

A Hard Decision

Westley Thomas

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This emotionally hefty play deals with the effects of war on individuals and relationships, and should strike a sympathetic chord with veterans.

Westley Thomas's play *A Hard Decision* focuses on the aftermath of war in a thought-provoking way, examining its effects on the individual, on the family, and on communities at large. The play becomes a thoughtful investigation of the particular impact of post-traumatic stress disorder on relationships by focusing on two newlyweds torn apart by the war who later find happiness in second marriages.

The play opens with William and Zera, high school sweethearts, who have just returned from their honeymoon and are expecting their first child. But before they can enjoy their new happiness, William leaves to fight in the Vietnam War. Quick, separate scenes introduce other central characters, including Margarite, who is Zera's childhood best friend, and Steve, a prisoner of war held in Vietnam.

A Hard Decision is a brief play, with only two acts, and its parts are very different from one another. The first act features a plethora of quick, short scenes that mostly function to introduce characters, though they are presented as static and two-dimensional despite the major life changes they endure. Broad narrative baselines are established, but the dialogue is generic and flat, and this all comes at the expense of narrative development.

The second act, which takes place several years after the end of the first, is where the play finds its center. The detail and focus that seemed missing in the first act are plentiful in the second, where the play tackles vast and complex issues, including PTSD and the effects of war. Characters are better fleshed out, particularly via the dynamics of their family interactions. We see the four central characters—Zera, Steve, William, and Margarite—in a more happy place in their lives than in the first act. Of course, beneath this happiness are difficult problems caused by Steve and William's time in Vietnam.

Sympathetic scenes find William and Steve, now former POWs, growing into great family men. Dialogue feels more natural in these situations, and exchanges brim with authenticity. Well-paced events help to tighten the plot, with the focus falling on the four close friends, who try to move past the hardships caused by the war. Such scenes are emotionally hefty. The play succeeds most when it focuses on events in the moment, rather than concentrating on backstory.

A Hard Decision should appeal especially to the friends and families of veterans, particularly where it considers the impact that war has on families and communities.

RON WATSON (March 23, 2016)

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