

THEATER

World War II provides backdrop for human drama in Violi's new play

"Riding the Comet"

When: 8 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays, 2 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays, through Oct. 2
Where: Morrisville Heritage Center, 635 N. Delmar Ave. (Route 32 by the Calhoun Street Bridge), Morrisville, Pa.
Admission: \$20, \$17 for senior citizens 62 and older, \$10 for children younger than 13; (215) 295-3694 or (actorsnet@aol.com)

By Ted Otten
 SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

Wars have inspired writers since ancient times, but often the stories that have the most impact are not about spectacular battles and monstrous weapons.

Individual human stories of people trapped in tense situations may be only small moments in the chaos of war, but they can provide meaningful and memorable experiences.

Contemporary Trenton playwright Mark Violi hopes that's the case with the world premier production of his World War II drama "Riding the Comet," directed by Kyla Mostello Donnelly. The play is the season opener for Actors' Net of Bucks County's 16th season in Morrisville through Oct. 2.

The script was slightly revised after a previous reading when Violi determined that a play with only one set had a greater chance of being produced elsewhere.

Originally the play's final scene, which Violi calls "a shocking surprise ending," took place in a second location, but Violi rethought the scene and moved it to the play's primary location, the home of a family involved in the French resistance. Its



Brian Jason Kelly, left, and Patrick Albanesius portray two American airmen shot down behind enemy lines in France during World War II in the Actors' NET of Bucks County production of Mark Viola's drama "Riding the Comet."



10-year-old Anna Chandless portrays the daughter of a French farmer turned Resistance fighter (Ed Patton) who helps the American servicemen escape from their Nazi pursuers in "Riding the Comet."

members are helping two downed American airmen escape from Nazi-occupied territory and are risking their own lives to do it.

There's a struggle within the family too. Not all its members are equally agreeable to the daily dangers they must face.

They are part of a real underground network Violi discovered by doing online research while writing the play. "The Comet Escape

Line," established by Andre de Jong, a 24-year-old Belgian, actually did help enemies of the Nazis avoid capture. Violi was surprised that Comet Line's significant contributions to the Allied war effort have been largely forgotten.

Brian Jason Kelly and Patrick Albanesius play the Americans. Albanesius, who made his company debut in this play's reading in 2009, describes his character, Pvt. Anthony Vizzaro, as "a wise guy from Brooklyn who's outranked by his buddy and probably resents being reminded of that since they are both in the same life-or-death situation.

"This isn't like any other war play I know. War is a kind of background, but it's primarily about the people," says Albanesius. He yearns to play some villainous roles that would go against his all-American-boy looks.

"The Americans trapped behind enemy lines have some wonderful scenes with the family's younger

daughter, Andie, that provide some lighter moments in an otherwise serious piece, but I think there's a nice balance in the play which makes it seem more real," Albanesius says.

Andie provides a debut role with the company for Anna Chandless, a 10-year-old who became stage-struck when she was part of the company's Summer Stars program.

She isn't worried about affecting an accent for this role, since Andie is

mysteriously silent.

Violi hopes audiences will enjoy the play but will also think seriously about some of its less-obvious messages.

"I hope to elicit a variety of responses. If we've done our job as storytellers, I hope they will react from their gut," says Violi.

"They just may learn something about themselves and how they might react in a similar situation. One of the themes is doing what you think is right and following through."



Trenton playwright Mark Violi is the author of "Riding the Comet."

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