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Alex Webb – on writing and performing his new Civil War drama Amelia

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January 12, 2012 By [Tim Treanor](#) [Leave a Comment](#)

At Washington Stage Guild, an extraordinary story about the foot soldiers of history.

History is a tale written by the victors, Machiavelli tells us. But it is usually lived by the losers – those who have lost their homes, or their fathers, or their arms or legs to some tragedy – war, invasion, or worse.

The American Civil War is a century and a half past now – which is to say, long outside the memory of any living person. The thoughts and feelings of the men who midwived it into being, and then ushered it to conclusion, are preserved in the amber of documentation. But our memory of those in the field, living with the stench of gunpowder and gangrene, flickers.

About forty years ago, my father told me about an encounter with a Civil War veteran he had had in the early thirties, when he was a boy. The veteran was recounting what it was like to be fired upon by cannon. “It was just like dodge-ball!” he said. “It moved so slowly you could catch it! But if you did, your arms would come off.” I am telling you this story now, and in thirty years you might tell it to a young person who in another sixty years might tell it her grandchild, and in this manner extend that eyewitness account for three hundred years or so. But each retelling would be like a photocopy of a photocopy, preserving imperfections and fuzzing the brilliant edge of the original experience.

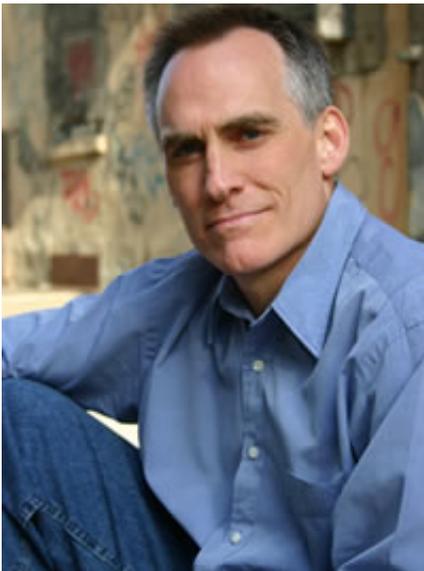


Shirleyann Kaladjian as Amelia and Alex Webb (Photo: C. Stanley Photography)

Amelia, Washington Stage Guild's world-premiere production of Alex Webb's Civil War play, memorializes the dignity of the life of an ordinary person in an extraordinary time. "I am extremely passionate about the notion that throughout history the true heroics of so-called average people are lost or drowned out by the bluster of those who have the power to write the history," Webb says.

The passion shows. DCTS reviewer Susan Galbraith gave the play her highest rating, and limned it with language usually reserved for the most powerful art: "[an] authentic and most moving piece of theatre" which "unexpectedly grab[s] your heart and [carries] you off into an adventure of the soul." Webb's writing, Galbraith says, is "muscular yet very tender... lyrical and powerful." It is the first play he has had produced.

Webb's story is about a farmer's daughter who marries a general-store clerk and then kisses him goodbye as he heads off with the Pennsylvania 20th to fight Johnny Reb. When he stops writing to her she decides to find out what happened to him. In person. Her journeys take her through lurid scenes of battlefield death, and she ends up in the war's worst prison encampment.



Author, actor Alex Webb

"Amelia is inspired by a single line in an Andersonville prison diary," Webb reveals. "When I was researching a role for *The Andersonville Trial*, I came across this intriguing sentence ... 'Rumor has it that a woman has come in here after her man.' I spun out my fictional adventure-romance from there." His protagonist is not a historical person, but she is real. "Amelia's character is based on my research, years spent wandering the battlefields of Gettysburg and summers spent in the Pennsylvania countryside."

So is it accurate to call a woman who takes on these sorts of risks and privations in the name of love "ordinary"? Perhaps; Webb's research shows that ordinary people do extraordinary things. "When Amelia walks into Andersonville prison to find her husband, it is certainly a dramatic event," he allows. "However, I don't know that it is that unusual after all. There are women and men right now walking through prison gates around the world in search of their political prisoner husbands, fathers, wives, brothers and daughters with no guarantee that they will ever walk out again."

Amelia (Shirleyann Kaladjian) risks her life, but Webb takes on some artistic risks, too. One is that he has one actor play every role other than Amelia herself – her father, her mother, her girlfriend, her beloved Ethan, and a whole army of civil war heroes and rogues. Another would be the identity of the actor who is playing all those roles. That would be Alex Webb.

These risks didn't bother Bill Largess, the veteran actor and director who serves as Washington Stage Guild's Artistic Director and who directs this play. "The transformations [from one character to another] are key to an audience's acceptance of the conventions of this play, and our approach...was to be as clear and simple as possible with them," Largess explains. "The tools of any actor, voice, physicality, emotion, are all we felt we needed to make clear who he was at any given moment... Sometimes he has an exit, but more commonly he turns, or shifts his position, or even his facial expression, and you know he's someone different now. [Webb's] skill with accents and vocal qualities is a big help." It appears to have worked: Galbraith noted that Largess "directs the piece completely without theatrical fanfare or gimmicks in a style both spare and dangerously exposed—like watching a tightrope act sixty feet in the air."



Shirleyann Kaladjian, wife of Alex Webb, plays Amelia

Some directors might feel dangerously exposed to have the playwright as a member of the cast. Not Largess. "It was a huge advantage," he says. "I think this worked so well because Alex and I have known each other so long. I know how he works, and he knows how I approach a scene, so it was a pretty smooth process. He was very open to my more 'dramaturgical' moments, where I would ask, or propose, something he hadn't considered about the play or the characters. I didn't impose anything but I didn't need to because of his willingness to try things he hadn't thought of. Plus, when his existing ideas were good, as they usually were, I was happy to interpolate them."

It was an advantage to Webb, the playwright acknowledges. Working with Largess allowed him to enjoy the play as it turned into a production. "I was listening to Bill give his curtain speech and I suddenly became a little overwhelmed with all that I had taken on. The wonderful thing is that I know what I like as an actor and I have tried to fill this play with scenes that any actor would relish to play and I am pleased to say that [his wife] Shirleyann [Kaladjian, who plays Amelia] and I have been having a blast playing them."

Amelia is a little out of the ordinary for Washington Stage Guild, which specializes in revivals of plays from the turn of the last century, particularly the work of Shaw. But it is not unprecedented. "Our mission statement describes what we do as 'eloquent plays of idea and argument, passion and wit,'" Largess notes,

“and while that certainly applies to Shaw or Molnar, it also leaves room for a script as wonderful on first glance as *Amelia*.”

Washington Stage Guild’s production of *Amelia* runs thru Jan 29, 2012 at the Undercroft Theatre, 900 Massachusetts Ave NW, Washington, DC.

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