



Ghost Light

by Jim Volz. Written on 2011-07-24. First published in the *ISE Chronicle*.

For the production: Ghost Light (2011, Oregon Shakespeare Festival, USA).

NO, IT'S NOT *HAMLET*, BUT AS JONATHAN MOSCONE WRITES, "IT WAS NEVER PLANNED THAT THIS play would swim in Shakespearean waters. But like Hamlet, I had a mythic father who, for me, has lived longer as a memory—a ghost, even—than as a corporeal being...He was, as Hamlet says, a man, and I don't think I will ever look upon his like again."

The world premiere of this haunting remembrance of the 1978 assassination of the Mayor of San Francisco, George Moscone, is a searing psychological exploration that's part ghost story, part exorcism and part therapy session. The second production in Oregon Shakespeare Festival's American Revolutions cycle runs in rep with a powerful *Julius Caesar* in the cozy New Theatre and does what repertory in a flexible space does best—creates an entirely new illusion with frightening thematic overtones, mirroring textual imagery and myriad connections between the play on stage, *Ghost Light*, the classic tragedy that serves as partial inspiration, *Hamlet*, and the bloody Bard-play staged the day before—*Julius Caesar*. This is an Oregon Shakespeare experience that New York's Broadway or London's West End can only hope to create for 21st century audiences.

Trying to find an inventive new approach to staging *Hamlet*, San Francisco Bay Area director Jon (Christopher Liam Moore) is struggling, nay obsessing over, how to handle the early appearance of the Ghost of Hamlet's father. Although suffering through years of therapy, Jon remains locked up artistically, personally and romantically (presumably due to issues related to his father's assassination, his inability to grieve, his awkwardness connecting to friends and lovers, and his anger over his father's fading political legacy and the homage that has been paid to the gay liberation movement's attention to the martyred Harvey Milk, the city supervisor who was also murdered that day by the disgruntled politician Dan White).

Leading us through the story are the "Boy," Jon Moscone as a grief-stricken 14-year old teen; the now grown theatre director, Jon; his costume director friend, Louise (who compels him as a theatre director to get a handle on Hamlet); and a "Messenger" (who assists souls transitioning

“from earth to the other side.”) Jon’s paternal grandfather appears as a prison guard/avenging angel; “Loverboy” is Jon’s fantasy boyfriend; Basil is an online, blind date pseudo-stalker; Robert is Basil’s bizarre friend, and there is a host of others including a designer, film director, medieval ghost, Spandex Ghost, Lady in Black, Puppet Ghost and the Ghost of George Moscone. It’s a mini-parade of personal angst, sometimes uncomfortable voyeuristic drama, and historical flights of fancy (including Mayor Moscone’s Tony Bennett like crooning of “*I Left My Heart in San Francisco*” as he fades into the background).

This is a story of at least three ghosts—George Moscone, Harvey Milk and Hamlet’s father. Without giving away the plot, it’s fair to say that some of the best of American drama confronts audience members with agonizing moments where they feel like an out of place peeping Tom who should run screaming from the theatre. Poignant drama also turns the psychiatrist’s scalpel inward and forces audiences to confront their own demons, memories, regrets, and inactions. Writer Tony Taccone and director Jonathan Moscone succeed in merging the personal with the profound and audience members were visibly moved as this is a more inclusive parable about sons and fathers, the loss of one’s parent, the decisions and indecisions that define one’s existence, and the basic gay human rights battles that continue to play out in America’s families, cities, armed forces and political arenas. It’s a story that’s larger than any one life or any one tragedy and, for that reason, has great potential to be told again and again in the world’s theatres.

Christopher Liam Moore shows the sensitive, intuitive side of the director Jon Moscone, who is obviously conflicted and agonizes over his realization that “My father has been languishing for over 30 years as an asterisk in the life of Harvey Milk.” The “Boy” shares in the confusion and is guilelessly played by Tyler James Myers. As “Mister” explains: “Those who have not released the dead are condemned to carry their spirit.” Both young men seem to revere their father’s history of championing gay rights and minority rights: “He’d talk about civil rights and homelessness and the death penalty like other dads might talk about trying to find the right weed killer for the lawn.”

Robynn Rodriguez as Louise offers a welcome dose of warmth and comic relief and keeps the Hamlet-in-production device in focus. The dynamic Loverboy, played by Danforth Comins, offers the audience immediate access to Jon’s tortured subconscious and Bill Geisslinger as the prison guard intensifies the drama. There are confusing moments in the play. The role of the messenger and his writhing relationship with the Young Boy is hard to follow. Derrick Lee Weeden (as the spirit guide charged with harvesting the soul of the Boy’s Father) is a terrific actor, but the dialogue is hard to follow and the “god-mike” device foisted on the messenger character plays oddly in a piece already loaded with ghosts, fantasy characters and flashbacks.

There's also a slow denouement that follows a rousing entrance and exit by a larger than life George Moscone that felt like, and probably should have been, the end of the play.

Todd Rosenthal's scenic design in the New Theatre is jaw-dropping in it's efficient, genius use of space and framing devices that separate and elongate the same theatre that seemed so tiny during Julius Caesar just the day before. Although layered on top of each other, Jon's bedroom and living room ring true while the aura of San Francisco and City Hall loom large over the action. Maya Ciarrocchi's projections and video designs and Christopher Akerlind's lighting design define moods and trigger memories essential to the play, Meg Neville's costume designs are straightforward and earthy and Andre J. Pluess' original music and sound design help complete both the physical and psychological journey through confusing times in both the play's thematic through-line and America's history.

As a writer, Tony Taccone does what he has always done exceptionally well as a director—tells a terrific story, unifies wide-ranging material, and brings the audience into the life of the play. Together with Director Jonathan Moscone, Ghost Light embraces the angst, creates a harmony of hard-hitting imagery, a touch of humor, and recognizable insights into the human condition.

For audiences who remember the tragic murders of George Moscone and Harvey Milk, who still cringe over the Twinkie defense or who recently viewed the 2008 Award-winning film, *Milk*, it's hard to remove the indelible imagery of this horrible moment in time. Still, as Jonathan Moscone explains in his Director's Note: "Whether or not you know who George Moscone was doesn't concern me. If you know loss, have lived with it, or just fear it, then this play, I hope, will be true to you." And so it is.

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