

Re:Union feels particularly relevant

Publish Date: October 24, 2011



By Sean Devine. Directed by John Langs. Coproduced by Pacific Theatre and Horseshoes & Hand Grenades Theatre. At Pacific Theatre on Saturday, October 22. Continues until November 12

Re:Union provides a thorough moral and intellectual workout, which makes it as unusual as it is welcome in Vancouver's current theatre scene. And the physical production is gorgeous.

In *Re:Union*, first-time playwright Sean Devine fictionalizes a historical event. On November 2, 1965, a young Quaker named Norman Morrison drove to the Pentagon with his one-year-old daughter Emily to protest U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War. When he got to the Pentagon, Morrison doused himself with kerosene and set himself ablaze under the office window of Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara. In *Re:Union*, which is set just after 9/11, Emily returns to the scene of her father's action to protest the Patriot Act and to argue against the U.S. taking military action in Iraq. Emily tries to enlist McNamara's support for her action, even as she struggles to come to terms with her father's death.

The play dares to ask complex questions. In a terrifically smart and effective device, Devine's Morrison lectures a philosophy class on the difference between pragmatic ethics and religious morality. To support his view that the religious approach is superior, Morrison tells the Bible story in which Abraham very nearly sacrifices his son Isaac because he hears God's voice telling him to do so. Because their realities are so private, Abraham—and, at first, Morrison—are easy to dismiss as insane. But McNamara represents the ethical position, in which the end can justify the means. In McNamara's case, that led to a tragic escalation of the Vietnam War. More recently, it has led to waterboarding and other forms of torture.

There are holes in the script: with little effort, Emily waltzes into McNamara's office, and when she declares that she will commit an act of domestic terrorism, McNamara somehow forgets to have her carted off. But the play's great strengths, its intelligence and its compassion for physical suffering, more than compensate: as McNamara lectures about strategic bombing, we hear an eyewitness account of how that bombing was experienced on the ground, we see images of a blasted village, and we hear explosions; when Morrison's suicide-sacrifice finally comes, the liquid pouring over his body makes the moment movingly tangible.

California-based director John Langs delivers an exquisite production. Set designer John Webber places elegant, futuristic panels along one long wall of Pacific Theatre's awkward space, and projection designer Jason H. Thompson throws compelling images onto those surfaces, including the chaos of the conflict in Vietnam, homely details of the Morrisons' family life, and live-action footage that Emily, an artist, is recording. Often Noah Drew's sound design evokes the ominous shifting of bureaucratic gears.

Andrew Wheeler mines McNamara's arrogance and torment, and Evan Frayne brings his trademark emotional nakedness to Morrison. Alexa Devine overplays the singularity of Emily's purpose a tad; she stares intently a lot. Nonetheless, her performance is intelligent and resourceful.

As society struggles, with Occupy Wall Street, to articulate coherent resistance to institutionalized power, *Re:Union* feels particularly relevant.

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