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Decade of discontent

Dragon Theatre presents Bay Area premiere of 'The Columnist'

by Elizabeth Schwyzer / Palo Alto Weekly

"We don't give two s---- what they want to read. We tell them what they need to know."

So brags conservative political columnist Joe Alsop to his young companion, Andrei, as they sit in their boxers on a Moscow hotel room sofa, having just emerged from the bedroom.

Full of bombastic bravura as one of the most respected voices in the American free press, Alsop tends toward hyperbole, both in conversation and in his published critiques of American foreign policy. Yet as David Auburn's play reveals, Alsop is a man whose life is founded in deep contradictions.

First performed on Broadway in 2012 with John Lithgow in the lead role, "The Columnist" is based on the life of the real Alsop, a syndicated newspaper columnist and Washington insider whose dinner parties regularly featured such guests as Robert McNamara and John F. Kennedy.

In Dragon Theatre's production of the play, directed by Brandon Jackson, Alsop is played by Randy Hurst, who captures both his character's relentless, often cruel ambition and the brittle vulnerability buried at his core.

Around Alsop orbit his friend and then wife, Susan Mary (Mary Price Moore, all deference and self-control in her cardigans and Jackie O. pearls); her daughter Abigail (a buoyant Camille Brown) who simultaneously adores and resents her stepfather; and Stewart Alsop (Gary Mosher), Joe's brother and sometime professional partner who has intentionally distanced himself from Joe's gravitational force field. Meanwhile, Joe's treatment of his wife borders on the abusive, and a nearly unspeakable truth threatens to implode their tenuous marriage.

As Washington socialites, The Alsops are close to the action as JFK is elected President. Joe fancies himself nothing short of a presidential adviser, especially as regards Vietnam ("Jack will do what needs to be done," he assures his brother. "And if he doesn't know what needs to be done, I'll tell him.")

As Joe becomes increasingly overbearing, pompous and strident, Stewart seems to recede, until it becomes clear he's suffering from more than a Joe-induced headache.



Joe Alsop (Randy Hurst) and his wife, Susan Mary (Mary Price Moore), have a less-than-satisfactory marriage in "The Columnist." Photo by James Kasyan.



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The Vietnam War escalates, and while younger journalists at the New York Times decry JFK's approval of increased American force, Alsop is busy phoning their editor to demand he fire the "long-haired teenage radicals." Hurst occasionally fumbles his lines; it's not hard to write it off as part of Alsop's breathless bluster.

The turning point of the play -- and of Joe's life -- comes in November 1963, with the news that Kennedy has been assassinated. In the immediate aftermath, while others weep and drift about dazed, Joe delves even deeper into his work, admonishing others to do the same. Yet as the months pass, it becomes clear that Joe has lost his focus, his columns spinning out of control into wildly inflammatory rants.

"There was real skill there, real finesse," reflects his arch enemy, New York Times Vietnam War correspondent David Halberstam (Drew Reitz). "Now it's just piss and venom."

It's around this time that Joe's past comes back to haunt him in the form of Andrei (Casey Robbins), the lover he thought he left behind in Moscow, yet whose specter has haunted Joe's career ever since.

From the Moscow hotel room to the Alsops' sitting room and study, a rather spare set by Rory Strahan-Mauk provides the requisite atmosphere; particularly fitting are Joe's clacking typewriter and green-shaded desk lamp. Costume designer Katherine Halcrow effectively conjures the era with tuxedos and bejeweled velvet gowns to mark the Presidential inauguration, and later a scandalously short leather miniskirt for Abigail, which soon gives way to the next trend: a tasseled hippy poncho and lace-up boots. Efficient scene changes incorporate music of the era, moving from the poppy innocence of Lesley Gore ("It's My Party and I'll Cry if I Want to") to Bob Dylan's moodier crooning.

Indeed, Dylan's famous warning that "The Times, They Are a-Changin'" echoes throughout the entire two hours of the production. Ultimately, "The Columnist" tells an age-old story of what happens when one outlives one's era and finds oneself displaced in another. Despite his volatile personality and the difficult contradictions he embodies -- a dyed-in-the-wool conservative who champions a Democrat's ascendance to the Oval Office, a noted Cold Warrior sleeping with the enemy -- Alsop's real fatal flaw amounts to nothing more than his audacity to continue speaking his mind long after the peak of his powers.

Though Alsop was an outspoken and influential player in mid-century American politics, few know his name today. Dragon Theatre's strong and invested production will go some way to correcting that historical oversight.

What: "The Columnist," by David Auburn, presented by Dragon Productions Theatre Company

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

When: Through June 21, with shows Thursday-Saturday, 8 p.m.; Sunday, 2 p.m. Post-show discussion on Sunday, June 14.

Cost: \$27-\$35

Info: Go to dragonproductions.net or call 650-493-2006, ext. 2 .

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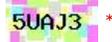
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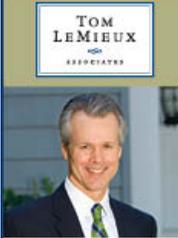
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