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Violence for peace fails in 'Musgrave's Dance'
[Review of John Arden's play *Sergeant Musgrave's
Dance* at the UWM Fine Arts Theater, Milwaukee]

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by Curtis L. Carter

Like some recent anti-war films, *Sergeant Musgrave's Dance* treats violence from within the military structure.

In the John Arden play which opened the drama season of the UWM Fine Arts Theater, Sergeant Musgrave and three soldiers — deserters in the guise of recruiters — descend on a snow-bound mining town in northern England, 100 years ago. Musgrave is obsessed with a God-inspired cause to awaken his countrymen to the futility and inhumanity of war.

Their arrival finds the town suffering from poverty and embroiled in a deadlock between the trade union and the local establishment represented by the mayor, the parson, and the constable. To the mayor, the soldiers' presence represents a weapon to be used against the trade union. Understandably, the unionists see Musgrave and company as a threat and threaten harm despite Musgrave's assurance that they are brothers in a common cause.

Independently of either group, Musgrave envisions the workings of his own plan to "perform God's dance" and thus to inform the world of the futility of violence and war.

Musgrave is not a pacifist-crusader with no war experience. He has functioned in the military with fervor, giving utmost consideration to "his duty to serve the country." That is, until he saw the futility and irrationality of military violence turned loose on innocent people in a search for the murderer of a single a.w.o.l. soldier.

Once he sees "the truth" he turns with equal fervor to the counter-cause of peace. Unfortunately, Musgrave is trapped by his own military logic. It has so conditioned his thinking that he does not hesitate to use guns to make the meaning clear.

Violence has already won. She has so corrupted both him and society that she saps his victory and turns it into an ugly farce.

Overall, the production is sturdily constructed. Yet it lacks excitement. Ron Gural's portrayal of Sergeant Musgrave was competent and well thought out. However, it was essentially one-dimensional in scope, failing to present subtlety, range and depth that the character of Sergeant Musgrave suggests to me.

Bludgeon, played by Thomas F. Omera, comes across with strength of characterization as he weaves between rival forces in the play, acting as gadfly, informer, and turncoat. Mary Farrell, as the barmaid, Annie, has nice moments throughout the performance.

The sets, designed by Stewart Johnson, are imaginatively conceived and suited to the play.

At times the script gets weighted down with dialogue in excess of the action. This is one of the reasons why the play moves very slowly in some scenes. In the last scene the play grows cold on the stage as Musgrave sits in jail and listens to his companion deliver the final lines. The rest of the cast is frozen on stage and the audience waits for it to end. It had ended for me several minutes earlier.