A victim of state terror in the US

Myth, Propaganda and Disaster in Nazi Germany and Contemporary America: A Drama in 30 Scenes by Stephen Sewell

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11 September 2003

Australian writer Stephen Sewell's latest play attempts to examine the rapid expansion of the US state apparatus since September 11, 2001 and how the Bush administration's "war against terrorism" is being used to attack democratic rights and victimise innocent citizens. Directed by Aubrey Mellor and with a strong cast, it recently played at Melbourne's Playbox Theatre and the South Australian State Theatre in Adelaide.

While Sewell is well known in Australian theatrical circles for dealing with political themes his plays were largely marginalised during the 1990s. Theatre audiences, however, have begun responding to more overtly political dramas in recent times. In fact, a number of plays critical of government policies and militarism were staged at this year's Edinburgh Festival.

Myth, Propaganda and Disaster in Nazi Germany and Contemporary America marks Sewell's return to mainstream state-funded theatres where it evoked enthusiastic audience responses. Inspired by Franz Kafka's *The Trial* and George Orwell's *1984*, it captures the shocked response of those witnessing the Bush administration's onslaught on democratic rights and their terrifying ignorance of why it is happening.

The play centres on the fate of Talbot Finch, an expatriate Australian academic working at a New York university, and a liberal democrat. He is deeply concerned about political developments in the US and has written a book entitled *Myth, Propaganda and Disaster in Nazi Germany and Contemporary America*, which he naively believes will soon be published. His lectures attempt to explain this political analogy.

As he tells his American wife Eve: "It's like the bad old days of the Ugly American are back; we're still overthrowing governments in Latin America, murdering people in their beds; we've got a string of prisons dotted across the world filled with people who'll never be charged with any offence and we've got an intelligence service breathing so closely down everyone's necks we might as well call it a police state."

When Eve points out Ground Zero, site of the former World Trade Centre, from their apartment window, Finch replies: "Those terrorist attacks—you know how many people were killed in car accidents last year? Forty-three thousand. How come we're not launching a pre-emptive strike on Detroit? All this s... about terrorists is b...s.... They exist, sure they exist, but they exist because we made them, and everything we do to get rid of them just makes more of them."

But in post-September 11 America, Finch's forthright views, which he espouses to anyone prepared to listen, are regarded as treasonous and soon cause his life to unravel. A thug invades his university office and begins to pistol whip him quoting lines from Kafka, "Someone must have been telling lies about Joseph K, for without having done anything wrong he was arrested one fine morning."

Despite this blatant political assault, the university security services deny knowledge of any interloper. The bewildered Australian lecturer doesn't realise that his life is being engulfed by a state security operation. Next, a young overseas student mistakenly believes Finch to be a socialist and inadvertently helps university authorities launch a sexual harassment case against him.

Eve, who lives a cocooned existence as a TV scriptwriter, continues to misunderstand him badly. When he disappears, and she eventually tries to find and help him, she too becomes enmeshed in the state frame-up against her husband.

Finch is kept incommunicado by state authorities and tortured by an agent from Homeland Security, the shadowy federal government department established by the Bush administration in the aftermath of September 11. This massive organisation, which brings together 22 American security agencies and has 170,000 employees, provides the framework for a US police state. In line with this development, the Bush administration maintains a string of offshore prison bases where anybody suspected as an opponent of American foreign policy can be imprisoned indefinitely without trial. Images of shackled and hooded Afghanistan war prisoners, incarcerated in cages at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba are infamous.

Sewell has correctly insisted that all artists must speak out against the violation of civil liberties and basic democratic rights now underway. As he told one publication, it is necessary "to resist, to state the truth, to put up a fight. If we allow ourselves to be shut up, or start believing the lies in order to get

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along, ultimately we're going to get our throats cut anyhow."

A prolific writer, Sewell, who plans to develop the play into a film, says that his dramas are linked thematically. The hellish torture inflicted on Finch continues a recurring motif in several earlier plays. In *Traitors*—a play concerning Left Oppositionists in Russia in 1926—a Stalinist torturer sleeps with a woman Oppositionist the night before he virtually rapes a man he is interrogating.

In *Dreams in an Empty City*—a work about corporate criminality in the 1980s and a play within a play—provides a brief glimpse of a Latin American military figure torturing a radical priest. This anticipates the hit-squad murder of the actor who plays the torture victim.

In this latest play Sewell condemns twenty-first century America by forcing his audience to confront the implications of the Bush administration's turn to the methods previously used by fascist regimes.

As Finch is tortured his complacent and corrupt academic colleagues enjoy themselves at a champagne reception at the Guggenheim Museum. A voice-over intones, "Imagine a boot stamping on a human face—forever". This terrifying image is of O'Brien, Winston Smith's torturer in George Orwell's *1984*.

Sewell also uses film footage projected onto a giant screen at the back of the stage to emphasise key moments in the drama—beginning with visuals from Nazi Germany to illustrate Finch's lecture about political developments in the US. Later, when the Homeland Security agent confronts Finch, the screen features a huge George W. Bush delivering a particularly sinister and threatening speech—shades of Big Brother in *1984*. The second act explodes with the devastating appearance of Finch clad in hooded bright orange Guantanamo Bay fatigues.

However, *Myth, Propaganda and Disaster in Nazi Germany and Contemporary America* relies on a slick anti-Americanism that reduces all US culture into the pap churned out by Hollywood. Sewell's fictional New York is populated by an homogenous, privileged layer and is presented as a microcosm of a United States that is nothing but a dystopia. This outlook prevents any serious probing of the reasons for the attack on democratic rights and the eruption of US militarism.

All of the play's American characters, with the belated exception of Eve, are comic book caricatures and so uniformly vile that they ignore everything Finch says. Finch can only confide in fellow expatriate Australian, Max, who starts out as an articulate larrikin privately putting down American culture in lines that Sewell intends for black comedic effect. But Max soon changes his tune and ingratiates himself with the university high-ups.

The play's climax involves Max's treachery and the revelation that he is a Guantanamo Bay torturer. While this transformation of the "Aussie mate", the foil for Finch's innocence and naïveté, allows Sewell to resolve various strands of the plot, it only serves to highlight the playwright's problems with characterisation.

Furthermore, the form that Sewell has chosen for the play—a comedy of contemporary manners—is inadequate for its subject matter and fails to effectively convey the seriousness of his theme. At times the dialogue descends into vacuous exchanges that threaten to derail whole scenes. Characters decry the internal US police state through various literary parallels that are presented as undisputed facts. Sewell also strives for sinister effect by having his torturer debate philosophy with Finch, as a modern parallel with the dungeons of the Inquisition, but this device is contrived and unconvincing.

The main weakness, however, is Sewell's deep-seated pessimism and despair. This is most obviously expressed by his protagonist Finch, who anticipates an all-powerful American empire that will last for centuries. This outlook, which thoroughly permeates the play, denies the profound contradictions wracking US capitalism: the growing economic crisis, the unprecedented social polarisation, the social tensions building up just below the surface, the hostility felt by millions of ordinary Americans to the Bush administration and its deranged militarist agenda.

While Sewell is rightly concerned about the monumental attack on democratic rights, he adapts himself to the images generated by the thoroughly corrupt and venal US media. He sees no social force—i.e., ordinary working people in the US—capable of challenging the present social and economic order.

The development of increasingly politicised audiences will no doubt see more plays and other artistic endeavours exploring the themes touched on by Sewell. Hopefully this will assist in creating a climate where Sewell and others like him are able to see beyond the media hype and surface appearances and develop a more rigorous and critical approach to their work.

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