

Daily Breeze

RAVE!

April 14, 2006

On Stage: Play uses light touch to explore cost of war

"Bright Boy" explores the potential conflict between former Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara's public history and his personal beliefs in a quirky, comical style.

BY JEFF FAVRE

Those who protested the Vietnam War might argue that Robert McNamara was one of America's biggest villains. Time, and the recent documentary "The Fog of War," might persuade others that the secretary of defense under presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson was misunderstood -- that his loyalty caused him to lead the country into a protracted and un-winnable war.

Katy Hickman explores the potential conflict between McNamara's public history and his personal beliefs -- in a quirky, comical style -- with her play "Bright Boy: The Passion of Robert McNamara."

Unlike the glut of current heavy-handed antiwar plays, and the one-dimensional satires of President George W. Bush, Hickman doesn't resort to easy answers. Instead, by creating a bizarre fictional world, and tossing McNamara into the eye of that storm, she allows issues to arise without offering solutions.

It's a complicated script, which director James Eckhouse and his versatile cast turn into an intriguing two hours.

It's 1995 at a women's college in Oakland and McNamara (Garrett M. Brown) is on tour to promote his book *In Retrospect*. The tour isn't going well because protestors blame him for the Vietnam War, among other things.

At one point McNamara learns that a new rumor has spread that he even caused AIDS.

McNamara collapses at the college and winds up on a strange journey that involves three of the students (Corbett Tuck, Tracey A. Leigh and Kim Chueh) who are protesting something unknown; as well as the college's president (Keliher Walsh) and her deranged Vietnam vet brother (Hugo Armstrong).

There are several flashbacks where we learn McNamara's history and see him in meetings with Kennedy and Johnson. He tries to please his bosses -- regardless of his opinions -- by finding solutions through statistics, an area in which he excels.

Hickman paints a picture of a once-crucial political figure now virtually unknown by today's college students, who are too absorbed trying to figure out what, and how, to protest.

The script occasionally is clunky because there are so many ideas floating around at once, but most of those moments are overcome by Brown's wonderful performance as a 78-year-old McNamara. He portrays the former secretary of defense as wide-eyed and confused, as well as brilliant and caring.

Brown's impressive performance delivers strong comic moments and quietly tender scenes.

Eckhouse's direction allows for the script's comedy to shine by keeping the performances reserved and the pacing fast.

Laura Fine's set design, which includes many metal file cabinets and desks covered in vines and grass, echoes the jungles of Vietnam, and how the war that ended 30 years ago still impacts and informs today's geopolitics.

McNamara has spent his later years reviewing the country's mistakes. Hickman, through this gentle comedy, argues that if we don't listen, we are doomed to repeat them.

"Bright Boy" may not offer any answers, but it's asking important questions, and it's doing so in an interesting way.

REVIEW

"Bright Boy: The Passion of Robert McNamara" plays at 8 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays, 7 p.m. Sundays through May 7 at the Electric Lodge, 1416 Electric Ave., Venice. Tickets are \$22. For information, call 310-823-0710.

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