

Sunlight

"**Sunlight**" at the Dragon Theatre is mostly about UC Berkeley "torture memo" professor John Yoo, but dressed up in just enough fiction to keep playwright Sharr White from being sued. Be that as it may, watching the show a mere 50 miles from where Yoo is (perhaps unbelievably) still teaching proves a cathartic experience.

In "Sunlight," Ben Ortega is our Yoo stand-in, Vincent, the Dean of Law at an unnamed but prestigious university, now embroiled in scandal because he advised the government how to torture terror suspects. His foil is his father-in-law and the university president, Matthew (Tom Bleecker, looking like a worn-down R. Crumb drawing), now stuck in a scandal of his own after trashing Vincent's office and bullying the university newspapers.

Vincent is prickly and dishonest but thinks of himself as a pragmatist, someone who does the ugly thing for the greater good. Matthew is bowed and ineffectual but imagines he's a proud gladiator and martyr to principle.

They're locked up together, along with Matthew's long-suffering assistant (Monica Cappuccini from the Dragon's wonderful "Show People" earlier this year, whose combative demeanor is oddly reassuring) and his daughter and lawyer (Marjorie Hazeltine, from "The Star Without a Name"), on a stormy night where they must decide who is right, who is wrong, and, most importantly, who is going to resign.

They argue and they debate and then they air past grievances and they ask hard questions. "Sunlight" poses: If enough people support the wrong thing, on what grounds can we argue against it? If something is done in your name, do you bear responsibility for it? Does war ultimately make villains of us all? These are intriguing issues. But the play doesn't handle them terribly well.

The family feud set-up is presumably supposed to ground the story in personal terms, but the effect is actually to trivialize things. It seems less like these characters are arguing because of the strength of their ideals and more like they've just got grudges. The actual fight the two men are having feels petty, and so do the characters themselves. That's believable, at least -- power does seem to breed childishness. But it's not particularly engaging to watch.

Eventually, Ortega fields a stirring monologue that breaks the show open in the second half and gives his role the complexity and sympathy it was lacking. But this scene now does its job too well: Bleecker's Matt is never as arresting, so "Sunlight" eventually seems

to endorse the one character over the other (if only by default), which was presumably not the intent.

Hazeltine, meanwhile, feels like she's supposed to be our central character, but the show sidelines her unexpectedly. She mostly seems to be around so that the other characters can talk about and around her, and actually it would probably be possible to write her out completely without losing much important material, another disappointment.

The set is simple includes a potentially intriguing gimmick: Most of the surfaces are blackboards, on which the characters write or erase key messages and props. It's a neat nod to themes like fragility, impermanence and the untrustworthy nature of a world where something can be here one second and gone the next. But as the play winds to a finish they take to erasing everything around them, which feels a bit too pointed.

It seems this is just not the show to tackle these issues. A shame, but you can't get blood from a stone.

"Sunlight" runs through Dec. 13 at the Dragon Theatre, 2120 Broadway in Redwood City. For tickets and information, call 650-493-2006 or visit DragonProductions.net