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With news of recent self-immolations by Buddhist monks in China, Vancouver playwright Sean Devine's *Re:Union* is suddenly elevated beyond the history books in an engaging and clever look at a dark time.

On November 2, 1965, Norman Morrison set himself on fire outside the office of then Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, in protest of the U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War. With him that day was his one-year old daughter Emily. In his new play *Re:Union*, Sean Devine reunites Emily and McNamara years later as Morrison's daughter plots her own protest.

With Morrison's motivations in bringing his infant daughter with him that day not fully understood, playwright Devine admits that *Re:Union* is "part fact, part fiction, with more than a little speculation". As Emily confronts McNamara for his role in the Vietnam War and by extension her father's suicide, McNamara forces her to confront an even more horrific possibility.

Perhaps because McNamara is the most well known figure here, his character is the most fleshed out of the three that inhabit Devine's world, with Devine cleverly weaving McNamara's progressive doubts about the failure of the U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War and his role in the conflict, into this year's later story. Andrew Wheeler, who plays McNamara, uses this to great advantage giving McNamara a questioning vulnerability lying just below the surface of this outwardly strong man. He is at times gruff and at others pensive, easily moving through a wonderfully gradated performance.



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Andrew Wheeler in the Pacific Theatre and Horseshoes & Hand Grenades Theatre co-production of *Re:Union*. Photo by Ron Reed.

This vulnerability is particularly potent in his interactions with Morrison's daughter Emily, played by Alexa Devine, who manages her own catharsis. Singular in her initial goal to undertake her own "act of terrorism", Devine successfully mirrors Wheeler's doubts as she begins to realize that perhaps things are not as black and white as she might wish to think.

The third character in the piece is Morrison himself, played by Evan Frayne. Through a series of flashbacks, the time leading up to his death is chronicled. Perhaps the biggest enigma of the trio, despite the playwright's own questions of Morrison's mental stability, Frayne portrays him without doubt and with no hint of insanity. In contrast, the larger question as to his true intention in bringing his young daughter with him that day never reaches a satisfactory conclusion, but despite going unanswered it adds another dimension to this multi-layered story.

A cacophony of visual and auditory elements accompany Devine's play. Projection designer Jason H Thompson mixes live action video with historical footage to underscore both the then and now, even going ultra low-tech by today's standards as Morrison uses an overhead projector in several of his flashbacks. At times, Noah Drew filled the small Pacific Theatre with such a large sound that it was appropriately uncomfortable but at other times the subtle use of music and sound effects beautifully underscored the drama. While my initial reaction after act one was to wonder whether there was more sizzle than substance here, in the end it all worked.

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A compelling exploration of a small piece of American history within its larger context, Devine proves himself a playwright to watch. Not since Peter Morgan's *Frost/Nixon* have I found American politics so interestingly portrayed on stage.

★★★★☆ [Re:Union](#)

By Sean Devine. Directed by John Langs. A co-production with Pacific Theatre and Horseshoes & Hand Grenades Theatre. On stage at Pacific Theatre through November 12, 2011. Visit <http://www.pacifictheatre.org> for tickets and information.

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