

THEATER REVIEW - UT San Diego

Making a case

Audience joins in Sledgehammer's political 'Trial of George W. Bush'

By Anne Marie Welsh

THEATER CRITIC

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As if watching the midterm election returns with Karl Rove weren't rebuke enough, the president was subjected in absentia Tuesday to Sledgehammer Theatre's "A Patriot Act: The Trial of George W. Bush."



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Bailiff Timothy Carr swears in three different "juries" at Sledgehammer's "A Patriot Act: The Trial of George W. Bush."

Listed among the cast of witnesses in this latest – and most thoughtful – interactive theater piece by impresario Todd Blakesley was that democratic collective known as “You, The People.”

The people spoke clearly Tuesday not only at the ballot box but also with eye-opening eloquence and historical insight at the Tenth Avenue Theatre, where three juries heard actor and audience testimony, considered evidence and listened to prosecution and defense arguments on three serious charges: malfeasance in office and dereliction of duty; war crimes; and treason.

The legal verdicts were mixed, surprising and enlightened. The verdict on the show: guilty – of providing sly, though truly “fair and balanced” political theater.

"A Patriot Act: The Trial of George W. Bush"

8 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays, 7 p.m. Sundays, through closing with a 2 p.m. matinee Nov. 26; Sledgehammer at Tenth Avenue Theatre, 930 10th Ave., downtown; \$10-25; (619) 544-1484 or www.sledgehammer.org

After the diverse witnesses had spoken, the judges had read the juries their instructions and sentences were handed down, a theme emerged. It's the lesson Prospero learns in “The Tempest,” though one not likely to dominate public policy anytime soon: “The rarer action is in virtue than in vengeance.”

Blakesley's done three previous and more raucous participatory pieces on election themes, including FritzCON during the Republican National Convention here in 1996.

“A Patriot Act” is somber by comparison, so completely do Blakesley and his Sledgehammer cohorts transform their performing space into a federal courtroom. Visitors (members of the audience) are carefully screened, are given badges and choose their roles at the door. Security goons wand everyone with metal detectors. An imposing Bailiff (Timothy Carr) keeps good order.

When the “All rise!” sounds for the entrance of the judges, the courtroom illusion takes over and observers (the role most in the audience choose to play) simmer down respectfully to listen.

Distinguished and restrained in their judicial robes, Blakesley plays the magistrate with Dick Emmet, a distinguished, silver-haired former Alabama state superior court judge, as presiding judge.



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Judge Dick Emmet (left) presides over the courtroom where Timothy Carr serves as bailiff and John Polak plays a prosecuting attorney in "A Patriot Act: The Trial of George W. Bush."

The frame for the evening causes dispute from the first gavel. This is a “military tribunal of universal justice,” the kind of “kangaroo court,” argues the president's defense team, to which an American citizen cannot be subjected. They've filed a writ of habeas corpus.

The irony cuts sharply, of course. The defendant will be tried by the standard of justice agreed upon by his attorney general and the Congress as appropriate for anyone, including American citizens, deemed an “enemy combatant.”

The prosecuting attorneys (John Polak and Jim Granby), following orders from the secretary of defense, have so defined Mr. Bush. But the Bush defense (Kaja Amao and Fred Moramarco) fearlessly counters every argument, cross-examines their own witnesses and presents a display of well-informed and impressive improvisation that keeps the scales of justice tilting first one way, then the other.

Each side presents its evidence initially with an actor role-playing a citizen as fully fleshed as a character in a courtroom drama. For the prosecution, big and insistent John Dawkins (Steve Oliver) passionately asks the absent president, connected by remote video and a secure telephone line, “Why are we in Iraq?”

Outlining an alleged “pattern of deception” in the run-up to the war, Dawkins gives in his testimony an opening to the feisty and youthful

prosecutor Polak. He enters as evidence huge charts of timelines and administration quotes later proven misleading, if not false.



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John Polak addresses the audience/jurors as he analyzes the charges against the absent president.

Also on display: the infamous, 12 words about Saddam seeking “yellow cake from Africa” and the Downing Street memo saying “intelligence was being fixed” to support the invasion. During his second appearance, Dawkins outlines Bush family ties to the Saudi royal family and The Carlyle Group, the oil-and-business conglomerate that relies, he says, on the cycle of war and reconstruction to build wealth – the Michael Moore argument.

Calling the volatile witness a “Monday morning quarterback” and arguing that the president was being held on “specious and immoral grounds,” Maramarco unrolled another timeline with quotes from previous administrations – Clinton on the need to neutralize Saddam, terrorism expert Richard Clarke, earlier affirmations of WMDs in Hussein-ruled Iraq.

The contest resembled dueling bloggers coming to theatrical life.

The defense called Sal D'Agostino (Jesse MacKinnon), a Bronx Vietnam vet who, though a Democrat, defended the president for doing all that was necessary to protect us.

“Doing the right thing,” D'Agostino said quietly, “is very often unpopular.”



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As one of the president's defense attorneys, Kaja Amado eyes a witness in Todd Blakesley's interactive "A Patriot Act: The Trial of George W. Bush."

On opening night, the volunteer citizen witnesses proved more dramatic than the actors. So much so that a couple of smart teenagers in the audience noted: "You can't tell the performers from the audience, can you?" Precisely.

Given the political leanings of many theater folk, witnesses for the prosecution outnumbered those for the defense. Testimony – some well prepared – lambasted the president's environmental record, the government's no-bid contracting in Iraq and, painfully, the terrible toll the war has taken on soldiers, including a 17-year-old's neighbor now home "battling mental illness for the rest of his life."

Eloquently, a man named Michael Feinstein read a series of charges against George III from the Declaration of Independence. But a mild-mannered and carefully reasoned answer came from defense witness Jim Fitzgerald, who put the Declaration in context, saying the revolutionary document noted the king's abuses had "no redress." Any abuses of executive power now, he argued, must be tried in a "court of his peers."

The tribunal has no jurisdiction, he argued, and if "you don't validate the rights the founding fathers fought for long ago," democracy itself is at stake.

His view was seconded by a female history professor who spoke dispassionately about the brilliance of the system of checks and balances

and the balance of powers in American government, and with great feeling about her son, with whom she differed. He was about to join the ROTC.

The courtroom was hot Tuesday. As in any real trial, some of the testimony wandered off, only to be gaveled back to relevance by Blakesley. Some witnesses misbehaved. But feelings were strong, the arguments intense, with defense attorney Kaja Amao especially adept in her spontaneous cross-examinations. In the end, most observers agreed that justice had been served.

Blakesley, whose first interactive pieces came more than 30 years ago at his tiny Crystal Palace Theatre in Pacific Beach, remains an invaluable, one-of-a-kind artist on the local theater scene. Citizen Blakesley has earned his personal Medal of Freedom, for in the end, that's what "A Patriot Act" is all about.



Conceived, written and directed by Todd Blakesley. Set: Chris Hall. Lighting: David Cannon. Video: Sarah Schneider. Costumes and sound: Ericka Aisha Moore. Cast: Todd Blakesley, Dick Emmet, Timothy Carr, John Polak, Jim Granby, Kaja Amao, Fred Moramarco, Jesse MacKinnon, Steve Oliver, Teresa McGee, George Pritzker, Indrani Ganguly-Fitzgerald.

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