

Intriguing 'Soldier's Story' explores blacks' changing roles

By Chris Welsch
Daily Nebraskan Staff Editor

"A Soldier's Story" is much more than that. It's a murder mystery, an insightful exploration of changing values at the end of World War II and of the complex effects of those changes on blacks. It's a damn good story.

The movie starts with the murder of Master Sgt. Vernon C. Waters, a hard-ass who is hated by his troops. Waters, played well by Adolph Caesar, leads a troop of all-black soldiers waiting for assignment in the European Theater.

Howard E. Rollins Jr. plays Richard Davenport, a sharp-look-

ing black captain sent to investigate the murder. The white officers at Fort Neal in Louisiana resent Davenport and fear he won't be successful in the investigation because of his race.

Davenport is determined to find the killer — his thorough investigation makes a fascinating murder mystery.

He interviews all the men of Waters' troop. An intriguing portrait of Waters emerges in their recollections. The sergeant is obsessed with imitating whites because he thinks this war will bring blacks into the mainstream. He humiliates and abuses his troops in his overzealous quest to eliminate "geechies" and "yassus."

Davenport has the formidable task of finding the killers in hostile territory. The white officers are covering up for two of their men who were the last to see Waters alive. Davenport is told he probably won't be able to arrest any whites for the crime — be they Klansmen or officers.

But what begins as a cut and dry case of racial killing becomes more and more complex as Wat-

ers relationship with the black troops is revealed.

Rollins is magnificent as Davenport. He handles the prejudice of the white soldiers and the admiration of the black ones with the same cool demeanor. "Soldier's Story" revolves around Waters, but Rollins makes it Davenport's story too.

Caesar also excels in his role. Although Waters is hateable, Caesar makes the character more than just a knee-jerk bad guy. Waters wants to be part of the white world, but as the movie progresses, he becomes horrified at the hypocrisy of his actions. In his efforts to further the race, Waters actually steps backward with his viciousness. Caesar portrays that struggle so well, one becomes sympathetic to the misled sergeant.

The role of blacks in society was changing rapidly at the end of WWII. Waters represented one extreme — a man proud of his black heritage, not cowed by prejudice. He was a success — with a law degree and the stripes of a captain in a white army.

C.J. Memphis, a dumb, friendly black who was considered an

"Uncle Tom" was scorned by Waters. Memphis was Waters' exact opposite. Played by Larry Riley, Memphis suffers Waters' abuse until it drives him to the edge — essentially taking Waters with him.

Technically, "A Soldier's Story" is straightforward. Everything is real. The camera work is smooth with some fine subtle touches. During one scene the camera takes in Waters as he talks about a "geechie" like Memphis he knew in WWI. In the background Memphis sings a blues tune. The camera closes in on the mirror until all that is seen is Waters lined face, his thin-lipped mouth; the focus, grinding insult after insult, showing his hate — then panning back to see the friendly innocent Memphis, smiling and singing.

The blues music in the bar scene is as good as anything you'll hear at the Zoo, and Herbie Hancock's funky, '40s soundtrack completes the movie.

The acting is fine-tuned, the timing is right-on. It's a slick job. A story well told.

"A Soldier's Story" should be at a Lincoln Theater soon.

"World Famous" P.O. Pears

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Sgt. Waters (Adolph Caesar, right) holds the smoking gun and accuses C. J. (Larry Riley) of pulling the trigger.

Bay Area exhibit . . .

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These artists have helped make San Francisco more in tune with the mainstream of contemporary art, like the East Coast, but with a West Coast flavor representing individual freedom. The stress on the individual produces a variety of styles with no central focus except the power of the artist's personal approaches to their work. This factor also seems to glue the exhibition together.

Otherwise, it looks like an abridged edition of contemporary painting in the United States, with works representing most major movements in modern American art.

One of the strongest pieces in the show (also the largest), is a 1983 work by William T. Wiley titled "Agent Orange." The use of folk icons and found objects derived from the "Funk" art of California, which tends to demystify art. The multimedia collage,

painting, print and assemblage is reminiscent of Robert Rauschenberg's "Monogram" and the value placed on the found objects leans into the realm of the metaphysical.

Another interesting piece is a large mixed-media work on canvas titled "I Used to Draw in Church on Sunday" by Raymond Saunders. The black-textured painting is accented with "patches" and "zips" of brilliant color, and feels like it belongs among Abstract Expressionist work because many techniques are borrowed from that movement.

In contrast to the Abstract Expressionist works is the photo-realism of Richard McLean. His painting "Satin Doll" looks like a snapshot blown up about 100 times and must be an airbrush painting since no brushstrokes are visible. Representative of another brand of realism is a small oil painting by Wayne Thiebaud titled, "Holy Park Ridge." Although the work is not a still-life (his usual subject matter), the approach to the landscape is similar — bright colors and thick textures reflecting the vulgar commercialism of pop art from a California point of view.

There are several other works in the exhibition — landscapes, geometric abstractions, figurative paintings and painted sculptures. One by Manueal Neri looks much like Edgar Degas' "Dressed Ballerina."



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