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Seduced by corruption

Camelot Theatre tackles a relevant topic in 'All the King's Men'

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Left to right: Dayvin Turchiano, Roy Rains Jr. and Cat Gould appear in Camelot Theatre's production of 'All the King's Men.' Photo by Steve Sutfin

By **Roberta Kent**

for Revels

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Does power inevitably corrupt? Do the ends justify the means? Does idealistic populism inevitably mask an urge to egocentric demagoguery?

Shakespeare examined these issues in plays such as "Julius Caesar" and "Coriolanus." Today's headlines reflect their relevance now. Playwright Adrian Hall, in adapting Robert Penn Warren's Pulitzer Prize-winning 1946 novel, "All the King's Men," looks at them in the context of America's Depression era. Camelot Theatre Company has chosen the play to kick off its 2012 election year America-themed season.

"All the King's Men" is based on the actual rise and fall of Louisiana governor Huey Long. "Colorful" is an inadequate description of Long. His political agenda was far to the left of President Roosevelt in the 1930s, proposing a radical redistribution of wealth by asset taxes on corporations and rich individuals. Wearing his trademark white linen suit and nicknamed "The Kingfish," Long took the crony and patronage system of his Establishment predecessors and filled it with his own rural supporters. He used his statewide popularity to bully and intimidate opponents. He was despised by the political classes and adored by Louisiana's disenfranchised.

The play is set in Louisiana during the 1920s and the '30s. As it begins, an earnest, small-town lawyer named Willie Stark is making a name for himself fighting cronyism in a backwater rural county. The big city Baton Rouge newspaper is intrigued and sends a bright young reporter, Jack Burden, to dig out the dirt.

Thus begins two compelling character odysseys. We watch as the idealistic Stark, dedicated to building the adequate roads, and providing decent schools, free textbooks, medical care and, yes, dignity to the "hicks" of rural Louisiana that the ruling class had wilfully ignored, takes on that wealthy, self-serving Establishment and becomes seduced himself by absolute power. Paralleling Willie's rise is the education of the engaging Burden, a discontented scion of that power structure, who becomes a political hit man in Stark's employ and ultimately is trapped by its reality.

Camelot Theatre has shown that it is not afraid to tackle big productions or big themes. Director Livia Genise has done a superb job in staging this one. Both the cast and the technical aspects are impressive and impeccably professional.

Stark is played by Roy Rains Jr., Camelot's staff production manager. His Willie deftly moves from diffident idealist to strutting bantam to callous demagogue. Rains has appeared in many Camelot productions, but there is no doubt that he carries this one.

He is well-matched by Dayvin Turchiano's Burden. Turchiano takes Burden from amused observer to

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admiring yes-man to rueful historian with incredible subtlety and skill. Turchiano is a superbly trained and talented actor, and in this production, you can't take your eyes off him.

Cat Gould shines as Sadie Burke, the political operative planted by Stark's opponents who becomes an ally and, ultimately, his mistress. Early on, Burke reveals to Stark that he has been set up as a candidate for governor by the Establishment candidate to split the rural vote. It is the turning point for Stark. Angry and humiliated, he draws on his resentment to galvanize the rural poor who have been politically impotent to vote him into power. As played by Gould, Burke is smart and tough, with a talent for vengeance that more than matches her boss.

Other standouts in the cast are Paul R. Jones as the patrician judge who becomes both Stark and Burden's unwitting nemesis; Casey Faubion as Stark's loyal gun-toting "companion"; Bob Herreid as Tiny Duffy, Stark's despised lieutenant governor; and Peter Wycliffe as the idealistic young doctor who ultimately ends Stark's political journey.

It is a large cast— 17 actors in multiple roles — and there isn't a false note or off-key performance anywhere. Every one of the supporting actors is exceptional.

With each production, Camelot's production staff gets more proficient with the technical capabilities of the new theater. Don Zastoupil's spare set design, once again taking full advantage of Brian O'Connor's innovative video design, and Bart Grady's lighting, evokes the feel of time and place. Barbara Rains' costumes are subtle and evocative. O'Connor's sound effects are unexpected and effective.

"All the King's Men" is a cautionary tale from the past that reverberates in today's headlines. This one is a must-see. It plays at Camelot through Feb. 26. For more information, call 541-535-5250.

Roberta Kent is a freelance writer living in Ashland.

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