



New York Theatre WireSM

Theatre Dance Performance Art Music
Alternative and International Theatre

Glenda Frank

We Have It All on Tape

“1984,” stage adaptation of the George Orwell novel and direction by Robert Icke and Duncan MacMillan.

Hudson Theatre, 139-41 W. 44 St., NYC.

June 22, 2017 – open run.

Monday – Thursday, 7 PM; Friday – Saturday, 5 and 9 PM.

For tickets and information, contact 646-975-4619 or [ticketmaster.com](#).

No intermission, no late seating.



Olivia Wilde, Tom Sturridge and the cast of “1984.” Photo by Julieta Cervantes.

The 2013 stage adaptation of Orwell’s “1984” by Robert Icke and Duncan MacMillan, arriving on Broadway after a successful London run, offers a surprising lock step vision of our paranoid present. Yes, everyone with an interest in smart theatre should get a ticket but you need to know, this production makes little concession to our conventional assumptions of good theatre. The audience has to do a lot of the work. But it is worth every moment. The resonance with current and historical horrors -- especially the use of hidden videos, class war, fake news and alternative facts -- is, by the end, more than troubling. To misquote Bertolt Brecht: Sit back, light your imaginary cigar, and prepare to look this dystopia in the eye.

It begins, like the novel I read ages ago, with Winston Smith (the talented Tom Sturridge), committing a felony, writing in his journal. Anything personal – from using a pen rather than a computer or believing he has a right to individuality – is forbidden. We watch him break more and more laws -- believing the news items and photographs it is his job to erase at the Ministry of Truth, shouting out he hates Big Brother, questioning the war news, and having an affair with Julia (Olivia Wilde), from the Anti-sex League.

We applaud him and fear for him. He is too trusting -- and we have seen his rabid co-workers. During the mandatory hate moment, when political prisoners are jeered, Parsons (a genial Wayne Duvall) is a pure corporate man. He brags about his seven year old daughter, who eavesdrops on him and causes an old woman, later released, to be arrested. She has better luck when she turns in her father, who is proud of his own Thought Police wannabe. How would Winston stand a chance if someone suspected him?

Maybe I was too young when I read Orwell’s novel. Times were different. Maybe this production has its own spin. I did not realize the sharp class demarcations, but Chloe Lamford’s smart two-story set is a guide. Below is the drab institutional world, which is in various scenes Winston’s bedroom, workplace, café, and childhood home. Above is the private room in the back of the antique shop where Winston and Julia believe they are free (of monitoring, for one thing). We see them also in video clips (design by Tim Reid), a foreshadowing of the evidence from the hidden cameras.

The world is familiar to us: the workers who are manipulated and the privileged leaders. The workers are told that their chocolate ration has been increased to 20 grams, and they cheer. Winston realizes that the announcement repeats daily. Without a past, the present is endless. (Scenes and phrases also repeat, making us wonder if Winston is unbalanced. He utters suicidal phrases, hears voices asking him the year and where he is.)

But he does not realize where he is. The antique shop owner (Michael Potts) who leads the lovers to a secret back room, O’Brien (Reed Birney) who welcomes the couple in his comfortable office where he offers them wine and good chocolate, even Julia who confesses that she has had many affairs before, do not alarm Winston. They are all members of the elite, building evidence. Emotionally we travel this journey with him – through love and friendship. When they take him to the place that has no darkness (The Ministry of Love), it is terrifying, even before the torture. A woman behind me said she was glad she attended a matinee or she wouldn’t be able to sleep. And Smith is half convinced he deserved punishment. It’s your own solipsism that trapped you, O’Brien tells him.



What I hadn’t realized is that the chain of events might have been a sting operation with Julia as bait. Winston Smith, despite his Everyman last name, was already one of Oceania’s cultural elite, trusted with the important work of rewriting history. Syme (Nick Mills), a co-worker, confides to him that he is working on a new Newspeak guide – Freedom is Slavery, War is Peace, and boasting that language will someday vanish. Winston is excited.

The links to Communism, Nazi Germany, ISIS, contemporary events are clear, but the power of “1984,” directed by Robert Icke and Duncan MacMillan and performed by a sure-footed cast, tunnels deeper than satire or political commentary. Brecht wanted us to leave the theatre and think about how we are going to change the world.

Reed Birney, Olivia Wilde and Tom Sturridge in "1984." Photo by Julieta Cervantes.

In the end, Moliere and Shakespeare, language itself, have been saved in some vague future. 2+2 + 4. Maybe "voodoo economics" has been banished. But we know that a lot of people had to stand up and fight before Oceania could be saved.



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