

UPROAR OVER THE MUSICAL "A VIETNAM DIARY"

Written by Tim McKeon

Based on the Case Study by Jay Dougherty

SETTING: A large curtain runs horizontally across the stage. There are four stools, two on either side of the curtain. Whenever it is noted that the actors enter or exit, it is always through this curtain.

AT RISE: Enter our host, JOAN KELLYHEYWITH. She is dressed in a suit and is charming but serious. She holds a microphone.

JOAN

Hello, and welcome to "Theater Law," where we explore the law in theater, the theater in law, vice versa and once again, vice versa. I am your host, Joan Kellyheywith.

(She pauses for applause. If there is none, she prompts the audience with her hand.)

JOAN (cont'd)

Thank you.

(Pause.)

Recently controversy has erupted over the hit musical, "A Vietnam Diary," which is based on the best selling book by Ming Nguyen. Darla Thomas, ex-dramaturge for the play, has filed a lawsuit claiming she wasn't given credit for writing several songs, pages of dialogue, as well as changing it from a tragedy into a drawing room comedy. I caught up with her this week in a theater downtown.

(Enter DARLA THOMAS, dressed all in black with a loud, colorful scarf. She and Joan pull up two stools.)

DARLA

Originally I was hired as a dramaturge for the production. As time went on however, my role changed. For example, I wrote lyrics for the songs "It's a Hard Knock Southeastern Asia life," "The Sun Will Come Out Over Saigon Tomorrow" and of course, "Vietnam," which was inspired by the title song from the musical, "Oklahoma!" I also created the character of Joe Friday, who, as you know, marries the main character in the end.

JOAN

And yet when you asked the writer, Bill Shakes, to be recognized as the co-author of this play-

DARLA

He refused.

JOAN

There are rumors that you are mounting a rival production of "A Vietnam Diary" across town. Is this true?

DARLA

Kind of. I want to let the public know exactly how much I contributed to the play. So what my lawyers and I have done is remove every single word I added to "Diary," including the "ands," the "buts," the "thes," and sort of mesh them together to make a twenty minute show I call "A.V.D."

JOAN

And "A.V.D." - is it similar to "A Vietnam Diary"?

DARLA

It's the same plot, but my play is far superior. I may not have all the verbs the Broadway version does, but that is a minor point. For example, here is the final scene from the original play.

(Enter a woman, MING, dressed in Southeastern Asian clothing. She sits on the floor, writing in a diary. Enter a white man, JOE FRIDAY, wearing fatigues.)

JOE FRIDAY

Ming, I couldn't get on that chopper. Not without you.

MING

I couldn't leave my diary behind. My Vietnam Diary.

JOE FRIDAY

I love you.

MING

I love you too, Joe Friday.

(They kiss and freeze.)

DARLA

(To JOAN)

And here is my version, with my words only.

(MING and JOE break. She sits down again and he exits. He enters and they begin the scene again.)

JOE FRIDAY

Ming, get that you.

MING

I couldn't Diary. Diary.

JOE FRIDAY

I you.

MING

I you, Friday.

(They shake hands and freeze. Pause. MING and JOE quickly exit. DARLA turns back to JOAN.)

DARLA

As you can see, my lawyers were able to win me most of the key nouns. We couldn't get the kiss, but I think the handshake works. Kind of takes their relationship down a notch, but it's still very powerful.

(JOAN nods. DARLA smiles weakly then exits. JOAN stands.)

JOAN

I caught up with the writer of "A Vietnam Diary," Bill Shakes, and the composer, Elton James, to see how the lawsuit is affecting their production.

(Enter BILL and ELTON. They sit on stools opposite JOAN.)

BILL

First of all, the cast and crew have been fantastic...

ELTON

No candles in the wind here.

BILL

And our show is still the best on Broadway. Of course we had to make some small changes with the lawsuit pending. We cut the marriage scene, which means our main character is living in sin in the end...

ELTON

And we had to remove all the parts Darla claims she wrote... The play is still standing at its original length of 3 1/2 hours though.

JOAN

How?

BILL

Well, we added long silences. Wherever there were words before, are now just meaningful pauses.

JOAN

(To audience)

Here's a scene.

(Exit BILL and ELTON. Enter MING. She sits on the floor and begins writing in her diary again. Enter JOE FRIDAY.)

JOE FRIDAY

I couldn't... on chopper, not without...

MING

Leave my... behind. My Vietnam...

JOE FRIDAY

...love...

MING

...love...Joe.

(They kiss, freeze, and exit quickly. JOAN looks to the audience.)

JOAN

One of the questions many people are asking is how will this affect the film version of "A Vietnam Diary," which is slated to be in theaters next summer? Morticia Mogul, producer of the film:

(Enter MORTICIA MOGUL, producer of the movie, "A Vietnam Diary." She pulls up a stool next to JOAN.)

MORTICIA

Our solution to bypassing this legal mess was to buy rights from everyone who had anything to do with the play. We also bought the word "Diary." You look that up in next year's dictionary and you'll see our name next to it. "Vietnam"

was unavailable for purchase but we have several other words that rhyme with it. Point is, we've spent over 500 million dollars in pre-production, already making this the most expensive picture ever made.

Unfortunately, just when we were about to start shooting, the star of the play died.

JOAN

Ben Fleck, who is also the star of your film.

MORTICIA

That's correct. Because we've spent so much money already, we can hardly abort production. Luckily for us, our parent company, Giant Studios, owns the rights to the Cop Drama "Chicago P.D. Hope," which Ben Fleck starred in. So what we've done is digitally inserted him into our film by using scenes he performed as the punk cop Calaban in "Chicago P.D. Hope." It's a little jarring at first, but I think overall, it works.

JOAN

I believe you have a clip for us?

MORTICIA

I believe I do. This is the last scene:

(Enter MING once again. She sits on the floor and begins writing in her diary just as she has every other time. Enter JOE FRIDAY. Instead of wearing fatigues, he is now wearing a cop uniform. He looks slightly above MING.)

JOE FRIDAY

We could sit in this room all day. It doesn't matter to me. And we will, until you say who killed Rodriguez, you scum.

MING

(As if he had said his original line)

I couldn't leave my diary behind. My Vietnam Diary.

JOE FRIDAY

...because I'm a cop. And being a cop is all I'm good at.

MING

I love you too, Joe Friday.

(MING and JOE FRIDAY kiss, freeze, then exit. JOAN turns to MORTICIA.)

JOAN

(Laughing)

Looks like a blockbuster.

MORTICIA

I certainly hope so.

JOAN

(To Audience)

That's all the time we have. Join me next week when I'll be talking with the team behind the off-Broadway drama "Howard Kemp," and Howard Kemp himself, who is suing the team for killing him six nights a week and two matinees on Sundays. I'm Joan Kellyheywith and this has been "Theater Law."

(She pauses for applause. If there is none, she prompts the audience with her hand. Fade to black.)

THE END