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ASSOCIATED PRESS

"Rent" playwright Jonathan Larson died shortly after the opening of his Stanley-award winning show.

Mother-daughter play gets Stanley Drama Award

Wagner Theater Department's \$2G prize goes to author of 'Out of Orbit'

By MICHAEL J. FRESSOLA
STATEN ISLAND ADVANCE

GRYMES HILL — West Coast playwright Jennifer Maisel has won the Stanley Drama Award, a competition established at Wagner College nearly 60 years ago. Her prize-winning play, "Out of Orbit" is about a mother and her teenage daughter.

The award, a \$2000 prize, will be presented at a reception later this month in the Players Club in Manhattan.

The competition has had some high-profile winners since it was launched in 1957. Four-time Tony Award-winning playwright Terrence McNally took the prize for his early work, "This Side of the Door." Lonnie Elder III won for "Ceremonies in Dark Old Men," and Jonathan Larson won for "Rent."

Larson was still working as waiter at the time. Opening in 1995, "Rent" became an international hit.

Richard Kalinoski, author of "My Soliders" opening Tuesday at Wagner, took the prize in 2003 for his play "Skin of Lawyer." (See the feature story right)

Maisel has had considerable exposure. Her "The Last Seder" ran Off-Broadway two years ago after productions in Chicago, Washington D.C., Los Angeles, St. Paul, St. Louis and Sao Paulo, Brazil.

SUNDANCE

"Out of Orbit," which was developed at the 2010 Sundance Theatre Lab and the Gulf Shore New Play Festival, was awarded the Ensemble Studio Theatre/Alfred P. Sloan commission for plays about science and technology.

The 2014 Stanley finalists are Sam Byron for his play "Gordy Crashes" and Chelsea Sutton for "The Dead Woman."

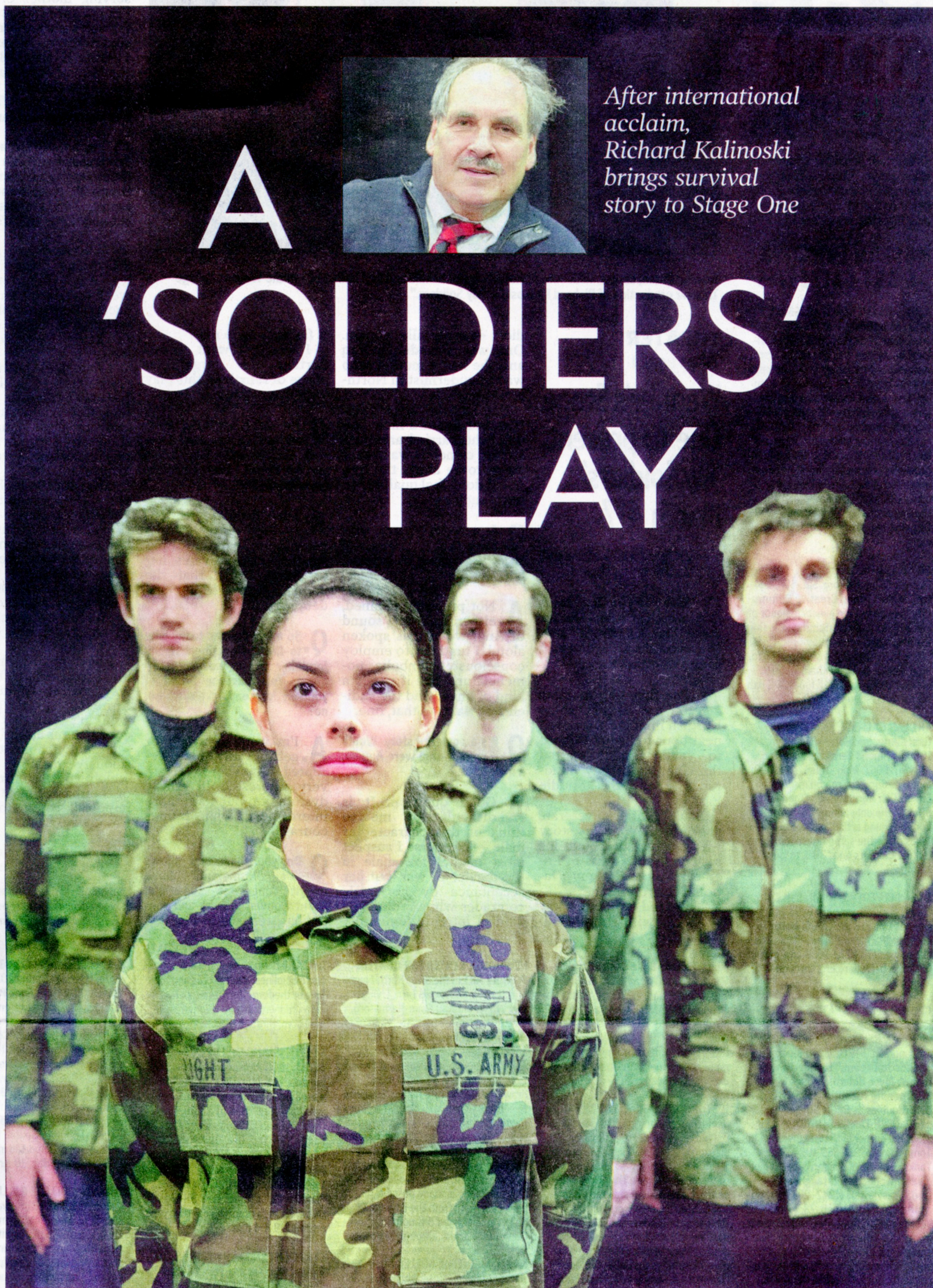
Sam Byron is a Chicago-born playwright living in New York City. He is currently finishing his MFA in playwriting at the New School for Drama, where he was the 2012 recipient of the Steinberg New Playwrights Fellowship.

"Gordy Crashes" follows a character, Gordy, as he navigates displacement in the East Village following Hurricane Sandy.

Exhausted, Gordy finds himself at his ex-girlfriend's doorstep, where he will form an unlikely and potentially dangerous relationship with her new boyfriend.

Sutton, whose entry was "The Dead Woman," was also a semifinalist for the Eugene O'Neill Playwrights' Conference 2013.

She is currently participating in workshops with the Vagrancy, Skylight Theatre Company's Play-Lab and Eclectic Voices and is an associate artist with Rogue Artist Ensemble.



Jeanine Bruen, center, with Tom Althoff, Tom DeMichele, Phil Della Noce in the Wagner College Theater production of "My Soliders."

PHOTOS BY KAREN O'DONNELL

By MICHAEL J. FRESSOLA / STATEN ISLAND ADVANCE

GRYMES HILL — When he has the option, playwright Richard Kalinoski is picky about who directs his plays.

For instance, he explained last week, he's "not interested" in directing a script's first airing, although he is happy to step up to a later production.

That's what he's done this winter at Wagner College with his 2009 drama "My Soliders," opening Tuesday in Stage One with an eight-member undergraduate cast.

Centered on Angi Busko, a young medic newly returned from the Iraq war, "My Soliders" is about the nearly unbearable price paid by someone who breaks the rules to do the right thing.

Best known for his much-produced 1995 play "Beast on the Moon," winner of multiple Molieres, the Tony awards of Paris, Kalinoski is enthusiastic about cast and crew.

"They show up on time," he said last week. "They do the work and they're smart."

He has been director and playwright in residence at the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh since 1998 and is on sabbatical this semester. Last week, he talked about "My Soliders," the difference between



Bruen as Angi.

'My Soliders'

Richard Kalinoski's contemporary drama about an Iraqi war medic suffering from PTSD

Where

Stage One Studio Theatre, Wagner College, 1 Campus Rd, Grymes Hill, 718-390-3259.

When

March 4-7, 8 p.m.;
March 8, 2 & 8 p.m.;
March 9, 2 p.m.

How much

\$10 at the box office;
718-390-3259.

More information

Check out
Wagner.edu/theatre/
my-soliders/.

ADVANCE BUZZ

Switch it up

Bach is banned (for the moment) but 'Ol Blue Eyes is in, when "Sinatra and Friends," comes to the Music at St. Alban's Series (with Holli Leggett, Eric Martin and Steven Silverstein) March 16 at 3:30 p.m. Tickets, at the door, are \$25.



ARTS & LEISURE



PHOTO COURTESY OF KAREN O'DONNELL

Jeanine Bruen, center, with Tom Althoff, Tom DeMichele and Phil Della Noce in the Wagner College Theater production of Richard Kalinoski's "My Soliders."

THEATER

FROM PAGE 1

Wagner's Stage One to present 'My Soliders' March 4-7

a smart play and a wise one and his life in the theater.

Q. What was your first idea in connection with "My Soliders?" Was it a war play first? Or a drama about a woman back home after a hitch in Iraq?

A. The first notion came to me when some Kurdish immigrants moved next door to us in Oshkosh 10 years ago. I started thinking about my ignorance about the Middle East.

Later I met a veteran, spoke to him and his story was fascinating about his service in the Corps of Engineers of the Army National Guard in Iraq.

This led to interview sessions with other sol-

diers — especially women. One was a medic in Iraq and she had a mother who was a taxidermist in Northern Minnesota.

She had riveting stories. One was about a male soldier who carried around a stuffed camel. It was never going to be about the Iraq war: I don't feel qualified to write such a play.

Q. As a medic, the main character, Angi, is a ministering angel. Her name is no accident, is it?

A. Not precisely planned, either. I like the sound of Angi when it is spoken aloud. I tend not to employ consciously symbolic nomenclature, but if she is a kind of angel, and the audience is warm to that, fine.

Q. It's a powerful story. Would it work if Angi were Angelo, a male?

A. Good question. It is difficult for me to think of this character as male — of course I suspect most medics are male in the theater of war, but her acceptance by her male comrades while retaining a kind of intrepid femininity

is fascinating to me.

I wouldn't want to undertake the gargantuan chore of remaking this play with masculine impulses.

Q. The play is set in the far-up-midwest, a place you know well. Do you think Angi could also have been a kid from Brooklyn or Louisville?

A. Sure. Brooklyn or Louisville. But Angi's yearning to leap out of her small town motivates her to enlist. I like that she comes from someplace deeply rural.

Q. So many dramas today hew to the dysfunctional family formula, which seems ever-green. You must be proud of yourself for heading elsewhere, no?

A. I'm proud of myself for getting any play accepted anywhere. I am very interested in family dysfunction but I am more interested in what defines courage.

Q. Do you think that shows like "Homeland" have taught Americans something about women, bravery and conflict; preparing the way for new

subject matter, like your play?

A. I hope so. I think many women are brave in small ways that get no attention. I think it's brave to be a single mother. I think it's brave to love an underserving mother or father. I'm not sure I know how to fashion a play around these somewhat banal examples. I wrote a play, "Beast on the Moon," about an Armenian woman/girl who is brave enough to fight for her marriage and family.

Q. You haven't had a big long Broadway run or a high-profile screenplay adaptation. But it is possible today to have a rewarding life in the theater without such things, isn't it?

A. I haven't had a lot of things I have wished for. My plays (whether weak or strong) tend to be accessible stories of people trying to find their courage or love (not romantic love).

I have had thousands of rejections — quite literally. I am always a little amazed that someone would even read my plays. I have had some vital opportunities, productions in Europe and awards in Paris.

The Louisville Humana Festival presentation of "Beast on the Moon" (1995), was a triumph — without reservation but the chance to work frequently with thoughtful people who take their artistry seriously and who honestly respect their colleagues. This hasn't happened as often as I would like.

I have not had my work on Broadway (off-Broadway, yes). It would be dishonest to suggest I wouldn't want that kind of conspicuous attention.

I am unable to consciously fashion a play which would confirm to all of the marketing strictures imposed by a move to Broadway. I tend to like plays which show wisdom ("Death of a Salesman") and are not just "smart."

Michael J. Fressola is the arts editor for the Advance. He may be reached at fressola@siadvance.com