

Stage adaptation of George Orwell's 1984: Puppets of the police state

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13 March 2006

1984, world premiere, based on the novel by George Orwell; adapted for the stage by Michael Gene Sullivan; directed by Tim Robbins for the Actors' Gang at the Ivy Station, Culver City, California, through April 8, 2006.

"In times of universal deceit, telling the truth is a revolutionary act."—George Orwell

With the United States mired in revelations of illegal domestic spying, the trampling of democratic rights and the Constitution, and the torture and "rendition" of prisoners, and presided over by a regime consumed with secrecy and the pursuit of endless war, the Actors' Gang production of Michael Gene Sullivan's adaptation of George Orwell's *1984*—a nightmarish vision of a totalitarian society published in 1949—achieves vibrant immediacy.

From the moment the lights go up, Tim Robbins's staging of Orwell's famous parable is not afraid to demonstrate its political "bias." It seizes the moment and rides the wave by plunging us straight into protagonist Winston Smith's incarceration and punishment. If its broader target is the corporatist, quasi-theocratic police state threatening to take shape in the United States, its more immediate target is torture as a tool of state control. While admirers of the novel may miss Orwell's acidic allusions to the rotting British Empire, fascist Germany, and Stalinist Russia, or Orwell's broader critique of state power, this interpretation places us in the nether world of Abu Ghraib, Guantánamo and the latter's detention cells.

Sullivan's imaginative adaptation of the novel leaps over Parts One and Two of the novel, picking up the story of Winston Smith after his arrest by Big Brother's agents and some time after his isolation in the torture chamber. Winston's growing rebellion against the regime and his furtive love affair with the mysterious Julia are seen only in trailer-length snippets re-enacted (play-acted) by the Party Members—a team of three men and a woman, dressed in identical dark suits, characters imaginatively created by the playwright and not in the novel. The team is directed by a leader who, until the play's final scenes, remains a disembodied voice and "talking head" who watches, coaches, and keeps the sessions on track from his small observation windows set high on the walls.

The play confines itself to the unrelenting spectacle of Winston's reformation through torture. To remind Winston of his "crimes," the team re-enacts events described in Winston's diary, the primary evidence of his subversive impulses and actions; the diary, a document peppered with subversive ideas and slogans, provides the "script" for these re-enactments. In many ways, this production plays as a kind of meta-theatrical pantomime, a dumb-show "to catch the conscience of the King" or, in this case, its audience.

When we meet Winston, he is already severely de-natured, a

battered ball of human dough, his face puffed and bruised. Confined to a shallow pit, he is shackled to power cords that send his body into convulsions with each application of current (accented with industrial audio). He is less a human being than a type—the terrified, mentally addled prisoner whose paranoid fears are being realized. He is hard to care about except in some abstract way. This is a very chilly bit of theater, targeting the brain far more than it stirs the heart. It's worth noting that Michael Gene Sullivan, the skillful playwright-adaptor of Orwell's book, is the head writer of the San Francisco Mime Troupe, and that the Actors' Gang works within the Commedia dell'Arte tradition.

The artistic principle at work is that we can find the universal in the type and archetype, the broadly human in the form. But herein lies the contradiction. Torture and political murder horrify us because they degrade, debase, and destroy the human being. We care because we believe in individual human dignity. While some detachment may be crucial for analysis, art must embrace the heart as well as the head (something that Orwell's novel does masterfully). If we don't care about Winston as the flesh-and-bone embodiment of suffering humanity, then there is something wanting in this production. This failure to engage the emotions is one of the production's failings, a serious but not a mortal one.

How could the emotions be engaged when all the actors, especially in act one, and in particular those playing the Party Members, have been directed to shout almost every single line? A little more subtlety, a little more emotional variety would have helped.... Nevertheless, no one can deny this production's energy and intellectual passion.

Orwell's lexicon of "crimethink" "newspeak," "thoughtcrime," etc., is utilized in this production as matter-of-factly as a Fox News anchor uses the Bush regime's euphemisms of the day. It doesn't take much to make the techniques for social control used by the Big Brother regime in Orwell's fictional nation of Oceania feel disturbingly familiar and even more disturbingly accurate. If finding resonance between the world of the play and the world in which we live is the self-adopted standard for this production's success, the play and its production succeed honorably. But given this cerebral tone, one is often left cataloging and assessing the effectiveness of his tormentors' methods. Even for an audience already familiar with the novel, the only dramatic question is how and when "thought criminal 6079 Smith" will betray his own humanity, his own most deeply held values, and abandon the objectivity of his own senses and intellect.

With little in the spare industrial set to distract the eye, focus narrows until attention to detail becomes almost clinical. This raises the question of intent: Is this production intended to remind us of how disinterested we supposedly have become when the object of a

regime's torment is someone other than ourselves or those we love?

Because this question is not answered in the negative, at best it leads us to a skeptical conclusion or to the possibility of a skeptical conclusion, which in any event is too facile and smug an explanation: that the American people just aren't interested, that they are perhaps callous, and, worst of all, indifferent.

Winston's diary details his connections to the "underground Brotherhood," a mysterious group of rebels and agents who embrace the philosophy of revolutionary theorist Emmanuel Goldstein. Sealing Winston's guilt is the fact that, at the time of his arrest, he had in his possession Goldstein's book, *The Theory and Practice of Oligarchical Collectivism* (inserted in full in Orwell's novel). Goldstein (never seen) is a cartouche of the Jewish-Marxist that has served as convenient boogey man for twentieth century fascists and would-be fascists. Goldstein's words, however, are a distillation of Orwell's own distinctly socialist views, many of them lifted directly from the works of Leon Trotsky.

The turning point in Orwell's political evolution was his experiences in the Spanish Civil War. His masterful *Homage to Catalonia* exposed the blood-soaked treachery of the agents of Stalin against revolutionary socialists, Bolsheviks, and the international working class. Orwell's detailed indictment of the way this genuine revolutionary movement was betrayed enraged Stalinists and their liberal intellectual apologists, especially those in England. Orwell was effectively ostracized by both the right and left, including much of the liberal intelligentsia who refused to believe the monstrosities of Stalin's crimes.

As the battle lines of the Cold War were drawn, Orwell was under enormous pressure to pick sides. He chose to remain as true to his core beliefs as his pessimistic nature allowed (before eventually giving way before his death at 47 to the pressures of imperialist "democracy"). The target of his anger became totalitarianism and authoritarianism in all its guises. His best-known works, *Animal Farm* and *1984*, have long been characterized as attacks on "communism." They are, according to the author himself, fables that lash out at the Stalinist hijacking of socialism, the dehumanizing frenzy of the Fascistic states, and the potential for fascism and totalitarianism in the so-called capitalist Western Democracies. [For more on Orwell's political philosophy, see Fred Mazelis's article on Orwell and Vicky Short's comments on Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia*.]

This production's theatrical spirit is given its most fruitful expression when the Party Members re-enact the events described in Winston's "script," his diary, and engage in meta-theater (commenting on theater itself). At these moments, they stop shouting and become emotionally available human beings—i.e., good actors. In Big Brother's Oceania, sex for pleasure is proscribed; only the "proles," the exploited worker population, are permitted to indulge their sexual appetites, though mainly through regulated doses of pornography called "pornosecs." When the female Party Member "playing" Julia and the male Party Member playing Winston begin to kiss, they suddenly seem to be "getting into it." The most insanelly and insistently puritanical of the team erupts in accusations, demanding that the couple be punished for their transgression. The paranoia that pervades Oceania is clearly just as rife within the inner circles of the Party as it is in the backrooms of its Gulag and on its streets.

In an early scene in which the re-enactors "play" a scene in which a Party Member calls on Winston's neighbor, the acting is excruciatingly false. The kids are too big, too phony, cartoon children. Their mother's accent is equally fake. But then it hits you: These are

Party apparatchiks trying to do the work of actors. Sullivan's blog account of the production (a fascinating look behind the scenes and into the methods of this approach to making theater) recalls how one of the production's earliest and most pressing questions was "how into it do the re-enactors, who are Party Members, get? Are they good actors? Do they need to read it or are they off book?" Given this ambiguity, it's fruitless to judge the quality of the acting. While some might have liked the actors to play it more "real" or with more "charisma," that only would have made the show more entertaining, which is almost beside the point. Since the play and production engage us fully, cast, director, designers, and writer have clearly done their jobs well, with flashes of brilliance and memorable moments.

In these re-enactment scenes, the playwright-adaptor has plunged into critical, theoretical questions of how media works, how content for those media is selected and packaged, and to what power-sustaining ends they are used. This is a meditation on the abuse of art for pernicious purpose. And in case we miss the point, every time a Big Brother newscast roars on, everyone snaps to mesmerized attention; one can almost hear the triumphalist fanfares of the corporate-owned media. Repeatedly underscored is Orwell's trenchant observation that "He who controls the present, controls the past; and he who controls the past controls the future."

The pivotal scene of this play comes when the Party Member playing Winston begins to read from the forbidden book by arch-enemy and revolutionary Emmanuel Goldstein. He seems, for a long, dangerously sustained moment, to be hearing the truth in the words, yielding to its explicitly revolutionary, anti-totalitarian Marxist economic and political message, and questioning the dictatorship of which he is part.

The play climaxes when O'Brien, the Party Member who leads the "reformation team," finally appears in the play's long last scene. Until this entrance, he has been nothing more than a disembodied voice and a face in the small windows set high on the walls of the chamber. O'Brien is dangerously charismatic, eerily soothing, smooth, and deceptively gentle. He is played like a seductive televangelist (or motivational guru) whose only goal in life is to save the "soul" of the sinner. He patiently explains his techniques even as he applies them. His efforts culminate in a scene that has haunted millions of readers of *1984* ever since its publication: a box with hungry rats (Winston's greatest fear) is lowered onto his head while he's strapped into a chair. We watch Winston lose his sanity. Broken in mind and spirit, he is now "saved," an infinitely malleable subject of Big Brother. O'Brien and the others rejoice quietly at this moment of salvation.

Threading throughout the play are Orwell's oft-cited parodies of the lies masquerading as proverbial truths: "Ignorance is Strength," "War is Peace," "Slavery is Freedom." The fear-mongering of the ruling Party, to sustain a state of endless war and a climate of abject fear, is so distressingly close to the amoral, cynical blather of the Bush regime and its apologists that the play fuels the growing anxiety (and, hopefully, powers of resistance) of all those who have been paying attention to national and world events over the past six years.



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