

Glenda Frank in New York

If you are a New Yorker, or even just visiting, politics is on your mind. Mayor Bill de Blasio is battling Governor Andrew Cuomo, who has presidential ambitions, about repairing the ailing subway system. Occasionally President Trump glides into his hometown, ties up traffic, and riles Democratic nerves. For several news venues Trump is a national obsession, often relegating global crises to back items.

None of this, however, has sated the Big Apple's appetite for the political. Last season we welcomed several shows with politics as their theme: *Oslo*, about individuals making a difference in world politics; *1984* or everything old is new again. Russia has been on our mind with the musicals *Anastasia* and *Natasha, Pierre and The Great Comet of 1812*, based on the Tolstoy novel *War and Peace*. Last month *The Great Comet* wrestled with racial politics as the producers attempted to replace Okieriete "Oak" Onaodowan (*Hamilton*), a young black actor, with Mandy Patinkin, a Broadway veteran with a wide fan base. Patinkin backed out, and the musical, which garnered the undying admiration of critics, will now close on Sept. 3.

Ever since the cast of *Hamilton* protested the new policies on immigration, the president has been a part of the season. Michael Moore, whose documentaries challenge assumptions and fabrications, is making his Broadway debut in *The Terms of My Surrender at the Belasco* Theatre. When director Oskar Eustis cast a Trump look-alike (Gregg Henry) as the assassinated Julius Caesar in Shakespeare's classic at the Delacorte Theater in June, there were protests and lost subscribers. Robert Schenkkan's *Building the Wall* and the cabaret *Me the People* were direct responses to new policies. This Sept. an adaptation of Roberto Bolaño's dystopian novel *Distant Star*, based on dictator Pinochet's brutal, American-backed dictatorship in Chile, will play at the Abrons Arts Center.

Oslo by J. T. Rogers, with a gifted ensemble directed by the incomparable Bartlett Sher, took New York by storm, earning a trifecta of Best Play awards from the Tony committee, Drama Desk, and Outer Critics Circle. It closed July 16 but will open at the Harold Pinter Theatre in London this October. It is a great sprawling work with fifteen actors, some of them double cast, on the large thrust stage of the Vivian Beaumont Theater, Lincoln Center, but it has the honesty and warmth of living people struggling toward a common goal. The simple set design by Michael Yeagan and lighting by Donald Holder established the human intimacy with movable corners so that when the wider pictures emerged – both the Oslo accords and the full cast for the epilogue – the stage dimensions are almost a surprise.

Oslo tells the story of intellectuals with a vision. Terje Rød-Larsen (Jefferson Mays of *I Am My Own Wife* fame), a Norwegian academic, and wife Mona Juul (Jennifer Ehle, recently seen in *The Real Thing*), a minor diplomat, believed peace in the Middle East could be achieved only if both sides talked face to face in a relaxed environment. Risking their jobs and government censure, they invited Israelis and Palestinians to

their home. As the process climbed the power chain, exuberant volunteers were replaced by nervous decision-makers. We watch them battle out their demands, resentments, concerns, and distrust. Most of the guests, sometimes locked in a room by their hosts to slug through impasses, are discrete characters. The power of the play lies in the balance between the high impact discussions and the folksy feeling of the couple, their home, and negotiators removing ties, jackets, and diplomatic restraints.

The talks led to the 1993 peace accords, but in a heartbreaking epilogue we learn the high price paid for this golden moment of hope. Many of the negotiators met the fate of Anwar el-Sadat.

One of my favorite moments of insight was when a lawyer examined a preliminary agreement and asked simple questions about the meaning of words, about borders and access. The negotiators and the audience squirmed as we acknowledged that peace is not only a matter of good will but also thorny details and lost liberties. The dramatist served history well.

We have been spoiled by Hollywood, whose dystopian rebels discover a decidedly heroic trait. Winston Smith (Tom Sturridge), the anti-hero of the play *1984* – a Melbourne Festival import adapted (from George Orwell's 1949 novel) and directed by Robert Icke and Duncan Macmillan, now at the Hudson Theatre – is not savvy enough to smell a sting, betrays his lover, and may suffer from hallucinations. All of which make him – and the adaptation – more interesting. He is younger than Orwell's Smith and probably smarter. His job is to rewrite history, 'unperson' enemies, and delete pictures that contradict the party line. But he has come to trust the news items he deletes and has little faith in official "facts". He seems to be the only one to realize every day the chocolate ration is "increased" to the same amount or less, even as his coworkers cheer. He recognizes that the endless war continues but with different enemies.

The set by Chloe Lamford is government dismal, one large room and hallway that become variously the workplace, Winston's room, his childhood home, and a group hate (conference) room. In this room he meets Julia (Olivia Wilde), a member of the Anti-Sex League who confesses that she loves him. His willingness to act on his feelings brings color and meaning to the plot and the set. The upper level, which is primarily the hidden room in back of an antique shop where Winston and Julia make love and plot rebellion, is both staged and on video. It is lovely and tragic. The images of their happiness are also images of their crimes. Superb video work and projections by Tim Reid and overlapping sound design by Tom Gibbons.

They seek out hidden corners where Big Brother cannot watch them. They realize only half the picture. The freedom they admire is a reward for party loyalty, for the antique dealer's turning them in, and for O'Brien's (Reed Birney, Tony Award for *The Humans*) willingness to torture Winston for his own good, to make him a better party man. We have seen this kind of perk

before in totalitarian regimes. The people have rations; the bosses have imported chocolates and fine wine. Winston, standing on the second level, looks down at his office and wonders if the other workers are happy in their ignorance. Whatever Orwell intended, this is a play about class distinctions as well as alternate facts (2+2=5) and language as manipulation in Newspeak (*War is Peace*).

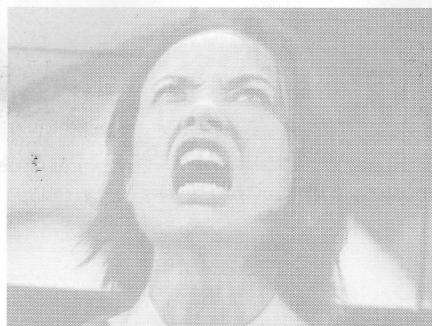
The torture scenes in the Ministry of Love, which is perpetually lit, are horrific in part because Birney and Sturridge are such convincing performers but also because of the pacing. Winston is not fazed by the electric shocks or beatings. This mild lead-up to the cage with rats, of which he is dreadfully afraid, magnifies his terror – first by presenting the object, the thought of which in itself is horrific, and then through Winston's reaction. At that moment, we believe that we too would have betrayed anyone to escape.

The dour capitulation is balanced by the closing scene, based upon the appendix to the novel according to Icke and Macmillan. Molière and Shakespeare – language – and art itself have survived. Perhaps there was truly a resistance which our anti-hero was right to believe in but did not find. The play is a warning – a timely warning.

Contact Glenda Frank at playsinternational@theater-research-institute.eu

BROADWAY LISTINGS

1984, Hudson; *Aladdin*, New Amsterdam; *Anastasia*, Broadhurst; *The Band's Visit*, Ethel Barrymore; *Beautiful: Carole King Musical*, Stephen Sondheim; *The Book of Mormon*, Eugene O'Neill; *A Bronx Tale – The Musical*, Longacre; *Cats*, Neil Simon; *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, Lunt-Fontanne; *Chicago the Musical*, Ambassador; *Come from Away*, Schoenfeld; *Dear Evan Hansen*, The Music Box; *A Doll's House, Part 2*, John Golden; *Hamilton*, Richard Rodgers; *Hello Dolly!*, Shubert; *Junk*, Vivian Beaumont; *Kinky Boots*, Al Hirschfeld; *Latin History for Morons*, Studio 54; *The Lion King*, Minskoff; *M. Butterfly*, Cort; *Michael Moore, The Terms of My Surrender*, Belasco; *Miss Saigon*, Broadway; *The Phantom of the Opera*, Majestic; *The Play that Goes Wrong*, Lyceum; *Prince of Broadway*, Samuel J. Friedman; *School of Rock*, Winter Garden; *Springsteen on Broadway*, Walter Kerr; *Time and the Conways*, American Airline; *Waitress*, Brooks Atkinson; *War Paint*, Nederlander; *Wicked*, Gershwin.





Jennifer Ehle and Jefferson Mays in Oslo. Photo: T. Charles Erickson.



1984 - Olivia Wilde, Tom Sturridge and the cast. Photo: Julieta-Cervantes.