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# CALENDAR

MOVIES • TV • STYLE

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## THEATER

# War's slow spread onto stage

### A dramatic battle to bring war onto stage

By Sean Mervin

**A**FTER more than four years of bloody deaths, mangled bodies and multiple losses of duty endured by U.S. servicemen and women, the war in Iraq has yet to produce a signature American stage drama. But one candidate might be the Greek tragedy-inspired "Flags" by the penitentiarian Jane Martin, which ran for three months at the 16-seat Odyssey Theater in Los Angeles in 2003 and is headed for New York with much of critical acclaim for the occasion.

The backing is a limited engagement and search at the result of Broadway issue 2007, but the play's champion, which include its young Los Angeles producers, have hopes that this belated New York premiere could lead to something bigger.

#### The strange case of Jane Martin

**T**HE play was commissioned by the Guthrie in 2003, but because of scheduling conflicts was given its first staging in 2004 at Minneapolis' Mixed Blood Theater, where Mulkey and Landry created the roles of Eddie and Kim. Considering its topicality, generally good notices and successful run at the Odyssey, the question arises why no other theater in New York or elsewhere has found a space for "Flags" in the last two years.

Steven Klein, the 33-year-old staff producer at L.A.'s Black Dahlia Theater who is producing "Flags" under his separate Pinoff Theater banner with business partner Ryan Johnston, believes the reason has largely to do with the strange case of Jane Martin. While most playwrights are eagerly competing to get their works seen and staged, "Jane Martin" remains an enigmatic persona shrouding a writer who doesn't want his or her true identity known and whose unnamed agent is said to live in rural Kentucky and be nearly untraceable.

Many in the theater have long believed Martin to be Jon Jory, the former head of the Actors Theater of Louisville who established that theater's renowned New American Play Festival and who has taught in the drama department at the University of Washington since 2000. Yet Jory, who reportedly disavowed the premises of all Martin's plays at Louisville and still serves as a liaison to the playwright, refuses to discuss it, and the producers and actors associated with "Flags" dutifully abide by the rules of the 35-year literary covenant.

"There's a privacy issue, and we want to respect that," says Klein, who also says, "As soon as I started telling people I wanted to get the rights to produce a Jane Martin play in New York, the Blupharian narrative was written." His friends in the theater said it would never happen. The only Martin play ever done in New York was her first, the widely produced "Talking With," a series of monologues for women done at the Manhattan Theater Club in 1982 after debuting the year before at Actors Theater of Louisville, where most of the playwright's works have premiered.

In the intervening 25 decades, at least 10 more plays by "Jane Martin" have emerged. Two of them, "Kitty and Du" and "Dark and Light," won the Best New Play Award from the American Theater Critics Assn. "Kitty and Du" was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in 2005. But no productions in New York. All the while, Martin has never made a public appearance or given an interview.

"The assumption," says Klein, "is that Jane Martin is reventful of New York theater."

Nevertheless, with "Flags" in mind, Klein and Johnston thought, why not try? A native of Boston and a Yale graduate, Klein, in addition to producing and selling in several successful shows at the Black Dahlia, in 2004 and 2005 took Christine Haggler's one-woman show "Belfast Blues" to London and Belfast, banking producing experience along the way.

#### Raising 'Flags'

**K**LEIN first went to see "Flags" at the Odyssey because Johnston, his friend, was in the cast, playing Frankie, the younger son. He went back to see it three more times. "I loved the piece," he says. "I and Johnston learned that no one had the rights to the play in New York. They began their campaign to get the rights themselves, convincing the government in Manhattan to find a theater while seeking Jory's counsel over the phone from Seattle. Klein made the connection with MERRICK, a nonprofit venue devoted to provide discounted stage space for new and experimental work. All that remained was to hire a theater service able to penetrate the Kentucky back country to get a signature from Martin representative to seal the deal. Or so the story goes.

With the built-in subsidy provided by MERRICK, Klein and Johnston estimate that they can open the three-week run of "Flags" on Sept. 12 for less than a third of the \$75,000 it would take otherwise. There is no money allotted for publicity, advertising or marketing.

The bare-bones budget also requires a cast that believes in the play enough to work for little. "People who care about this play are making extreme sacrifices," Johnston says.

The nine-member ensemble will include thesians Johnston and Klein; Mulkey and Landry,



"FLAGS" Husband-and-wife actors Chris Mulkey and Karen Landry will reprise their roles as a working-class couple whose lives come askew when they learn their son has been killed in Iraq. At far left, co-producer Steven Klein watches rehearsals with director Henry Wislumpac; at left, actor Steven Mervin works on a scene from the play, which is headed for an off-Broadway run in September.

Photography by Ken Cedeno for LAT

Johnston's brother Klein, and Stephen Merritt, the talented character actor who was in the cast at the Odyssey and last appeared on Broadway in Paul Verhoeven's revival of "Our Town."

The production is being directed by Henry Wislumpac, a fellow Yale grad who assisted Robert Falls directing the Broadway production of Censor McPheerson's "Shining City" and will also direct the premiere of McPheerson's "Port Authority" in New York.

The politics of the play, even while Klein and Johnston believe there to be ambiguous, seem to matter a lot to Mulkey and Landry, who are from the generation that fought and protested the Vietnam War.

"I'm getting to do something that's important," says Landry, who turned down a movie offer to do the play in Minneapolis the first time.

During an interview at the Black Dahlia, where the company was rehearsing before heading out, Mulkey grabbed a guitar and played his own talking blues song with the message that the Iraq war was Vietnam all over again.

"I'm pro-America," Mulkey says gruffly while reading his military high school background and staunch objection to being sent to Vietnam. He

sure the invasion in 2003, Mulkey says he sent President Bush an e-mail asking him to consider Saudi Arabia instead. He got a response, thanking him for his opinion.

The role of Eddie, the blindfolded warrior who insists public demand to take down the American flag be mistakenly hoisted upside down as a tribute to his fallen son, has the size and force that calls out to an actor with Mulkey's reservoir of fury even as it backs the audience.

"It's such an intense play," Mulkey says. "When we did it at Mixed Blood, there was a nervousness among the cast that someone was going to jump up onstage and take issue with the play. I was ready for that."

It never happened.

As to why a play with such ongoing relevance and emotional weight has not been much produced on regional stages, Michael Ekoon, the former literary manager at the Guthrie who commissioned "Flags," responds, "Is that a rhetorical question?" Then he adds, "Evidently the American theater isn't going to break any new ones on the subject."

"Flags," which in 2004 could have been seen as a direct response to the government's then pro-

blisks on photographing the flag-covered coffins being sent back from Iraq, stands as an exception—even if to this point a minor one. But from the look of things around the country, it may not be an exception for much longer.

Not counting David Harber's "Stuff Happens" (British) done at the Mark Taper Forum two years ago and "Black Watch," a drama about a Scottish regiment in Iraq, coming to UCLA's Royce Hall in the fall, new American plays dealing with the war include the revised "Dying City" by Christopher Ethier, at Lincoln Center; "Craig Lucas' "A Prayer for My Enemy," now onstage at the Intiman in Seattle; "Welcome Home, Jenny Butler" by Julie Marie Myatt, scheduled for next year at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival and the Kennedy Center; and "Blood 17" by Jessica Goldring, opening at Florida Stage Company.

In the original script of "Flags," Eddie makes reference to the number of Americans died as "size hundreds." By the time of the Odyssey production, the line had to be changed to "two thousand." Now, in New York, it will be changed again, to "thirty-seven hundreds," a clear indication that the war has not stopped coming home, in the news or on the stage.

# Los Angeles Times



## 'Flags': A small victory in bringing Iraq war to stage

*Husband-and-wife actors Chris Mulkey and Karen Landry will reprise their roles as a couple whose lives come unhinged with the news that their oldest son has been killed in Iraq.*

(Photographs by Ken Hively/LAT)

By Sean Mitchell  
Special to The Times

August 26, 2007

After more than four years of bloody chaos, roadside bombs and multiple tours of duty endured by U.S. servicemen and women, the war in Iraq has yet to produce a signature American stage drama. But one candidate might be the Greek tragedy-inspired "Flags" by the pseudonymous Jane Martin, which ran for three months at the 99-seat Odyssey Theater in Los Angeles in 2005 and is headed for New York with much of that cast reunited for the occasion.

The booking is a limited engagement next month at the small off-Broadway venue 59E59, but the play's champions, which include its young Los Angeles producers, have hopes that this belated New York premiere could lead to something bigger.

Husband-and-wife actors Chris Mulkey and Karen Landry will reprise their roles as Eddie and Em Desmopoulos, a working-class couple whose lives come unhinged when a military chaplain shows up at their door with the news that their oldest son has been killed in Iraq. Mulkey, the endearingly rough-hewn character actor who is about to be seen as the new coach on NBC's "Friday Night Lights," in "Flags" plays an angry Vietnam vet and garbage man whose patriotic disposition is sorely challenged by his discovery that the military has lied to him about the circumstances surrounding his son's death.

Landry, a former member of Minneapolis' Guthrie Theater acting company who appeared on "Six Feet Under" and "St. Elsewhere," returns as the mother who must accept the unthinkable while wrangling an inconsolable reformed alcoholic husband from "going postal." A four-member chorus intrudes to comment on the events as news footage of the war and media coverage play in the background.

**The strange case of Jane Martin**

The play was commissioned by the Guthrie in 2003, but because of scheduling conflicts was given its first staging in 2004 at Minneapolis' Mixed Blood Theater, where Mulkey and Landry created the roles of Eddie and Em. Considering its topicality, generally good notices and successful run at the Odyssey, the question arises why no other theater, in New York or elsewhere, has found a space for "Flags" in the last two years.

Steven Klein, the 31-year-old staff producer at L.A.'s Black Dahlia Theatre who is producing "Flags" under his separate Firefly Theater banner with business partner Ryan Johnston, believes the reason has largely to do with the strange case of Jane Martin. While most playwrights are eagerly competing to get their works seen and staged, "Jane Martin" remains an enigmatic persona shielding a writer who doesn't want his or her true identity known and whose unnamed agent is said to live in rural Kentucky and be nearly unreachable.

Many in the theater have long believed Martin to be Jon Jory, the former head of the Actors Theater of Louisville who established that theater's celebrated New American Play Festival and who has taught in the drama department at the University of Washington since 2000. Yet Jory, who coincidentally directed the premieres of all Martin's plays at Louisville and still serves as a liaison to the playwright, refuses to discuss it, and the producers and actors associated with "Flags" dutifully abide by the rules of the 26-year literary conceit.

"There's a privacy issue, and we want to respect that," says Klein, who also says, "As soon as I started telling people I wanted to get the rights to produce a Jane Martin play in New York, the Sisyphian narrative was written." His friends in the theater said it would never happen. The only Martin play ever done in New York was her first, the widely produced "Talking With," a series of monologues for women done at the Manhattan Theater Club in 1982 after debuting the year before at Actors Theater of Louisville, where most of the playwright's works have premiered.

In the intervening 2 1/2 decades, at least 10 more plays by "Jane Martin" have emerged. Two of them, "Kelly and Du" and "Jack and Jill," won the Best New Play Award from the American Theater Critics Assn. "Kelly and Du" was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in 1993. But no productions in New York. All the while, Martin has never made a public appearance or given an interview.

"The assumption," says Klein, "is that Jane Martin is resentful of New York theater."

Nevertheless, with "Flags" in mind, Klein and Johnston thought, why not try? A native of Boston and a Yale graduate, Klein, in addition to producing and acting in several successful shows at the Black Dahlia, in 2004 and 2005 took Geraldine Hughes' one-woman show "Belfast Blues" to London and Belfast, banking producing experience along the way.

## **Raising 'Flags'**

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When he and Johnston learned that no one had the rights to the play in New York, they began their campaign to get the rights themselves, pounding the pavement in Manhattan to find a theater while seeking Jory's counsel over the phone from Seattle. Klein made the connection with 59E59, a nonprofit venue created to provide discounted stage space for new and experimental work. All that remained was to hire a courier service able to penetrate the Kentucky back country to get a signature from Martin's representative to seal the deal. Or so the story goes.

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The bare-bones budget also requires a cast that believes in the play enough to work for little. "People who care about this play are making extreme sacrifices," Johnston says.

The nine-member ensemble will include (besides Johnston and Klein) Mulkey and Landry, Johnston's brother Kyle, and Stephen Mendillo, the talented character actor who was in the cast at the Odyssey and last appeared on Broadway in Paul Newman's revival of "Our Town."

The production is being directed by Henry Wishcamper, a fellow Yale grad who assisted Robert Falls directing the Broadway production of Conor McPherson's "Shining City" and will also direct the premiere of McPherson's "Port Authority" in New York.

The politics of the play, even while Klein and Johnston believe them to be ambiguous, seem to matter a lot to Mulkey and Landry, who are from the generation that fought and protested the Vietnam War.

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"I'm pro-America," Mulkey says gruffly while recalling his military high school background and staunch objection to being sent to Vietnam. Before the invasion in 2003, Mulkey says he sent President Bush an e-mail asking him to consider Saudi Arabia instead. He got a response, thanking him for his opinion.

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In the original script of "Flags," Eddie makes reference to the number of American dead as "nine hundred." By the time of the Odyssey production, the line had to be changed to "two thousand." Now, in New York, it will be changed again, to "thirty-seven hundred," a clear indication that the war has not stopped coming home, in the news or on the stage.