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Department of Theatre and Drama

Review: 'The Exonerated' draws out questions of morality

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By Matthew Waterman, H-T Reviewer



Richkard Saint-Victor portrays Robert, a horse groomer sent to death row for a crime he didn't commit. Lee Martin, right, plays Georgia, his wife, as well as additional characters throughout the play. Nick Munson (background) also portrays multiple characters that help to create the world of "The Exonerated".

At any given time, there are several thousand inmates on death row in the United States. At least a fraction of them are bound to be innocent.

The criminal justice system is far from being immune to error. If we are going to use the death penalty, we should at least confront that fact.

Playwrights Jessica Blank and Erik Jensen confront it head-on in "The Exonerated," a 100-minute drama with no intermission. The play tells the stories of six people sent to death row on wrongful convictions, all of whom were later exonerated.

Blank and Jensen's work had a successful off-Broadway run starting in 2002, and it was adapted into a made-for-TV movie in 2005. It starred Danny Glover, Susan Sarandon and others.

A production of "The Exonerated" by the Indiana University Department of Theatre, Drama and Contemporary Dance plays this week in the Wells-Metz Theatre. The show opened Friday night with both playwrights in attendance.

The most disturbing element of "The Exonerated" is the element of truth. The script is based on actual case files and public records, supplemented by interviews with 40 former death row inmates who had been exonerated.

The stage is furnished with five chairs and surrounded by audience members on three sides. The former inmates take turns telling their stories. Other actors take on an array of minor roles (police officers, attorneys, etc.) to bring some parts of the stories to life.

Director Liam Castellan has led a solid cast through a moving and engaging production. At no point during the 100-minute performance did I find myself wishing for an intermission.

At the center of the play is Delbert Tibbs, based on the real Delbert Tibbs, a black man who became an anti-death penalty activist after being sentenced to death on a wrongful conviction by an all-white jury.

Tibbs' narration is rife with wisdom and poeticism. He is portrayed simply and calmly here by Ansley Valentine, an associate professor of acting and directing at IU. The rest of the actors are students (graduate and undergraduate).

Matthew Murry portrays Gary, a soft-spoken farmer who was convicted of murdering his parents. Murry's performance brings out his character's humility and gentleness.

Richkard Saint-Victor enacts the part of Robert, a black horse groomer who went to death row for the rape and murder of a white woman. Robert and his wife Georgia (Lee Martin) express more overt anger at the justice system and its racist tendencies than do any of the other characters.

Nicholas Jenkins plays Kerry, an awkward man who was found guilty largely because the prosecution accused him of "homosexual perversion," the script suggests.

Kevin Renn embodies the character of David. David was picked up as a young man for a robbery and murder he had no connection to. Years behind bars have traumatized David into a state of addiction and emptiness.

Finally, we have Meaghan Deiter in the role of Sunny. Sunny was a free-spirited hippie who ended up, along with her husband, in the wrong place at the wrong time. They were riding with a sketchy friend (Rhodes, played by Nicholas Munson) when he shot two police officers to death, then blamed it on his passengers.

The structure that Blank and Jensen employ in this show — the characters taking turns telling their stories — means we're always jumping around to different subplots. Yet, it's not hard to follow at all. If anything, the scattered narrative is what makes the show so watchable.

There's something that makes "The Exonerated" especially shocking from a moral standpoint. None of the cases in this play (which, again, are taken from true events) were situations in which the police or justice system made their best efforts to uncover the truth, and they arrived at the wrong answer due to misleading evidence. They are all cases in which outrageous mistakes occurred; confessions were fabricated, vital evidence was neglected or decisions were made on the basis of outright racism.

On the one hand, "The Exonerated" is the opposite of a moral puzzle. What happens is clearly wrong, since Blank and Jensen only tell the stories of the innocent, not the guilty.

On the other hand, the play clearly casts doubt on the morality of giving the state the power to execute its own citizens. Those who walk in as supporters of the death penalty may walk out with uncertainties.

If You Go

WHO: Indiana University Department of Theatre, Drama and Contemporary Dance.

WHAT: "The Exonerated" by Jessica Blank and Erik Jensen.

WHERE: Wells-Metz Theater, 275 N. Jordan Ave., Bloomington.

WHEN: 7:30 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday; 2 p.m. Saturday.

TICKETS: \$15-\$25. Call 812-855-1103 or visit theatre.indiana.edu.

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