

BACKSTAGE WEST

Bright Boy: The Passion of Robert McNamara

PICK

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By Paul Birchall

Playwright Katy Hickman's surreal comedy is a clear reaction to the recent documentary *Fog of War*, the powerful apologia by Robert McNamara --former secretary of defense during the Kennedy and Johnson administrations--who was heavily blamed for America's entry into the Vietnam War. *Fog of War* was an attempt to depict McNamara as a normal man who believed he was paving the road with good intentions but was meantime sending thousands of young Americans down that road. By contrast, Hickman's sprightly comedy depicts McNamara's tale as a mix of opéra bouffe and darkly ironic cartoon--the perfect example of how tragedy turns to farce given the passage of just the right amount of time.

The story takes place in 1995, as long-retired McNamara (Garrett M. Brown) arrives on the campus of a small California women's college to attend a memorial for his old Cold Warrior pal Dean Rusk. McNamara's visit is anticipated with nervousness by Helen (Keliher Walsh), the college's president, who loathes the man's politics and whose deranged, one-handed Vietnam vet brother (Hugo Armstrong) has vowed to destroy the official.

The jaunty, easygoing McNamara is unbothered by any of the controversy surrounding his presence at the college, but after he unexpectedly starts suffering visions of his morally ambivalent past and collapses at the memorial, he commences an almost King Lear-like odyssey across the campus grounds. A trio of young women (Corbett Tuck, Kim Chueh, and Tracey A. Leigh) meanwhile starts digging up the campus president's front garden to protest--well, they're not sure what they're protesting.

It might be a bit of a stretch to envision McNamara as a latter-day Lear, roaring at the storms of history, but Hickman artfully melds fact and whimsy in a way that is simultaneously satiric, intellectually adroit, and moving. The play is more character- and idea-driven than it is anchored by any bona fide story line, and the plot drifts this way and that, as the writer pleases. Yet the writing is strikingly funny, and director James Eckhouse's production is so tight he's able to whip up laughs from situations that are as rich in pathos as they are humor.

Performances are top-notch, anchored by Brown's compelling, scenery-chewing turn. Part good-time guy, part embodiment of un-self-analyzed evil old man, Brown's McNamara is a jolly, charismatic figure--all the more so because his peppy happiness seems to be balanced by the total lack of any internal self. The scenes in which Armstrong's hilariously dysfunctional Vietnam vet hopes for some kind of closure in regards to the war, only to be foiled by McNamara's unabashed lack of guilt, are droll and powerful--a perfect comic turn. Also fine in smaller roles are Walsh's confused campus president and Graham Sibley as McNamara's tightly wound flunky.

Presented by Ensemble Studio Theatre-LA at Electric Lodge, 1416 Electric Ave., Venice. Fri.-Sat. 8 p.m., Sun. 7 p.m. Apr. 8-May 7. (213) 368-9552.