

HOLYOKE

HCC production shares disabled veteran's story

There's an early scene in Lindsey Ferrentino's 2014 play, "Ugly Lies the Bone," when the main character, Jess, rebukes her sister for removing a mirror from the wall of their childhood home.

"You don't have to change anything," says Jess, a soldier returning to civilian life. "I don't want things different."

Nevertheless, things are different.

Her hometown of Titusville, Florida, is suffering an economic decline caused by the ending of NASA's space shuttle program. She can't find a job. Her mother has dementia. Her younger sister, Kacie, has a new boyfriend Jess thinks is a deadbeat. Her long-term sweetheart married someone else while she was deployed.

More than that, Jess is different too, changed psychologically, the way all soldiers are who've served in combat, and physically, from an IED explosion that left debilitating burns on her face, neck, arm and leg for which she is still undergoing treatment.

"She's dealing with the fact that she's not the same anymore, and neither is anyone in her sphere," says Holyoke



Carina Savoie, front, of Agawam, plays Jess, a disabled soldier, in the HCC theater department's production of Lindsey Ferrentino's "Ugly Lies the Bone." The cast also includes, in back from left, Idalisha Carmona of Westfield, Keith Gordon of Chicopee, Hannah Labreche of Holyoke, Haley Thompson of Westfield, and Edward Rodriguez of Springfield.

Community College theater professor Tim Cochran, director of "Ugly Lies the Bone," the Theater Department's spring production.

The show opens tomorrow and runs through Saturday with performances each night at 7:30 and a matinee on Saturday at 2 p.m.

The play interweaves the two main aspects of Jess's present life: her experience at home and her experience in virtual reality therapy - a real type of burn treatment known

as "distraction therapy" - that helps relieve acute pain.

For much of the play, Jess, played by HCC student-actor Carina Savoie, of Agawam, wears virtual reality goggles while the disembodied voice of her therapist (portrayed by Idalisha Carmona, of Westfield) guides her through a virtual world.

"Jess really starts to embrace the escape she feels and the distraction from the past she vividly recalls," says Cochran. "In the virtual world

IF YOU GO

Event: "Ugly Lies the Bone"

When: Thursday-Saturday, 7:30 p.m.; Saturday, 2 p.m.

Where: Holyoke Community College Leslie Phillips Theater, Fine & Performing Arts Building, Homestead Avenue, Holyoke

Cost: \$10, general admission; \$8, students, seniors; \$5, HCC students, faculty, staff; free, veterans

For more info: Call 413-552-2528

she can do anything. She can run, she can jump, she can be anybody she wants to be. But it's sort of false and it becomes addictive."

For help creating both the real and virtual worlds, Cochran turned to theater professor Matt Whiton for stage and lighting design and electronic media arts professor Justin West for media design.

What they came up is a kind of fractured set and a series of scattered screens on and off stage that will display the digital images as Jess would see them through her goggles.

"I wanted the audience to experience some of what Jess

is with this virtual freedom," says Cochran, "to watch the character in front of us, knowing that she can't do certain things anymore because of her pain."

For background, and to supplement the script, the cast and crew visited the Warrior's Art Room in Westfield and talked to veterans engaged in art therapy there. Warrior's Art Room founder Steve Jones, a 2015 alumnus and an Iraq war veteran, also visited the cast in the Leslie Phillips Theater and described his own combat experiences.

"We're trying to maintain some level of authenticity," says Cochran, "and the students have been hungry to learn."

He also invited student-veterans to audition and cast Keith Gordon, of Chicopee, a veteran and National Guardsman as Kelvin, Kacie's out-of-work boyfriend, whose repartee with the tough, quick-witted Jess provides much of the play's comic relief.

Other cast members include Hannah Labreche, of Holyoke; Edward Rodriguez, of Springfield; and Haley Thompson, of Westfield.