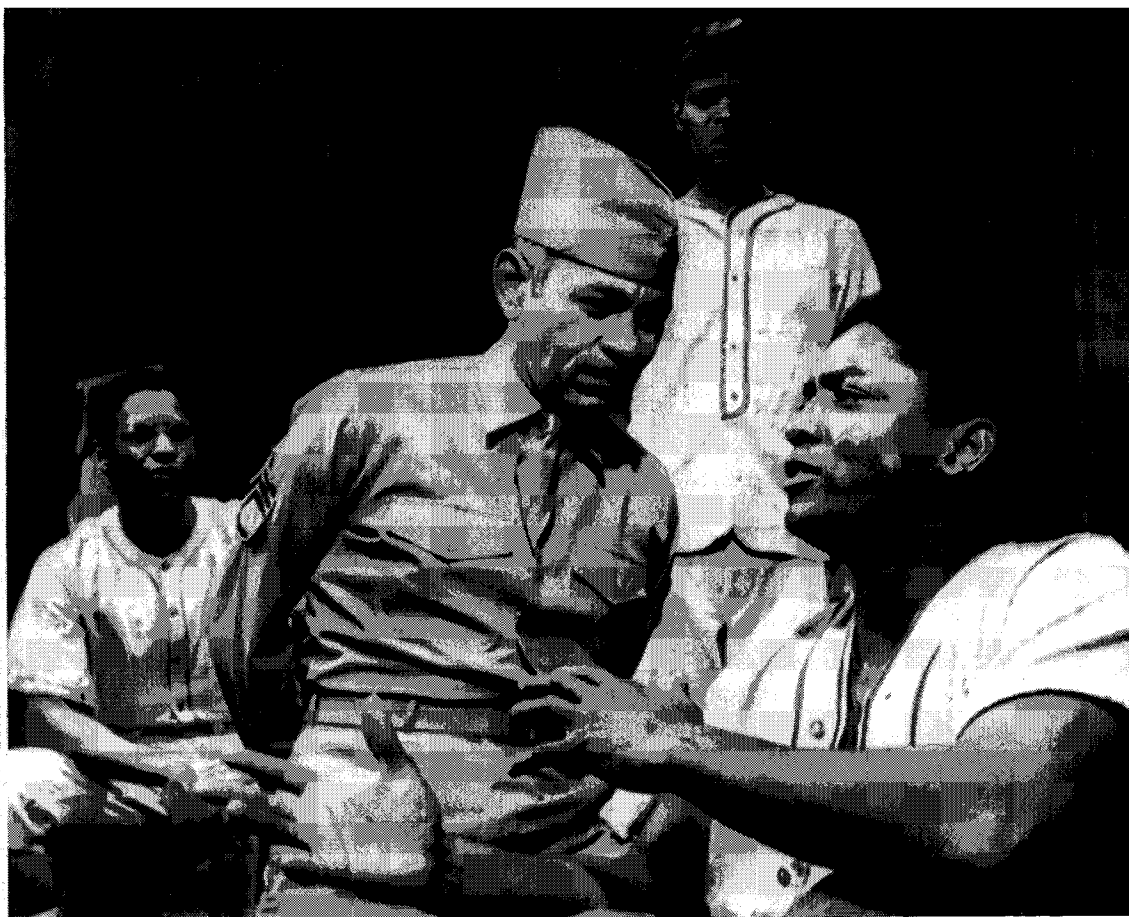


# A Soldier's Play

CHARLES FULLER



*Left to right: Denzel Washington as PRIVATE FIRST CLASS MELVIN PETERSON, Adolph Caesar as TECH/SERGEANT VERNON C. WATERS, Samuel L. Jackson as PRIVATE LOUIS HENSON, and Larry Riley as PRIVATE C. J. MEMPHIS in a scene from A Soldier's Play. Photograph copyright © 1981 by Bert Andrews. Reprinted by permission of Marsha Hudson, the Estate of Bert Andrews.*

**Charles Fuller**, a native of Philadelphia, studied at Villanova University. He is a prominent contributor to the repertory of the NEC, who, in addition to producing his 1982 Pulitzer Prizewinning *A Soldier's Play*, also performed his *Brownsville Raid*, *Zooman and the Sign*, an early epic cycle, *In My Many Names and Days*, and the recent epic cycle, *We*. He is the recipient of a Guggenheim Award and a National Endowment of the Arts Fellowship for playwriting. He has taught playwriting on the faculty of Temple University and is currently engaged in writing for the screen.

**A Soldier's Play** was produced in New York by the NEC at Theatre Four, opening on November 10, 1981, with the following cast:

<i>Tech/Sergeant Vernon C. Waters</i>	Adolph Caesar
<i>Captain Charles Taylor</i>	Peter Friedman
<i>Corporal Bernard Cobb</i>	Eugene Lee
<i>Private First Class Melvin Peterson</i>	Denzel Washington
<i>Corporal Ellis</i>	James Pickens, Jr.
<i>Private Louis Henson</i>	Samuel L. Jackson
<i>Private James Wilkie</i>	Steven A. Jones
<i>Private Tony Smalls</i>	Brent Jennings
<i>Captain Richard Davenport</i>	Charles Brown
<i>Private C. J. Memphis</i>	Larry Riley
<i>Lieutenant Byrd</i>	Cotter Smith
<i>Captain Wilcox</i>	Stephen Zettler

Directed by Douglas Turner Ward; scenery by Felix E. Cochren; lighting by Allen Lee Hughes; costumes by Judy Dearing; sound by Regge Life; production stage managed by Wayne Elbert.

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# **A Soldier's Play**

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

## **CHARACTERS**

*in order of appearance*

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 C. J. MEMPHIS  
LIEUTENANT BYRD  
CAPTAIN WILCOX

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## **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 freestanding 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-blownup, 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 policelike 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 rednecks.

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 (*relaxing*): 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 questions?

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 — cleanup 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*.) OK, OK! 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?

WILKIE: Yeah. Got the whole place surrounded.

HENSON: I don't know what the hell they thought we'd go into that town with — mops and dishrags?

WILKIE: Y'all recruits know what Colonel's cleanup detail is, don't you? Shovelin' horseshit in his stables —

COBB: Ain't no different from what we been doin'. (*He lies down and begins scratching around his groin area.*)

PETERSON (*to COBB*): Made you the barracks Commander-in-Chief, huh? (COBB *nods*.) Don't git like ole Stone-ass — What are you doin'?

COBB: Scratchin'!

HENSON (*overlapping*): Taylor knows the Klan did it—I hope y'all know that!

SMALLS (*sudden*): Then why are the M.P.'s outside with rifles? Why hold us prisoner?

PETERSON: They scared we may kill a couple peckerwoods, Smalls. Calm down, man!

WILKIE (*quickly*): Smalls, you wanna play some coon-can?

(SMALLS *shakes his head no. He is quiet, staring.*)

COBB (*examining himself*): Peterson, you know I think Eva gave me the crabs.

HENSON: Cobb, the kinda women you find, it's a wonda your nuts ain't fell off—crabs? You probably got lice, ticks, bedbugs, fleas—tapeworms—

COBB: Shut up, Henson! Pete—I ain't foolin', man! (*He starts to open his pants.*)

PETERSON: Get some powder from the PX.

WILKIE (*almost simultaneously*): Which one of y'all feels like playin' me some cards? (*He looks at HENSON.*)

HENSON: Me and Peterson's goin' down the mess hall—you still goin', Pete?

PETERSON (*nods*): Wilkie? I thought all you could do was play gofer?

HENSON (*slyly*): Yeah, Wilkie—whose ass can you kiss, now that your number-one ass is dead?

COBB (*laughing*): That sounds like something C. J. would sing! (*Looks at himself again*) Ain't this a bitch? (*Picks at himself*)

WILKIE (*overlapping, to HENSON*): You know what you can do for me, Henson—you too, Peterson!

PETERSON: Naughty, naughty!

WILKIE (*moves to his bunk, justifying*): I'm the one lost three stripes—and I'm the only man in here with kids, so when the man said jump, I jumped!

HENSON (*derisively*): Don't put your wife and kids between you and Waters's ass, man!

WILKIE: I wanted my stripes back!

COBB: I'm goin' to sick call after chow.

WILKIE (*continuing*): Y'all ain't neva' had nothin', that's why you can't understand a man like me! There was a time I was a sergeant major, you know!

HENSON (*waves disdainfully at WILKIE, turning his attention to COBB*): Ole V-girl slipped Cobb the crabs! How you gonna explain that to the girl back home, Corporal? How will that fine, big-thighed Momma

feel, when the only ribbon you bring home from this war is the Purple Heart for crab bites? (HENSON *laughs as SMALLS stands suddenly.*)  
SMALLS: Don't any of you guys give a damn?  
PETERSON: What's the matta', Smalls?  
SMALLS: The man's dead! We saw him alive last night!  
COBB (*quickly*): I saw him, too. At least I know he died good and drunk!  
SMALLS (*loud*): What's the matter with y'all?  
HENSON: The man got hisself lynched! We're in the South, and we can't do a goddamn thing about it—you heard the Captain! But don't start actin' like we guilty of somethin'. (*Softens*) I just hope we get lucky enough to get shipped outta this hellhole to the war! (*To himself*) Besides, whoever did it, didn't kill much anyway.  
SMALLS: He deserved better than that!  
COBB: Look, everybody feels rotten, Smalls. But it won't bring the man back, so let's forget about it!  
PETERSON (*moving to pat SMALLS on the back*): Why don't you walk it off, man?

(SMALLS *moves away to his bunk. PETERSON shrugs.*)

HENSON: Yeah—or go turn on a smoke machine, let the fog make you think you in London!

(SMALLS *sits down on his bunk and looks at them for a moment, then lays down, his face in the pillow.*)

WILKIE (*overlapping*): Let Cobb bring his Eva over, she'll take his mind off Waters plus give him a bonus of crabs!

(*The men laugh, but SMALLS doesn't move as the lights begin slowly to fade out.*)

HENSON (*counting*):—an' blue-balls. Clap. Syphilis. Pimples! (COBB *throws a pillow at HENSON.*) Piles! Fever blisters. Cockeyes. Cooties!

(*The men are laughing as the lights go out. As they do, a rather wiry black officer wearing glasses, CAPTAIN RICHARD DAVENPORT, walks across the stage from the wings, dressed sharply in an M.P. uniform, his hat cocked to the side and strapped down, the way airmen wear theirs. He is carrying a briefcase, and we are aware of a man who is very confident and self-assured. He is smiling as he faces the audience, cleaning his glasses as he begins to speak.*)

DAVENPORT: Call me Davenport—Captain, United States Army, attached to the 343rd Military Police Corps Unit, Fort Neal,



Louisiana. I'm a lawyer the segregated Armed Services couldn't find a place for. My job in this war? Policing colored troops. (*Slight pause.*)

One morning, during mid-April 1944, a colored tech/sergeant, Vernon C. Waters, assigned to the 221st Chemical Smoke Generating Company, stationed here before transfer to Europe, was brutally shot to death in a wooded section off the New Post Road and the junction of Highway 51—just two hundred yards from the colored N.C.O. club—by a person or persons unknown. (*Pauses a little*) Naturally, the unofficial consensus was the local Ku Klux Klan, and for that reason, I was told at the time, Colonel Barton Nivens ordered the Military Police to surround the enlisted men's quarters—then instructed all his company commanders to initiate a thorough search of all personal property for unauthorized knives, guns—weapons of any kind. (*Slight pause.*) You see, 90 percent of the Colonel's command—all of the enlisted men stationed here are Negroes, and the Colonel felt—and I suppose justly—that once word of the Sergeant's death spread among his troops, there might be some retaliation against the white citizens of Tynin. (*Shrugs*) What he did worked—there was no retaliation, and no racial incidents. (*Pause.*) The week after the killing took place, several correspondents from the Negro press wrote lead articles about it. But the headlines faded—(*Smiles*) The NAACP got me involved in this. Rumor has it, Thurgood Marshall ordered an immediate investigation of the killing, and the army, pressured by Secretary of War Stimson, rather randomly ordered Colonel Nivens to initiate a preliminary inquiry into the Sergeant's death. Now, the Colonel didn't want to rehash the murder, but he complied with the army's order by instructing the Provost Marshal, my C.O., Major Hines, to conduct a few question-and-answer sessions among the men of Sergeant Waters's platoon and file a report. The matter was to be given the lowest priority. (*Pause.*) The case was mine, five minutes later. It was four to five weeks after his death—the month of May. (*He pauses as the light builds in CAPTAIN TAYLOR's office. TAYLOR is facing DAVENPORT, expressionless. DAVENPORT is a bit puzzled.*) Captain?

TAYLOR: Forgive me for occasionally staring, Davenport, you're the first colored officer I've ever met. I'd heard you had arrived a month ago, and you're a bit startling. (*Quickly*) I mean you no offense. (*Starts back to his desk and sits on the edge of it, as DAVENPORT starts into the office a bit cautiously*) We'll be getting some of you as replacements, but we don't expect them until next month. Sit down, Davenport.

(DAVENPORT *sits.*) You came out of Fort Benning in '43?

DAVENPORT: Yes.