

# Theatre Review: Indiana University Department of Theatre and Drama presents “The Exonerated”

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If there is one production you should see in the coming week, it is “The Exonerated”.

It’s extremely difficult to render a police interrogation legible these days. With the proliferation of TV shows like Law and Order (and it’s one notable spinoff SVU) and the CSI franchise, police work is made out to be a scientific, objective, and rational process. In these contexts, the realities of the criminal justice system are rendered illegible by the problematic narrative that it is a seamless machine of interlocking cogs, designed to discern and disclose “the truth”. Any first-year law student will tell you that if you believe this narrative, you haven’t been paying attention.

“The Exonerated” enters this narrative framework with the intent to disrupt any such belief in a system as a logical and coherent process. Much like recent video footage of police interactions posted to social media, “The Exonerated” punctures the Blue (though perhaps Red, White and Blue as well) Wall of Silence. Telling the stories of six people who were wrongfully placed on Death Row, the play asks audiences what the modus operandi of the justice system actually was in each case. Arguing that each of the six stories are linked by the presumption of guilt before innocence, a fundamental inversion of how such a system *should* work, we are also asked to contemplate the inherent problem of capital punishment itself. If the system that furnishes the verdicts contains deeply rooted flaws how can we trust that those delivered to the executioner are actually guilty of the crimes of

which they have been accused? Further, what constitutes “cruel and unusual punishment”? Is it the physical torture of a suspect? The death penalty itself? Or something more subtle and insidious: a prison industrial complex which gluttonously devours human life to sustain its own existence? And lastly “why do we do this?”

There have been many iterations of “The Exonerated”, including several stagings of the work and a made-for-tv movie. However, it is impossible to approximate the depth of feeling and the emotional immediacy of the play through film. The format which the IU Department of Theatre and Drama has laid out, six chairs set on a stage in the round, furnishes the ideal viewing experience. This is one of those plays that audiences must approach with the same kind of vulnerability that the actors have. Jessica Blank and Erik Jensen’s script is impactful and accessible, never ranging into the realm of camp or emotional kitsch. Neither does it verge into the 3rd person authoritative realm of the Real Crime Story docuseries. By creating a story from the margins, and drawing upon real court transcripts, what we are given is not merely a performance, but an *encounter* between the audience and those whose words and feelings the actors channel. It’s a rare thing to witness, and perhaps an even rarer thing to allow ourselves to be vulnerable enough as audience members that we can empathize with those in front of us.

While I term this production an *encounter*, there are a few performances which are worth of note. The first of which is Professor Ansley Valentine’s performance as Delbert, our narrator, anchor and, arguably, the Greek chorus. Valentine is a seasoned performer whose character work in “The Exonerated” was absolutely stunning. His cadence reminded me of the speaking styles of James Baldwin and David Suchet’s Shylock from *Merchant of Venice*. He does not take from the actors around him, he gives. His blocking is eloquent in its subtlety, and his characterization of Delbert is layered and complicated. Go see this performance to watch an expert in his craft act as the connective tissue of this play.

Four other performances stand out. The interactions between Rickard Saint-Victor and Lee Martin as Robert and Georgia will make you cry. They not only have chemistry, but also what appears to be a solidly developed deep-history. That is the key ingredient in making a stage couple believable. Both actors have perfectly timed their comedic punctuations of their scenes, which rupture the drama but also somehow make their characters more human and thus, more believable. I look forward to seeing Martin's work in the future, she has a talent for switching between different characters, modes of emotion and tonal shifts.

Reid Francis Henry and Nicholas Munson might easily be overlooked as they play villains. However, both actors gave some of the most uncomfortable and yet believable performances of the evening. Henry plays Jesse, Jeff and is also one of the ensemble characters. His accent was dead-on middle Texan, and remained perfectly steady throughout his scenes as the sheriff. Henry's delivery reminded me a great deal of a young Brian Cox (Zodiac and Deadwood) in that he deftly gives voice to his characters' regional and personal identities. He also has some extremely difficult lines: those that include the n-word, those spoken in Japanese and those that are spoken in rapid sequence. There are different levels of syntactical difficulty here that Henry negotiates dexterously. He has clearly worked with Munson and his fellow cast-mates to craft a believable performance that articulates both the will and the voice of State sanctioned violence, all while suggesting that ultimately that voice is a human one. Munson, as a trial lawyer and Gary's brother, lent a great deal of emotional pathos to what otherwise might have easily been wooden, secondary characters.

Finally, I wanted to say kudos to all of these actors who have created an extraordinary audience encounter with these stories of love, loss, perjury and resistance. This is assuredly a difficult play, but one which allows both its audience and cast to connect with those who have often been presumed guilty by circumstance, by proximity and by race. "The Exonerated" is a late-season production, but a very worthwhile experience.

Note: The above review details my opinions formed after seeing the dress-rehearsal version of the play on December 1st. Further, these are my own perceptions and opinions, every performance is a chance to evolve the characters.