Cultural Daily

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Judicious Theatre: The Man Beyond the Court

Sylvie · Wednesday, April 26th, 2017

A play about the late Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia?

You can almost feel the political ranks parting like the Red Sea. And the questions: Why? Why not? Can we do justice to the Justice? Will it be too political? Too academic? Too reverential? Too brazen? Too soon?

STOP.

First, it's not exactly a play. More of a well executed sketch of the man. And no, it's not a one-man show, despite Scalia's overarching presence. It takes three people on stage to get this done. And you can leave at home any fear of a boring disquisition of The Law. *The Originalist* at the Pasadena Playhouse is none of those things.

Edward Gero as Antonin Scalia in *The Originalist* at the Pasadena Playhouse.

It is an engrossing hour and 45 minutes in the company of two and a half good brains indulging in some grand neo-Shavian repartee. If you like a good battle of wits, this one's for you.

But playwright John Strand is not content to deliver just that. With subtle wit, intelligent writing and humor, he deftly conjures up a side of the late Justice that most of us don't know — a human side. Or at least a human side as filtered through John Strand. We also get magnificently rendered, full volume opera (a favorite pastime of Scalia, even if you're not a buff), smart encounters at a shooting range (with metaphoric instructions on hitting you target, even if you hate guns) and competitive card games (even if you're not a shark).

Should I go on…?

Jade Wheeler and Edward Gero in *The Originalist* at The Pasadena Playhouse.

So what Strand offers is a surprisingly solid portrait of the man beyond the Justice. And since most of us have not been privileged to know this man, it's easy to acknowledge this portrait as the person he might have been. What's more, the excellent actor who plays Scalia — Edward Gero — is an uncanny likeness. In a story in the *Los Angeles Times*, Gero is quoted as saying that he and Scalia had met and discovered that their respective families came from Sicilian towns about four miles apart, making them entertain the possibility that they might even be related.

Gero is aided and abetted in this piece by the playwright's invention of a law student Scalia invites to become his clerk. Cat, as she is called, smartly played by Jade Wheeler, is almost as clever as the Justice. After all, she has youth on her side and she'll be learning fast as she matures.

Edward Gero and Jade Wheeler in *The Originalist* at The Pasadena Playhouse.

What this piece does is render the late Justice more approachable. We see a side of him that politics alone do not allow. After all, how unlikely is it that he and Ruth Bader Ginsburg, one of the most liberal justices on the High Court, were fast friends? *Something* had to draw them together.

The injection of another clerk, Brad, more in tune with Scalia's ideas, is perhaps the only concession Strand makes to expediency. The somewhat thankless role, played by Brett Mack, has one purpose: it gives Cat and Scalia something to push back against.

But the triumph of this event is Molly Smith's flawless direction. There is not a shred of padding, not a wasted gesture or flagging moment in her staging. It is lean and fit, aided by the fact that Smith has nurtured the production from its inception at Washington DC's Arena Stage, where Smith has been the Artistic Director for the past decade. And it is beautifully supported by Misha Kachman's elegantly spare scenic design, consisting principally of a desk, heavy gold and scarlet drapes and a pair of chandeliers.

l-r: Brett Mack, Edward Gero and Jade Wheeler in *The Originalist* at The Pasadena Playhouse.

What you get at The Playhouse is an inviting *nonacademic* portrait of Scalia as one might wish to have known him. Fact or fiction? Clearly both. And it won't matter if you like a good show. The larger truth is often better seen through fiction's widening lens.

Top image: l-r: Brett Mack, Edward Gero and Jade Wheeler in John Strand's The Originalist *at the Pasadena Playhouse.*

Photos by Jim Cox Photography.

WHAT: *The Originalist*

WHERE: Pasadena Playhouse, 39 So. El Molino Ave., Pasadena CA 91101.

WHEN: Tuesdays-Fridays, 8pm; Saturday, 4 & 8pm; Sunday, 2pm. Ends May7. Note there is no performance Tuesday, April 25.

HOW: Tickets $25-$80; premiere seating $115, available in person at the Playhouse box office, online at PasadenaPlayhouse.org or at 626.356.7529.

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