

The Columnist

Joe Alsop is an obscure name now, but as we learn in "**The Columnist**" at Redwood City's Dragon Theater, for most of the 20th century he was on a first-name basis with the president (that is to say, every president) and ran in 300 newspapers across America. Imagine if your opinion automatically inserted itself into 10 percent of Facebook and Twitter streams, whether they liked it or not.

Here played by veteran actor Randy Hurst, it's clear that Alsop was a brilliant, insightful, slightly weird dude. He's fluent in Latin, for crying out loud. When we meet him in 1954 he's vibrant and powerful, a true believer in America, democracy and the press. He's also a bully, an elitist and a self-important namedropper.

We watch his influence rise and decline, we observe his sham marriage and strained relationship with family and we see the world outgrows his old school thinking. By the end he's sitting on a park bench, dismissing the Beatles as "a fad" and peevishly wondering when the civil rights movement will "blow over." Yes, despite Alsop's age, this is another Boomer retrospective.

Pulitzer winner David Auburn wrote "The Columnist" and poured a lot of his subject's wit, wiles and furious energy into the script. We're obviously supposed to look at this as a classic tragedy: Joe's a great man, but he's laid low by his hubris. Problem is, for as intriguing as he may be, it's virtually impossible to sympathize or empathize with this guy, which means we never really care.

There's a subplot about KGB blackmail (naughty photos with a Moscow gigolo -- isn't that always the way?) but it's oddly ambiguous what's ever happening with that, and so Joe never seems vulnerable and we're never interested in siding with him. In the end, he's just the world's smartest dumb guy.

Hurst has a thorough command of the part, right down to Alsop's crisp Harvard accent and upright bluster, like an effete drill sergeant. Unfortunately, for whatever reason, he couldn't stop flubbing his lines opening night. With so many false starts and hiccups, you might think it's on purpose and maybe the real Alsop had a stammer. (He didn't.

Yes, we Googled it, what's your point?) Hurst still does a sound job with the red meat of the script, but this couldn't help but let the air out of a lot of things.

"The Columnist" is an unsuccessful play but not an awful one, and two standouts in the cast help tremendously: First, Gary Mosher as Joe's brother Stewart, a more practical, everyman sort of pundit, smart enough to know that housewives and hippie kids can be just as important as generals and ivy league grads. Mosher's understated compassion and sadness are oddly comforting.

Second, Camille Brown as Joe's teenage stepdaughter and morality pet, also much smarter and more aware than he is. In the show's best scene, she's clad in a nightgown and eagerly soaking up the goings-on on inauguration night 1961, and the charge of the moment spreads to the audience: Up late with the grown-ups, what could be more exciting?

Now and then there are moments when "The Columnist's" columnist looks as complex and vulnerable as he's meant to, like when he grieves over the death of JFK. That's a powerful, credible moment, but it falls by the wayside when he's steamrolling everything the rest of the time. Those with personal ties to this history might respond better (a few older audience members were in tears over the Kennedy stuff), but others will have trouble breaking through the ice.

"The Columnist" plays through June 21 at the Dragon Theatre, 2120 Broadway Street in Redwood City. For tickets and information, call 650-493-2006 or go to DragonProductions.net