

MRT's season opener is a civics lesson you'll love to learn

By KATHLEEN PALMER
Staff Writer

I work in a newsroom, and I hate news. There, I said it. There's a reason I work the arts and entertainment, food and wine beats, instead of covering things like politics. Gah, I detest politics.

However, thanks to "45 Plays for 45 Presidents" – the first offering of Merrimack Repertory Theatre's new season – I am now enraptured by the riveting story of the leaders of the free world.

In two hours, a troupe of five actors – Celina Dean, Veronika Duerr, Aaron Munoz, Nael Nacer and Terrell Donnell Sledge – give two minutes to each Commander-In-Chief of the United States, in an astonishing amount of theatrical work that in and of itself is impressive.

From the quick scene segues, to the singing, the dancing, the rap-spitting, the spoken-word, the comedy and the well-placed silences, these actors leave everything they have on stage.

Written by Chicago troupe The Neo-Futurists, it was first presented in 2002, then called "43 Plays for 43 Presidents." Writers Andy Bayiates, Sean Benjamin, Genevra Gallo-Bayiates, Chloe Johnston and Karen Weinberg "created the show not as a series of impersonations, but rather as a set of fully realized theater pieces that explore the thoughts, feelings, triumphs and failures of the individuals we have chosen to lead our country – as well as of their families, colleagues and adversaries."

The effective set design by Michael B. Raiford features a large hanging portrait frame, where each president is projected

IF YOU GO

Merrimack Repertory Theatre presents '45 Plays for 45 Presidents'

WHEN: Through Oct. 2. See website for dates and times.

WHERE: Nancy L. Donahue Theatre, 50 E. Merrimack St., Lowell, Mass.

COST: \$26-\$70, based on seat selection and other discounts.

TICKETS/INFORMATION: 1-978-654-4678, email box_office@mrt.org or online at www.mrt.org.

(sometimes with hilarious add-ons, designed by Ido Levran). A great effect is the word "QUOTE," a speech bubble and the open- and close-quote

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marks hanging above the stage, which all light up whenever an actor relays something a president literally said. The seal of the president is on the stage floor, and the mighty dollar looms quietly, significantly, behind it all.

The beautifully simple device of donning a jacket with a U.S. flag on the back is used to denote which actor is currently portraying the president. It also becomes a visual representation of when the title was fought over (George W. Bush vs. Al Gore is particularly amusing), wrenched away from, forced upon, and usurped by others.

In addition to cycling through the presidents, there are character vignettes that include wives (a brief laughter-stopping moment by Veronika Duerr of the heartbreak of First Lady Jane Pierce) and one of the funniest



Photo courtesy of MEGHAN MOORE

A splashy musical number for Richard Nixon with, from left, Terrell Donnell Sledge, Veronika Duerr, Aaron Munoz, Celina Dean and Nael Nacer. Part of "45 Plays for 45 Presidents," presented by Merrimack Repertory Theatre, Lowell, Mass., through Oct. 2.

moments in the show, where Aaron Munoz plays Ben Franklin as a stand-up comedian roasting Jefferson.

There are some brilliant symbolic moments peppered throughout the show: The tipping-over of a scale full of "state" blocks – a blunt, crashing announcement of the Civil War. The awkward, looking-between-themselves moment when the four white actors try to decide who should wear the jacket as Lincoln, eventually having Terrell Donnell Sledge soberly take it on. The comparison of jumping rope – and in his second term, double-dutch – to the challenges faced by our current president, also portrayed by Sledge (bravo on the jumping!).

I must go back again to the talent of the actors at spinning out these snapshots. To wit, Nael Nacer's chilling John Adams – whose policies on "ejecting aliens and immigrants" that he perceived as a threat felt like an icy foreshadowing of a current election stance – and his smug portrayal of Woodrow Wilson, the only president to hold a Ph.D. Duerr dons the jacket – and little else – in a saucy turn as Bill Clinton. Munoz is comical as "big babies" John Quincy Adams and Taft, and as Cleveland's doppelganger (a clever choice for the placement of intermission, as you'll see). Celina Dean is charming in her "Silent Cal" ukulele song, and fierce in her positively

blistering end-of-show rap that I will leave for you to discover.

I can't touch upon all the stellar facets of this show, or tell you how much I learned about the violent, horrible history of what when down during each man's tenure. But I can tell you there is much humor, surprising enlightenment and poignant moments in this crisply paced show. The ending is up to the audience – noticing the play's name, perhaps you know that we're currently only on our 44th president – and I'd love to see what the cast had prepared if the outcome was different.

A final note: I brought my 10-year-old middle schooler to this show, and we both loved it. This is

the most engaging civics lesson anyone will likely find, and I encourage all parents of older kids to consider bringing them. The history of the U.S. presidency ain't pretty, but it is ours. And "45 Plays for 45 Presidents" is the best way to learn it.

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