

FAVORITE

JOHN PIELMEIER

Playwright, novelist,
and actor

Photo: Jordan Matter



Portrait of Leonard Pielmeier, 1944
S. OHRVEL CARLSON (1911–2006)
c. 1944–45, charcoal on paper,
10 3/4 x 8 1/4 in.
Private collection

American playwright John Pielmeier likes to tell stories, ones that he makes up and that affect his audiences. In his Tony Award-winning Broadway play, *Agnes of God*, he told the tale of a nun who gives birth to a child she claims was the result of an immaculate conception. In his forthcoming London — and later Broadway — adaptation of *The Exorcist*, he tells a new version of demonic possession. And in his forthcoming novel, *Hook's Tale*, he has Captain Hook relate his memoirs.

But the most compelling tale for Pielmeier is a true-life one concerning his late father, Leonard Pielmeier, who died in 1979. As a regional field director for the American Red Cross in France, the elder Pielmeier was assigned a grim task during World War II: to retrieve dead soldiers in the battlefields, collect their personal effects, then contact the families to deliver the news. “My dad dealt with the dead,” says Pielmeier from his home in Garrison, New York. “It was clearly horrendous work for him, so much so he never spoke about the war.” In a symbolic act to forever sever his connection with such duties, Pielmeier describes how “on the ship back to the States in 1945, my dad took his gun and threw it overboard.”

Leonard Pielmeier’s work with the 28th Infantry Division of the Red Cross was chronicled by S. Ohrvel Carlson, an American artist who sketched the soldiers as they performed their somber duties. Carlson rendered a charcoal drawing on paper of Leonard that now hangs in the home office of his son. “It is my dad’s eyes and his expression seems so uncovered, his emotions so naked. I see a tremendously sad man in the picture, and a man who looks completely shell-shocked.”

Carlson’s sketches from wartime France were so valued that they can now be found in the Library of Congress; a book of them



was published in 2005. “[Carlson] evidently gave my father the drawing he made of him,” says Pielmeier, “and no one knows about it but my sister and I. It’s a lovely picture, but one I never saw as a boy when it was somewhere in our home in Altoona, Pennsylvania.”

Indeed, Pielmeier’s father never revealed the drawing to his family, keeping it hidden in an envelope in a trunk. Upon discovering it after his father’s death, Pielmeier

framed it and presented it to his mother, who cherished the work until her own passing in 2007. “I read all the letters between my father and mother after they were married in 1942, whereupon he immediately went overseas. My mother didn’t see him for three and a half years. I can read the change in tone of the letters as soon as he landed in France. You could feel right away that he had seen things he had never expected to see.”

Carlson’s depiction of the then 38-year-old Pielmeier reveals the soldier’s troubled inner state of mind. After the war, still feeling compelled to honor duty, this time familial, Pielmeier entered the family business as a grocer and butcher for the rest of his life. “It is not what my dad would have chosen to do, but he felt it his duty,” John Pielmeier says.

Although Pielmeier “sees” the drawing every day while writing, he admits to not always consciously seeing it. But upon taking it down recently, he found tucked into the back of the frame, as he knew it would be, a letter from President Harry S. Truman, thanking Leonard Pielmeier for his brave service and awarding him a Bronze Star. A man who dealt with the dead was recognized for his contribution to the living.