

## Timely Play Addresses Racism, Homophobia, and Society's Endorsement of Violence

By JON WHITE

This year marks the tenth anniversary of the Gulf War. Though many see the war as a triumph of the forces of democracy over the oppression of Saddam Hussein's tyranny, Naomi Wallace's play, *In the Heart of America*, reveals stifling injustice within the American armed forces. Wallace's play goes beyond critiquing the military – it offers a disturbing look at American society. In Wallace's America, racism and homophobia abound.

Contrasting against such themes of hate and oppression, as well as against Wallace's social criticism, the plot engages the love that flourishes between two young soldiers serving in the war. It is a tale that is at once violent and tender, numbing yet erotic.

This May, Middlebury College seniors Ryan Palsrok and Laura Yee bring Wallace's provocative story to Vermont.

Last year Palsrok, the director, became the center of a controversy over discrimination against gays on campus. This episode, along with the fact that Middlebury has witnessed the destruction of materials belonging to gay and Islamic student organizations in the last two years, lends great topicality to Palsrok's direction.

Wallace sets the play in an army camp in Saudi Arabia. The action, however, interweaves the traumas of the Gulf War with those of Vietnam. Characters talk of dropping thousands of pounds of bombs on Iraq, while in another scene they discuss the grisly details of the 1968 My Lai Massacre in Vietnam.

Two characters, Boxler and Lue Ming, give haunting life to Wallace's look at the Vietnam conflict. The two literally haunt the play as spirits left over from the war in Southeast Asia and their stories recall the racism, violence, and destruction that prevailed in Vietnam 30 years ago.

The sensual romance that counters this past brutality involves two soldiers, Craver and Remzi. Craver hails from a lower class family from

*In the Heart of America* will take place at the Hepburn Zoo at Middlebury from May 10-13. Tickets can be purchased by calling 802-443-MIDD. The play features adult language and content.



Laura Yee, as Lue Ming, can be seen in *In the Heart of America*, produced by the Middlebury College Theater Department.

The show is also sponsored by Feminist Action at Middlebury, as well as the Middlebury Open Queer Alliance.

Kentucky while Remzi is Palestinian-American. Beyond being taunted for their homosexuality, the two endure humiliation for their own social backgrounds; Remzi for being an Arab in American society, and Craver for his country roots. Nonetheless, the two find each other against the odds created by their social status, their sexuality, and their involvement in the army.

Through Craver and Remzi, Wallace challenges her audience to address the violence, homophobia, and racism that continue to undermine our humanity. The beating death of Matthew Shepard several years ago, the current and escalating conflict between the Israelis and Palestinians, as well as the unwillingness in Washington to redress the "don't ask don't tell" policy in the military, all indicate that homophobia, racism, and violence continue to grip society.

In her introduction, Wallace

explains her motives for writing the play. "I am most impassioned by a theater that puts us all at risk. I am not as interested in answers as I am in questions."

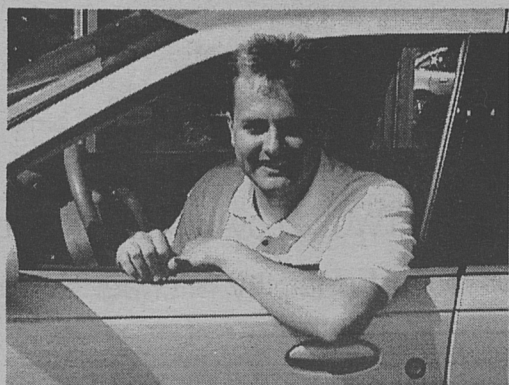
Wallace provides no simple solutions in her play, but she suggests that transformation can occur. Perhaps for Wallace, in challenging her audience to address and consider these issues, steps toward some solution can be found.

Wallace's play opened for audiences at the Bush Theater in London on August 3, 1994. It won the 1995 Susan Smith Blackburn Prize. Palsrok's staging of *In the Heart of America* will be one of the few ever done in the United States. It features five students from Middlebury assuming the main roles; Michael Azzara, Liz Myers, Chris Timberlake, Laura Yee, and Ulises Zanello have been cast for the production.

### THE ALMOST EMPTY HOUSE

Last window shut  
last bag of trash  
waiting at the door.  
I can see the spots  
where I lived,  
where I have been  
rich and poor.  
Had lost our self here  
our secret rendezvous  
haunted place, haunted space  
I lived here after her.  
I slept in that room  
I ate in them all  
in the almost empty house,  
it was the only place  
left for me to call  
home.  
Who says I didn't pay?  
I left the curtain  
in the bathroom in the  
almost empty house.

Pat Robinson



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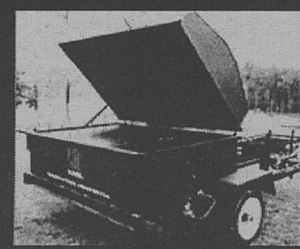
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