

Play examines World War II experience

By Diana Nollen, The Gazette

John Wayne and his contemporaries helped tell the stories of the front lines in World War II, but Columbus Junction classmates Rick Williams and Ron Clark didn't grow up with tales from the homefront on the silver screen in the 1950s.

These childhood friends who came of age during the Vietnam War and moved to Iowa City about 30 years ago are uniting their strengths in history and drama to help preserve the small-town Greatest Generation experiences through their play, "A Grateful Nation."

Clark calls it "a community memoir," sparked by Williams' "deep admiration for our parents' generation and what they achieved, and the risks they had to take during World War II — not just on the battlefield, but here at home, as well.

"Our country was tested in a way that it had never been tested before, and these guys from our hometown — and the women, as well — rose to the challenge in remarkable ways," Clark said, adding that history buff Williams "wanted to tell that story before it was completely forgotten."

After spending a couple of years researching and reading every issue of the Columbus Gazette from early 1930 to 1945, Williams approached Clark, co-founder of Iowa City's Riverside Theatre, about 18 months ago, to see whether his findings could be shaped into a play.

"I gave it a dramatic shake," Clark said, and now the preservation piece is coming to the Riverside Theatre stage for two performances and audience talkback sessions Saturday night and Sun-



Photo courtesy of Rick Williams

Men gather in jaunty poses in 1939, before a war that would change the world. The new play, "A Grateful Nation," examines the ways in which small-town life was affected during World War II. Staged readings will be held Saturday and Sunday at Riverside Theatre in Iowa City.

day afternoon.

Professional actors Jody Hovland, Sean DeMers, Jack Sharkey and Katherine Slaven will assume multiple characters, from ages 18 to 90. They will stand on the sidelines with scripts in hand, bringing the visual focus to vintage photographs in the center.

Some moments will be lighthearted, others will be poignant, all enhanced by the era's popular music.

"It was really fun to put it all together to create a dramatic time capsule," Clark said. It's one that captures not only the experiences of the playwrights' hometown 35 miles southeast of Iowa City, but also one that resonates across the land.

"It would be a stretch to say these stories are universal, but they are certainly

national," Williams said in a prepared statement. "Every American living in the early 1940s was affected by the events of the war — and so were those of us who came after them."

Clark was especially intrigued by exploring the stories of men like his father, who were rejected for service because of medical conditions, and those who were required to stay home to operate the family farms.

"What that meant in their lives is extraordinary," Clark said, "because the guys who went to World War II had a marker for the rest of their lives — that this adventure had been theirs. But obviously, it was the farms and factories of the United States and Canada that really fed and equipped the troops.

"On a very personal level,

IF YOU GO

- **What:** "A Grateful Nation," by Rick Williams and Ron Clark
- **When:** 7:30 p.m. Saturday and 2 p.m. Sunday; talkbacks with writers and actors follow
- **Where:** Riverside Theatre, 213 N. Gilbert St., Iowa City
- **Cost:** \$15 and \$20, 20 percent off for veterans, military personnel and their immediate family
- **More information:** (319) 338-7672 or Riversidetheatre.org

I think my dad always felt a little left out, and actually, some people looked down upon the men who stayed behind and never gave them the proper credit. My dad didn't know what to do with that, not being looked upon as one of the good guys. So this play explores what it meant to be part of that generation whether you were on front lines or whether you were back here, feeding and building for the troops," Clark said.

"To me, it's a play for the voices from that era."

Voices that will continue to be heard when the show travels to the Columbus Junction High School auditorium April 21.

"Rick and I are pretty thrilled about that," Clark said. "We'd love to see (the play) have an extended life. Wouldn't it be great if other small towns could pick this up and want to produce it themselves?"

"You don't have to know Columbus Junction to appreciate the characters, because these characters are in every small town."

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