



Kuntu's Buffalo Soldiers include, front left, Marcia Jones as a woman who concealed her identity to serve with the cavalry.

STAGE REVIEW

'Buffalo Soldiers' revisits historic time

By Christopher Rawson
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

"Buffalo Soldiers Plus One"

● **WHERE:** Kuntu Repertory Theatre at Alumni Hall (old Masonic Temple), 4227 Fifth Ave., Oakland.

● **WHEN:** Through Feb. 14; Thurs.-Sat. 8 p.m.; Sun. 4 p.m.; Feb. 12, 11 a.m.

● **TICKETS:** \$12-\$20; discounts: 412-624-7298.

One pleasure of theater is to learn something. That's the goal of Vernell Lillie's new historical pageant, "Buffalo Soldiers Plus One," directed by her with accompanying music by Ernest McCarty staged appropriately during Black History Month by Pitt's Kuntu Repertory Theatre.

It is important to know that heroic African-American units served in the Civil War and continuously thereafter until the armed services were finally integrated by President Truman (only after Jackie Robinson integrated baseball). This exemplary service included the Indian Wars of the 1880s, the period of Lillie's play, when the black troops were popularly referred to as buffalo soldiers.

Surely this is generally known, especially from recent films. Lillie concentrates more specifically on the irony of those 1880s wars: Wasn't white contempt of American Indians the same sort of racism blacks experienced? Should black soldiers, only recently freed, help the government exterminate Indians so predominantly white settlers could take their land?

There is potential for a strong drama about the internal conflicts buffalo soldiers experienced. But Lillie's play doesn't so much dramatize conflicts as lecture about them. "Buffalo Soldiers" rarely digests its research into living dialogue — its characters make speeches that sound more like newspaper editorials than actual dialogue.

The story itself is confusing, a series of confrontations among the buffalo soldiers (with their two sympathetic white colonels), a bigoted white general and the Indians. Narrators sometimes fill in previous or later events. I just couldn't follow the time schedule or geography of battles and other events.

But that's not Lillie's main concern. Rather, she wants to educate us about the ironies. You get a clue early on when a soldier says, "Native Americans have been playing their drums all day." (Isn't "Native American" a 20th-century locution?) Anyway, hardly a negative thing is said about the Indians by the men fighting them; a Seminole scout lectures a general on the admirable qualities of the buffalo soldiers; and the Indians lecture us all on non-ownership of the land — all sympathetic views but more obviously the playwrights' views than the characters'.

The chief Apache leader, Victorio, even links blacks, Indians and "our friends in Mexico" in to an anachronistic rainbow coalition. I'm sure some of this

is based on research. But a colonel yelling "shut up" at a general?

What's more successful about "Buffalo Soldiers" is the sense of life among the black troops, especially during a pair of Sunday services at the start of Act 2. Here, as elsewhere, there is pleasure in the music provided by McCarty. "Buffalo Soldiers" isn't exactly a musical, but music gives it much of its heart, even in such a small touch as when, after a bigoted tirade by the general, the black soldiers whistle "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," like the Sharks responding to the bigoted cops in "West Side Story."

The large company of 31 is mainly students and community actors, not the stronger group Kuntu sometimes uses. Demetrius Gross and Corey Rieger are fine as Capt. Carpenter and Col. Grierson. Marcia Jones plays "William Cathay," an historically paccurate woman disguised as a man.

Some of the staging feels haphazard, like battles where no one fires a shot and white officers stand around without lifting a finger as Indians politely leave them be. There are a lot of unintended pauses.

But even at just 95 minutes, it's a huge undertaking, and in the post-show talk-back that is an essential Kuntu feature, Lillie described some of the adversity the play faced. Spotlight Costumes came to the rescue and Young Ruel Davis stepped in to do the choreography (and some fine dancing himself).

Lillie also points out that there is a black aesthetic that is purposefully non-linear, eschewing beginning-middle-end dramaturgy for pageant and ritual. Agreed.

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ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT: FILM, TV, THEATER, MUSIC, BOOKS, VIDEO, THEATRE

THINGS TO DO

ART WORK

The Steel Valley Arts Council opening reception for "Celebrating African-American History Month" is from 4 to 8 p.m. today at Artspace 303, 303 E. Eighth Ave., Homestead. The exhibition features the works of Biko, Nailah, Bill Rizo, Douglas Webster, Vanessa German and Ian Greene. Local spoken-word performing group Innertainment also will perform. Information: 412-326-0100 or www.steelvalleyarts.org.

BOOK IT

Bring gently used children's books to any Borders Books and Music store from now until Feb. 15 "For the Love of Books." There will be special family entertainment at the stores featuring WQED on-air children's characters, noted children's authors and special guest storytellers. The donated children's books will be distributed to the area's neediest children through local food banks. Information: www.mvec.org.



"E with Hooked Nose in Viktor & Roll Evening Gown" is a 44- by-72-inch digital print by Claudia Hart, one of six new media artists exhibiting in "Allure Electronica" at Wood Street Galleries.

ART REVIEW

Complex attractions

Artists appeal to the senses through digital works

By Mary Thomas
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

To allure, according to Webster, is "to tempt with something desirable; attract; entice; fascinate." That's a good description of what the art does in the aptly titled exhibition "Allure Electronica" at Wood Street Galleries.

The digital works by six artists — all New Yorkers and women — are classy, smart, creative and provocative. But "unabashed sensibility" is the characteristic that exhibiting artist Claudia Hart would like to emphasize.

Hart noticed that the art being brought to meetings of a "loose amalgamation of women working with technology" was "sensual, beautiful, [addressing] issues about the body, emotion, sexuality. I saw that as consistent." It started her thinking about the influence gender might have upon digital expression.

"Guys are obsessed with hardware. Women are obsessed with the software, meaning the content," Hart says. "You can find men who [employ sensibility], and they get tremendously successful. But the women don't. People like beauty. When guys do it, they become Bill Viola."

Hart, you may recall, was the

creator (along with the Swinepearls) of the cheeky gender commentary "Playworld.02," part of the 2001 Wood Street exhibition "Interactive Domains." She discussed her observations with Murray Horne, Wood Street curator, which led to this exhibition.

Andrea Ackerman's "Rose Breathing" exemplifies these aesthetic concerns. This hypnotic vision in saturated rose-flamingo-pink is simultaneously infatuating and confrontational. Ackerman counts on the viewer's preconception of what constitutes a flower, and the intensified scale and color, along with the rhythmic movement of the petals as they spread out and then fold in upon themselves, play against such expectations to create tension.

A symbol of fairy tale and myth, of courtship and funerals, the pulsing bloom, alternately exposing and covering its reproductive center, also calls to mind the erotic interpretations of Georgia O'Keeffe's famed floral paintings, although Ackerman says she didn't have the latter in mind when creating "Rose." Rather, she hopes to discourage the "destructive notion" that other species are less significant than humans.

Ackerman was, until recently, a practicing psychiatrist, with a

molecular biophysics degree from Yale and an M.D. from Harvard, and her thinking is often inspired by the likes of chaos and string theories.

There isn't space to do justice to the complexity of structure and association contained within Ackerman's work, or that of any of the other artists in this invigorating presentation. Suffice to say that each piece has a compelling richness that will reveal itself in proportion to the time spent with it.

Julia Heyward's interactive video "Miracles in Reverse: To Tell the Truth" will probably demand the most time, but it's worth it. The viewer confronts metaphysical questions about truth while traveling virtual space with "mother, Jesus or an alien" in a seemingly playful work that takes on a chilling cast after one realizes the dark childhood events that inspired it.

Hart exhibits large, digital prints featuring her virtual character "E" — "the woman of the future, who can change her face and body to go with her wardrobe" — wearing courtier clothing (including Andy Warhol paper dresses) and plunked within dreamscapes that critique modernist architecture.

Lillian Ball's combinations of video projection and mirrored glass are blatantly gorgeous, but

titles like "Boiling Point" and "Floating Worlds" (a reference to the Japanese domain of courtesans and actors) imply emotional and critical components.

Nancy Dwyer and Kiki Seror use text in ways that are remarkably fresh and thought-provoking. It takes patience to decipher the messages within Seror's kaleidoscopically vivid designs. Dwyer's dramatic "Happy Birthday, Jon" is entrancing, the closest to projected sculpture I've seen, and her "Expect Delays," with its exacting animation and multiple connotation, is memorable.

The show may travel, which it should, as audiences deserve to see work of this quality. And we can hope to see more by these artists in the future.

"Allure" continues through March 6 at 601 Wood St., Downtown, above the T station. Hours are 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Tuesdays and Wednesdays and 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. Thursdays through Saturdays. Admission is free. A fine catalog with color illustrations for each artwork, thoughtful essays and brief artist bios is \$8. For information, call 412-471-5605.

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