

Williamston Theatre powerfully delivers Orwell's '1984'

Ken Glickman, For the Lansing State Journal 7:42 a.m. ET April 5, 2017



(Photo: Picasa)

Here we are in the year 2017 watching the play "1984", Williamston Theatre's new production, drawn from a book written by George Orwell in 1949.

When first written, the novel was a frightening depiction of what the future could look like under brutal authoritarian rule.

And it's still frightening.

Orwell creates a dystopian world: The country is called Oceania, and it is always at war against an enemy that is constantly changing. Big Brother is on vigil watching the citizens as are ubiquitous tele-screens that are also snooping.

Williamston's artistic director, Tony Caselli, brings his audience into this chilling and foreboding world with unrelenting intensity. The play's adaptation is by Michael Gene Sullivan and it is a Michigan premiere play

through April 23.

The protagonist of the story is Winston Smith who is in a room (exquisitely designed by Kirk Domer) for questioning and for torture. Smith works for a government agency that re-writes history to match what is happening today. We learn words like doublethink, thoughtcrimes, memory hole and others.

I kept on thinking of Time Magazine's cover story last week: "Is Truth Dead?"

One of Smith's worst crimes against the state was falling in love with a free thinker named Julia

This play is not for the faint of heart. Smith (David Wolber) is shackled in a hole in the floor and is subjected to torture if he doesn't speak the truth, per his interrogators.

Williamston newcomer Wolber is superb in this challenging role. Besides the unsettling torture scenes (each one having a personality of its own) Wolber also shows love, sensitivity and even humor. It is Wolber's masterful performance that gives audiences a respite from the dark nature of the story.

The interrogations are conducted by four members of the Thought Police – one of which is not in the room but is asking the questions via speakers. We learn other philosophies of the ruling regime: war is peace, freedom is slavery and ignorance is strength.

All the acting is well done, but Tobin Hissong and John Lepard (the voice) are clearly a few of levels above most of the cast.

After all these years, the Orwell story remains incredibly powerful. The strong material of "1984" is not usually seen at Williamston Theatre, but this production speaks to the theater's integrity to present such a play and to do it with so much professionalism.

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