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## Military officers help ensure authenticity of play

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Among the cast of “Mister Roberts” at the Omaha Community Playhouse are, left to right, Jonathan Purcell, Ron Chvala, Michael McCandles and Doug Blackburn.

Sometimes the make-believe world of theater is all about making it real.

When Susan Baer Collins signed on to direct “Mister Roberts” at the Omaha Community Playhouse, she knew she wanted expert help to give the show set on a World War II cargo ship military authenticity.

“My dad was in the Navy,” Collins said, “but that doesn’t mean I know anything about it.”

“Mister Roberts,” which will open Friday, won the best-play Tony in 1948 before becoming a best-picture Oscar nominee in 1955. Both starred Henry Fonda, who began his acting career at the playhouse. Fonda knew something about Navy authenticity, having served on a ship in World War II.

Help for Collins came from two active-duty officers at StratCom. Navy Cmdr. John Kennedy is the show’s technical adviser, while Army Maj. John Morgan was cast as Insigna, one of the sailors on the USS Reluctant.

Before rehearsals began, Kennedy helped Collins understand nautical terms in the script. The kingpost, she learned, is the mast near the cargo hold, used for cranes to load and unload the ship. Fenders are bumpers put alongside the ship when another vessel pulls up close. A bit is a metal post used to tie off a rope.

Kennedy sent a tutorial, complete with photos and arrows, labeling parts of the ship, explaining what it means to be on watch, describing what the ship’s bridge looks like.

“It was extremely helpful,” she said. “We were e-mailing on his Blackberry as questions came up.”

Later, Kennedy came to a rehearsal to answer questions from cast members. They learned how to salute, stand at attention or at parade rest, where to cast their eyes, how to position their feet at a 45-degree angle. Kennedy even did an inspection of cast members at attention.

Collins said she got the higher level of military authenticity she wanted in the details, plus something at least as valuable she hadn’t expected.

“He talks like a theater person,” Collins said. “He can analyze characters from what they say and do. I thought that was awesome.”

The USS Reluctant is a dysfunctional ship on which bored sailors far from combat fester with resentment toward their tyrannical captain. Roberts, who cares more about the men than himself, is caught between them and the skipper.

Kennedy offered insight on the depth of the dysfunction, such as what it means when the captain sounds general quarters over a personal offense. Kennedy also could explain the deeper insult when the captain chews out Roberts, a fellow officer, in front of all the enlisted men.

“He helped with intangibles,” Morgan said, “like how officers and enlisted relate to each other.”

Morgan said he agreed with Collins that the war being fought in “Mister Roberts” is on board the ship, a war for survival and dignity and a war against tedium and routine.

“I understand that tedium,” said Morgan, 44, who has served two tours of duty in Iraq. “It’s part of war, and it wears on you.”

Soldiers and sailors learn to lean on each other and to let off steam in constructive ways like lifting weights, he said.

Cast member Ron Chvala, a former Marine, recalled shipboard bets that could turn the movement of insects into a race and pranks dreamed up in off-duty moments.

Some moments in the show, like sailors on deck trading war stories, remind Morgan of moments in Iraq, late in the evening smoking cigars.

“Some things about the military haven’t changed in 60 years,” he said, “like the leadership, the camaraderie and dedication to duty. Mr. Roberts taking care of his sailors, that feels as true today as it was in 1944. And the same issues the captain had can also arise today.”

Collins said the pranks dreamed up by the sailors aren’t just an amusement but something to live for. The brilliance of the play, she said, is in its combination of great humor and its demand to be taken seriously in key moments.

“The more you couch anything you’re pretending in truth, the more you might be able to pull off what you’re trying to do,” Collins said. “It’s life on a ship and what it means to lead that we’re trying to get at.”

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