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Gunpowder, treason and plot

Dragon's 'Equivocation' is an unequivocally well-done production

by Karla Kane / Palo Alto Weekly

So influential to the English language and the world of theater is the work of William Shakespeare that works about the Bard creating that work have become a sub-genre of their own. Bill Cain's "Equivocation" is an example of that genre, with Dragon Productions Theatre Company currently offering an excellent production of it.

"Equivocation" takes places in the very early days of the 17th century, when Queen Elizabeth I and her Tudor dynasty made way for "Wee King Jamie," the Tudor cousin James I from Scotland, ushering in the Stuart era. Shakespeare, known as "Shag" in this play, is tasked by powerful politician and royal right-hand man Robert Cecil with writing the definitive dramatization of the "Gunpowder Plot." That plot, the foiling of which is still celebrated in England on Guy Fawkes Day ("Remember, remember the fifth of November"), involved a group of Catholics planning on blowing up parliament, the protestant king and his family. Cecil orders Shag, who's under the crown's wealthy patronage, to help him use the story as propaganda. Shag, however, is deeply conflicted, especially as he does more research into the "plot" and finds much in the official version that doesn't add up. Not only that, but he discovers he harbors sympathy for the plotters, who've long been punished for their Catholic faith and who suffer torture and barbaric executions at the hands of Cecil and his men. In fact, he may harbor some Catholic tendencies himself.

Shag is deep into writing his "experimental" play "King Lear" at the time and says he's not usually in the business of reporting on current affairs anyway. His fellow theater-troupe members are similarly conflicted, and they all go back and forth on the merits of accepting the money and pleasing the dangerous Cecil and their king on the one hand and being true to their art on the other.

In the meantime, Shag is also dealing with family issues. Separated from his wife, his younger daughter, Judith, loves her father but is neglected by him due to lingering grief over the death of her twin brother, Shag's only son. These personal issues may just turn up in his work as well.



Micheal Weiland and Paul K. Rosenfield play an actor and King James I in a scene from "Equivocation." Photo by Lance Huntley.



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To equivocate means to prevaricate, to use ambiguous or misleading language in an attempt to avoid both lying and telling the truth. In "Equivocation," persecuted Jesuit priest Henry Garnet defines the term as a way to "tell the truth in difficult times," by looking to the spirit rather than the letter of the issue being discussed. Shag hopes to learn from Garnet how to best do this through his plays, to tell the deeper truths behind the propaganda and drama (while saving his own hide and ensuring his own reputation for greatness will continue).

Cain, a Jesuit priest himself, has written a clever and dense script brought to life expertly by Dragon director Jenny Hollingworth and her six-person cast. The show blends Shakespearean in-jokes, references and quotations and often uses a play-within-a-play structure that requires the actors to switch back and forth between roles even within the same scene (familiarity with Shakespeare's work definitely helps boost audience comprehension and enjoyment). It's a pleasure to watch the master shape his "Scottish play" (or is that "Scott-ish?") into a tale warning about extreme ambition in a way that both speaks to the affairs of his day and is timeless.

Of course, plenty of connections can be made to our present day, as well, as we consider "alternative facts" and "fake news" and the power of the media and the arts to become propaganda or, as Shag prefers, to hold up a mirror to society. It's a good reminder, too, of the power of theater to resonate with people of all sorts of backgrounds and beliefs, to reflect what it's like to be a part of humanity. Shag states that he doesn't want to remind people what they are but rather that they are. Insight or malarkey? Either way, the man has a way with words.

The cast is wonderful, from Paul Stout as Shag's best friend and leading actor Richard and the saintly-yet-cagey Garnet to new Dragon co-leader Arika U. Spencer-Koknar as Judith, the daughter who lives in the real world outside of the theater and who proclaims to hate the artifice of soliloquies (delivered, of course, in soliloquy form). Michael Weiland skillfully portrays a plotter, a guard and an actor, while Paul Rosenfield is fabulous in his triple roles as the headstrong, talented young actor Sharpe, the pitiful, tortured plotter Thomas Wintour and King James, who hides a sharp and cruel mind behind his Scottish brogue and foolish exterior. Brad Satterwhite does triple duty as well but it's as the menacing, scheming, unhappy Cecil that he's most memorable. Last but not least, local theater favorite Max Tachis makes his full-production Dragon debut as Shag, and he does not disappoint; another great performance to add to his resume.

So, in true Shakespearean fashion, there's politics, history, plays-within-plays, religion (politics are religion for those who think they're gods, Cecil shrewdly points out), twins, gory violence, strong language, nudity and more. Yes, at around 2 hours and 45 minutes, it's a bit too long. Yes, it is a lot for the audience to take in, but well worth the slight brain fatigue you may feel afterward. A bloody good show.

What: "Equivocation"

Where: Dragon Theater, 2120 Broadway St., Redwood City.

When: Thursdays-Saturdays at 8 p.m., Sundays at 2 p.m.; through Aug. 19.

Cost: \$27-\$35.

Info: Go to [Dragon Productions Theatre Company](#).

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