

Shock therapy

By Tom Helma



‘1984’ a grim reminder of dangers of authoritarianism

You may not want to take a first date to see “1984.” But your soon-to-be voting, nearly 18-year-old son or daughter? No question.

Williamston Theatre’s 2017 reawakening of George Orwell’s dystopian vision of an un-brave new world — in which verbs are purged from the language, two plus two is five and electroshock therapy cleanses one’s soul of any individuality — is just what the doctor ordered for increasing social consciousness.

Michael Gene Sullivan’s adaptation of the Orwellian tale, in the capable hands of director Tony Caselli and his ensemble cast of six, cuts a deep swath of raw emotion through the wordy complexity of the novel on which it is based.

Eschewing the bleak description of this mechanistic society, Sullivan takes us backward from the middle of the book to the beginning, then to a terrifying end-game, via the four-person interrogation of central character Winston Smith.

Smith is thrown out onto the stage, chained in a shallow grave-like metal trough, while his four interrogators act out the pages of his secret forbidden diary, hurling his own words down on him like acid rain. All four take turns beating him with both harsh invectives and actual body blows. A final scene of increasingly intense electroshock, followed by a graphic enactment of Smith’s worst fear, reduces him to emotional rubble and strips him of all dignity.

Smith’s four antagonists, three male and one female, are all cloaked in identical grey three-piece suits. They are joined on stage by a fifth chief interrogator. Throughout the play, he was a mere diabolical voice, but he becomes the most heinous of the bunch, one more grey suit in a hopelessly grey world.

Anonymity is a key element in these roles, yet each of the actors manages to infuse their characters with unique qualities. David Wolber is Smith, whose many tortured moments are painfully difficult to watch yet excellently performed. Tobin Hissong’s limping shopkeeper/Fourth Party member

stands out, as does Robin Lewis-Bedz's Second Party character. She moves back and forth between two characters, playing Smith's lover and one of the interrogators. Brandy Joe Plambeck and Curran Jacobs, as First and Third Party members, bring a dogged determination to their menacing roles. John Lepard emerges as the aforementioned heinous voice/chief interrogator. Williamston Theatre-goers may have a hard time seeing him in the future as the nice guy he is off stage.

Kirk Domer has created an effective, deceptively simple-looking set, and Michelle Raymond devised a series of props that includes a cage of rats — yep, live rats.

This is not an easy play to watch. Oligarchy and the annihilation of the human spirit is nothing to sneeze about. Democracy and free speech do not come easy. Orwell's vision is clearly applicable today, but then again, it always has been. Bravo, Williamston.

"1984" Williamston Theatre Through April 23 8 p.m. Thursday-Friday; 2 p.m. and 8 p.m. Saturday; 2 p.m. Sunday \$25 Thursday/\$30 Friday and Saturday evenings/\$27 matinees/\$10 students/\$2 discount for seniors and military Williamston Theatre 122 S. Putnam St., Williamston (517) 655-7469, williamstontheatre.org