his book, *Men and the Water of Life*, “The collapse of traditional cultures, the loss of shared myths and rituals that enfold the individual into the group, and the spread of modern industrial societies are producing generations of unbonded children and adults who are not initiated to the purpose and meaning of their own lives.

“In many tribal cultures, it was said that if the boys were not initiated into manhood, if they were not shaped by the skills and love of elders, then they would destroy the culture. If the fires that innately burn inside youths are not intentionally and lovingly added to the hearth of community, they will burn down the structures of culture, just to feel the warmth. ... [But] the most certain signals for lighting the fires of destruction are sent when the old people of a group lose their memories.”

Hemphill and Hall have shone a light on a moment in our history, hoping their art will lead to healing. Audience response was very positive, both from veterans and from those who were back home at the time of the war, and, in the authors’ words, “blind to the trauma of the returning soldiers.” In after-play discussions, the word “catharsis” was heard more than once. But Hemphill and Hall have raised a bigger issue as well. The stakes are high as we watch our culture disintegrate around us, as our communities disperse, as we have to fight tooth and nail to maintain public support for the arts.

Art, culture, community. Surely these are worth fighting for. ●



Scene from *Eulogy for a Warrior*, set in Vietnam.  
Photo by Ross Kolman and Jan Chambers