

# A SOLDIER'S PLAY

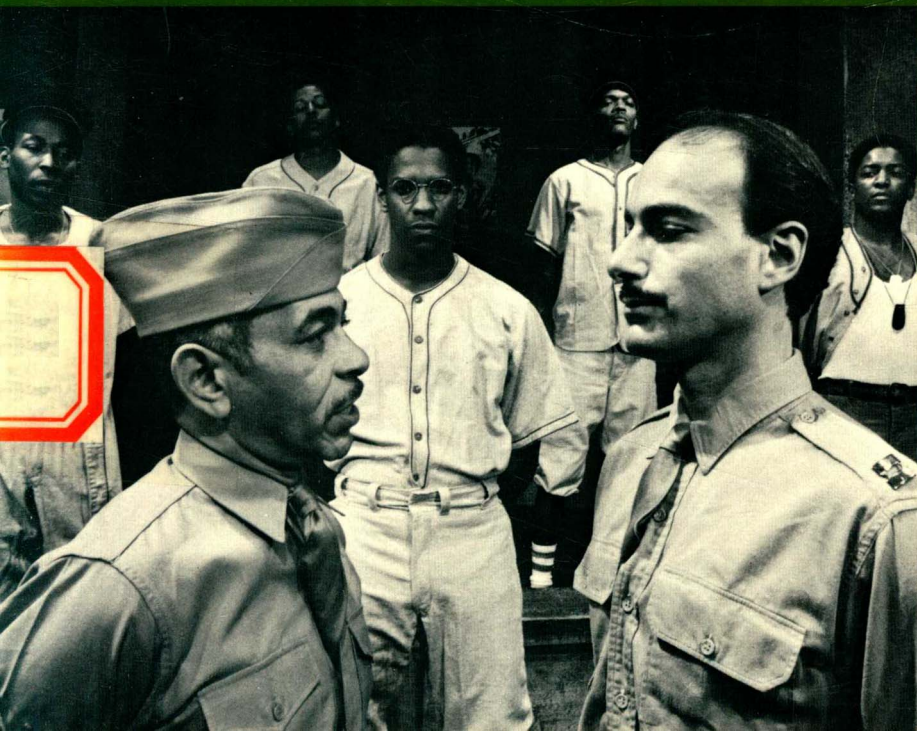
A PLAY BY

Charles Fuller

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*Winner of the Pulitzer Prize for Drama, 1982*

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# A Soldier's Play

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**Charles Fuller**

A DRAMABOOK

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**A SOLDIER'S PLAY**

by  
Michael Fuller

For LARRY NEAL  
whom I will miss  
for the rest of my life

*A Soldier's Play* opened on November 10, 1981, at Theatre Four in New York City. It was presented by the Negro Ensemble Company—Leon B. Denmark, Managing Director, and Douglas Turner Ward, Artistic Director. Direction was by Douglas Turner Ward; scenery by Felix E. Cochren; lighting by Allen Lee Hughes; costumes by Judy Dearing; sound by Regge Life. The cast was as follows:

TECH/SERGEANT VERNON C. WATERS

CAPTAIN CHARLES TAYLOR

CORPORAL BERNARD COBB

PRIVATE FIRST CLASS MELVIN PETERSON

CORPORAL ELLIS

PRIVATE LOUIS HENSON

PRIVATE JAMES WILKIE

PRIVATE TONY SMALLS

CAPTAIN RICHARD DAVENPORT

PRIVATE G. J. MEMPHIS

LIEUTENANT BYRD

CAPTAIN WILCOX

*Adolph Caesar*

*Peter Friedman*

*Eugene Lee*

*Denzel Washington*

*James Pickens, Jr.*

*Samuel L. Jackson*

*Steven A. Jones*

*Brent Jennings*

*Charles Brown*

*Larry Riley*

*Cotter Smith*

*Stephen Zettler*

# A SOLDIER'S PLAY





## CHARACTERS

TECH/SERGEANT VERNON C. WATERS

CORPORAL BERNARD COBB

PRIVATE JAMES WILKIE

PRIVATE LOUIS HENSON

PFC MELVIN PETERSON

PRIVATE TONY SMALLS

CORPORAL ELLIS

CAPTAIN CHARLES TAYLOR

CAPTAIN RICHARD DAVENPORT

PRIVATE G. J. MEMPHIS

LIEUTENANT BYRD

CAPTAIN WILCOX



# ACT ONE



TIME: 1944

PLACE: Fort Neal, Louisiana

SCENE: *The inner shell of the stage is black. On the stage, in a horseshoe-like half circle, are several platforms at varying levels.*

*On the left side of this horseshoe is a military office arrangement with a small desk (a nameplate on the desk reads: CAPTAIN CHARLES TAYLOR), two office-type chairs, one straight-backed, a regimental, and an American flag. A picture of F.D.R. is on the wall.*

*On the right side of the horseshoe, and curved toward the rear, is a barracks arrangement, with three bunk beds and footlockers set in typical military fashion. The exit to this barracks is a free-standing doorway on the far right. (This barracks should be changeable—these bunks with little movement can look like a different place.) On the edge of this barracks is a poster, semi-blown up, of Joe Louis in an army uniform, helmet, rifle, and bayonet. It reads: PVT. JOE LOUIS SAYS, "WE'RE GOING TO DO OUR PART—AND WE'LL WIN BECAUSE WE'RE ON GOD'S SIDE."*

*On the rear of the horseshoe, upstage center, is a bare platform, raised several feet above everything else. It can be anything we want it to be—a limbo if you will.*

*The entire set should resemble a courtroom. The sets, barracks and office, will both be elevated, so that from anywhere on the horseshoe one may look down onto a space at center stage that is on the stage floor. The levels should have easy access by either stairs or ramps, and the entire set should be raked ever so slightly*

*so that one does not perceive much difference between floor and set, and the bottom edges of the horseshoe. There must also be enough area on both sides of the horseshoe to see exits and entrances.*

*Lighting will play an integral part in the realization of the play. It should therefore be sharp, so that areas are clearly defined, with as little spill into other areas as possible. Lights must also be capable of suggesting mood, time, and place.*

*As the play opens, the stage is black. In the background, rising in volume, we hear the song "Don't Sit under the Apple Tree," sung by the Andrews Sisters. Quite suddenly, in a sharp though narrow beam of light, in limbo, TECH/SERGEANT VERNON C. WATERS, a well-built, light-brown-skinned man in a World War II, winter army uniform, is seen down on all fours. He is stinking drunk, trying to stand and mumbling to himself.*

*WATERS (repeating): They'll still hate you! They still hate you  
... They still hate you!*

*WATERS is laughing as suddenly someone steps into the light. (We never see this person.) He is holding a .45 caliber pistol. He lifts it swiftly and ominously toward WATERS's head and fires. WATERS is knocked over backward. He is dead. The music has stopped and there is a strong silence onstage.*

*VOICE: Le's go!*

*The man with the gun takes a step, then stops. He points the gun at WATERS again and fires a second time. There is another silence as limbo is plunged into darkness, and the barracks is just as quickly lit.*

*We are in the barracks of Company B, 221st Chemical Smoke Generating Company, at Fort Neal. Five black enlisted men*

stand at "parade rest" with their hands above their heads and submit to a search. They are: CORPORAL BERNARD COBB, a man in his mid to late twenties, dressed in a T-shirt, dog tags, fatigues, and slippers. PRIVATE JAMES WILKIE, a man in his early forties, a career soldier, is dressed in fatigues from which the stripes have been removed, with a baseball cap on, and smoking a cigar. PRIVATE LOUIS HENSON, thin, in his late twenties or early thirties, is wearing a baseball T-shirt that reads "Fort Neal" on the front and "#4" on the back, with fatigues and boots on. PFC MELVIN PETERSON, a man in his late twenties, wearing glasses, looks angelic. His shirt is open but he does not look sloppy; of all the men, his stripe is the most visible, his boots the most highly polished. PRIVATE TONY SMALLS, a man in his late thirties, a career man, is as small as his name feels. All five men are being searched by CORPORAL ELLIS, a soldier who is simply always "spit and polish." ELLIS is also black, and moves from man to man, patting them down in a police-like search. CAPTAIN CHARLES TAYLOR, a young white man in his mid to late thirties, looks on, a bit disturbed. All the men's uniforms are from World War II.

TAYLOR: I'm afraid this kind of thing can't be helped, men—you can put your arms down when Ellis finishes. (*Several men drop their arms. ELLIS is searching PVT. HENSON*) We don't want anyone from Fort Neal going into Tynin looking for red-necks.

COBB: May I speak, sir? (TAYLOR *nods*) Why do this, Captain? They got M.P.'s surrounding us, and hell, the Colonel must know nobody colored killed the man!

TAYLOR: This is a precaution, Cobb. We can't have revenge killings, so we search for weapons.

PETERSON: Where'd they find the Sarge, sir?

TAYLOR: In the woods out by the Junction—and so we don't have any rumors. Sergeant Waters was shot twice—we don't know that he was lynched! (*Pause*) Twice. Once in the chest, and a bullet in the head. (*ELLIS finishes with the last man*) You finished the footlockers?

ELLIS: Yes, sir! There aren't any weapons.

TAYLOR (*relaxes*): I didn't think there would be. At ease, men! (*The men relax*) Tech/Sergeant Waters, in my opinion, served the 221st and this platoon in particular with distinction, and I for one shall miss the man. (*Slight pause*) But no matter what we think of the Sergeant's death, we will not allow this incident to make us forget our responsibility to this uniform. We are soldiers, and our war is with the Nazis and Japs, not the civilians in Tynin. Any enlisted man found with unauthorized weapons will be immediately subject to summary court-martial. (*Softens*) Sergeant Waters's replacement won't be assigned for several weeks. Until that time, you will all report to Sergeant Dorsey of C Company. Corporal Cobb will be barracks N.C.O.—any question?

PETERSON: Who do they think did it, sir?

TAYLOR: At this time there are no suspects.

HENSON: You know the Klan did it, sir.

TAYLOR: Were you an eyewitness, soldier?

HENSON: Who else goes around killin' Negroes in the South?—They lynched Jefferson the week I got here, sir! And that Signal Corps guy, Daniels, two months later!



TAYLOR: Henson, unless you saw it, keep your opinions to yourself! Is that clear? (HENSON *nods*) And that's an order! It also applies to everybody else!

ALL (*almost simultaneously*): Yes, sir!

TAYLOR: You men who have details this afternoon, report to the orderly room for your assignments. The rest of you are assigned to the Colonel's quarters—clean-up detail. Cobb, I want to see you in my office at 1350 hours.

COBB: Yes, sir.

TAYLOR: As of 0600 hours this morning, the town of Tynin was placed off-limits to all military personnel. (*Slight groan from the men*) The Friday night dance has also been canceled—(*All the men moan. TAYLOR is sympathetic*) O.K., O.K.! Some of the officers are going to the Colonel—I can't promise anything. Right now, it's canceled.

ELLIS: Tenn-hut!

*The men snap to. The CAPTAIN salutes. Only COBB salutes him back. The CAPTAIN starts out.*

TAYLOR: As you were!

*The CAPTAIN and ELLIS exit the barracks. The men move to their bunks or footlockers. WILKIE goes to the rear of the bunks and looks out.*

COBB: They still out there, Wilkie?