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1984 on Broadway: Terrifyingly Relevant

David Sheward · Wednesday, June 21st, 2017

While it is not a direct response to the young Trump administration, the bracing and horrifying stage adaptation of George Orwell's classic dystopian novel *1984* arrives on Broadway at a startlingly appropriate time. Though published in 1949, the trends Orwell was spotting in political and social life are just as prevalent nowadays, even more so. The newspeak and shifting truth perpetrated by Big Brother, the tyrannical leader of a repressive future state, are shockingly similar to the "fake news" and "alternative facts" which surround us today. The denizens of Airstrip One, the decimated remains of London after an atomic conflict, are mesmerized by their TV sets just as anyone you see on a New York City subway is locked in an embrace with their smartphone. "They won't look up from their screens long enough to know what's happening," warns Winston Smith, the tragic Everyman hero of the tale.



Reed Birney, Olivia Wilde, and Tom Sturridge in *1984*.

Credit: Julieta Cervantes

There have been film versions produced in 1956 and in the titular year, as well as a limited-run Off-Broadway production in 1987. This new edition, adapted and directed by Robert Icke and Duncan MacMillan, has had four British stagings and arrives on the heels of the controversial Central Park *Julius Caesar* depicting the assassination of a Trump-like figure and the resultant political chaos as a fascist Marc Antony rises to power. That production is a picnic compared to this nightmare vision of the alternative future.

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The familiar plot of Winston and his lover Julia vainly attempting to thwart the authoritarian dictates of the pervasive party remains. But Icke and MacMillan have rewritten it as a sort of dream, framing the action with a meeting of a group of intellectuals from even further in the future discussing the merits of the original book (here it is Winston's diary) and debating if it is real or not. This tension between reality and illusion pervades the script as scenes are repeated several times with slight, disturbing variations, Chloe Lamford's initially bland yet cosy set comes apart and reconfigures, Natasha Chivers' frightening lighting blazes on and off, and Tom Gibbons' blaring soundscape assaults our eardrums. The idea is to make us as unsettled and unsure as Winston as he faces the monolithic power of Big Brother.

That impact is fully revealed in the final section of a harrowing, intermissionless 100 minutes in

one of the most realistic depictions of torture I've ever seen presented on any stage. Winston's final degradation and capitulation to the state is presented to us like a Soviet show trial in a stunning coup de theatre. The lights are brought up and we become complicit witnesses in Big Brother's final victory as Winston pitifully cries "Someone stop it. Make them stop!" The future-historian device which reappears at the end somewhat lessens the shattering impact, but this production remains devastatingly memorable.



Tom Sturridge and Reed Birney in *1984*.

Credit: Julieta Cervantes

Tom Sturridge plays Winston like a sleepwalker occasionally waking up to his terrifying surroundings. You can feel his pain, horror, and rage as his lethargy is slowly shrugged off and he realizes what an inescapable trap he's in. Olivia Wilde's Julia is simultaneously seductive and innocent, a wild animal and a frightened little girl. As the party official O'Brien who oversees Winston's destruction, the reliable Reed Birney is chillingly ordinary, a shark with a quiet smile. His is the bland, calm face of Big Brother's world and it's frighteningly familiar. He is watching us indeed.

June 22—Oct. 8. Hudson Theatre, 139 W. 44th St., NYC. Mon-Thu 7pm, Fri-Sat 5pm & 9pm, Running time: 100 mins. with no intermission. \$35-\$149. (646) 975-4619. www.telecharge.com

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