

Encore Michigan

'1984' feels very 2017 at The Williamston Theatre

[Review](#) April 01, 2017 Bridgette Redman

WILLIAMSTON, Mich. – A really good playwright knows that the story he or she tells must have its own mark and its own shape. This is especially true when adapting a classic tale. If you hew too carefully to the original work, it risks being a pale shadow that adds nothing to the story.

Thankfully, Michael Gene Sullivan knows this and his adaptation of George Orwell's *1984* is its own creation, theatrical and compelling. He doesn't simply engage in a linear staging of the book, editing out scenes and choosing dialog. Instead, he creates his own structure and changes the form of the original story. By taking this freedom from the novel, he is true to its events and themes, but transforms it into a highly theatrical piece that takes place in a single room with complex flashbacks and re-enactments.

The crux of the story is there. Winston Smith, a party member who works in the Ministry of Truth revising the past to fit the present, has committed "thought crimes" in a totalitarian world in which Big Brother dictates every aspects of the people's lives. Thinking independently or having concerns other than the state—or even insisting that 2 plus 2 equals 4—is a crime punishable by harsh and severe torture and execution.

The play begins in the interrogation room and it never leaves there. The events of the story that led Winston to this room are played out by his interrogators, party members who are disgusted by his crimes against the state.

Winston, played by David Wolber, is chained to the floor in the center of a stark room, surrounded by benches and an industrial set by Kirk Domer that features deep red fluorescents and the fearful austerity of a futuristic prison. Surrounding him are four nameless party members who start out moving in perfect gray choreography and slowly develop dangerous signs of individuality and personality.

Wolber has a difficult task because his role is in such great contrast to everyone else on stage. Where they are stiff and unyielding, indistinguishable cogs in a machine, he is loose and human. He provides a contrast in posture, style of speech and depth of expression. He also must display intense physical pain and suffering. There is a moment where he rolls his eyes up so that only the whites of his eyes are displayed and he truly looks as though he is past the point of endurance.



The four party members—Brandy Joe Plambeck, Robin Lewis-Bedz, Curran Jacobs and Tobin Hissong—do an incredible job of capturing the subtleties of their roles. They are a vehicle for creating the world that Winston rebelled against, but they also show the audience just how much they too are in fear, and that even as interrogators they are not safe and they know it. They reveal this through fleeting expressions, subtle shifts in body movements and eventually through the delivery of the lines the playwright gives them that gives away what they have been so expertly foreshadowing.

The final member of the cast is played by John Lepard—and it is a mostly off stage role—the omnipresent, omniscient voice of the interrogator. Jason Painter Price works wonders with the sound design, giving Lepard's voice reverb, echoes and a mechanical intensity and volume that makes Lepard truly terrifying. Lepard is the master game-player, manipulating and torturing not just Winston, but his interrogators as well.

Director Tony Caselli deserves credit for these key shifts in his actors that give this production an intensity and intelligent interpretation. He paints a chilling picture from the very beginning and uses the staging and pacing to communicate the fear that is ever-present in this world. He knows when to build things up to a point of suspense and when to provide the audience with some relief, though don't expect many laughs during this presentation.

There is a starkness to every element of this production, forcing you to focus on the words, the themes and the terror. It is often a challenge to present terror on stage without it becoming comical, if only because of the audience's need to reject anything too intense. This production succeeds and it does so because all the elements are so in synch and dedicated to the same vision: the crackling interruptions of the tele-screen with its strident demands created by Price; Shannon T. Schweitzer's white-washed lighting that lets nothing hide in shadows; Michelle Raymond's cage-like torture device that brings the interrogation to a climax; the unforgiving and harsh lines of Domer's set.

Williamston Theatre's *1984* is unforgettable—much like the original novel itself. It is rich in themes, and it would be easy for the audience to afterward hold hours-long discussions on any one of the many elements and themes that are explored in this show. And for a story that was written in 1949, it still feels incredibly relevant in its issuing of a clarion warning of the dangers of fascism, newspeak, ignorance, hatred, cruelty and war.

[Click here for show days, times and details.](#)

Read more about [1984 03/23–04/23](#)

Read more about [Williamston Theatre](#)