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'The Best Man': How low do you stoop to conquer?

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By Bill Varble
for the Mail Tribune

Gore Vidal's "The Best Man," the 1960 political melodrama now in revival at Camelot Theatre, invites us to an encounter on at least three levels.

The level of political commentary that, with some exceptions, still looks relevant. As a dialectical spawn of the conspiracy-happy mind of the protean Vidal. Or simply as a ripping good yarn where the dealing is dirty, the wit is sharp and the stakes are high.

It is the 1960 Philadelphia convention of a major political party that looks very much like the Democrats in a day when conventions could be contentious affairs that actually selected candidates rather than the treacherous infomercials they are now. Idealist William Russell (Don Matthews) and cynical Joseph Cantwell (David Dials) have each come to the convention to win the nomination — but short of the number of delegates needed.

Russell is an urbane, witty, liberal intellectual with a Harvard pedigree, principles and a dark secret. Cantwell is a self-made, hard-driving Southerner of limited intelligence, unlimited ambition and no principles whatsoever. He may have a dark secret of his own.

Both men are courting the endorsement of popular former President Art Hockstader, a beloved old warhorse who sees himself as a realist and whose blessing is seen in both camps as critical. Hockstader is played to stunning effect by 90-something-years-young Grant Shepherd.

All the action takes place in a Philadelphia hotel whose layout seems to be such that characters can somehow enter other guests' rooms through restrooms with multiple doors. Don Zastoupil's eye-candy set teems with period details such as a bar and ice bucket, impressionistic doors out of "The Jetsons" and a black telephone with a rotary dial.

Suspended above the stage is the device that ties everything together, a giant TV set circa-1960.

This appliance occasionally sputters to grainy, black-and-white life to comment on the action through actual programs and campy commercials of the time. Its presence also reminds us that 1960, with Kennedy and Nixon and the first televised presidential debate, marked the ascendancy of TV to a primary position in the political wars.

In contrast to the kind of melodrama that deals in exaggerated actions and fast pacing, "The Best Man" throws its characters into a hothouse atmosphere and lets them simmer. Director Roy Von Rains Jr. turns the heat up through a long first act in which Cantwell tries to blackmail Russell into dropping out.

But a chance to strike back presents itself to Russell. The play's question is simply whether the principled man will descend to the level of the unprincipled man in order to achieve power. Put another way, is it OK to do bad in order to enable yourself to do good?

In turning this question over and over like a pebble in a stream, "The Best Man" frequently goes for laughs. When Cantwell's ethics are questioned, Hockstader, the pragmatic old pol, drawls, "Just because he's a bastard don't mean he wouldn't be a good candidate."

When a key development introduces the possibility of an undistinguished third candidate, Russell says, "Don't underestimate him. Men without faces tend to be elected president."

When a reporter asks Russell whether famed philosopher Bertrand Russell (no relation), whom the candidate quoted at a press event, wasn't fired from a teaching gig, the presidential hopeful allows that he was, but "only for moral turpitude," not incompetence as a philosopher. Is this naivete, or is Russell toying with the rubes, or is Vidal toying with us?

Von Rains gets strong performances from Renee Hewitt as Russell's frustrated but loyal wife, Alice, Presila Quinby as Cantwell's cluelessly vulgar wife, Mable, and Shirley Patton in a funny turn as Mrs. Sue-Ellen Gamadge, a minor kingmaker, arbiter of taste and self-appointed spokeswoman for "the women."

Although Vidal makes some of his most savage points with sardonic glee, it is a chilling commentary that we can no longer see the Adlai Stevenson-like Russell as a credible candidate, while the Richard Nixon-like Cantwell remains frighteningly plausible.

Although the conflict between these two is the play's moral fulcrum, Shepherd, a well-known local actor, dominates the scenes he's in, inhabiting the Hockstader character without in any way slipping into a Harry Truman impression. It is a terrific performance in a meaty role, the best work I've seen from Shepherd.

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The dramatic momentum seemed to founder a bit in the second act. Some of this is attributable to Vidal, who tended to indulge his favorite vice of writing on and on. Some of it may tighten as the production gets its legs.

Camelot is noted for its musicals but has given us three political thrillers in this political year, "All the King's Men," "1776" and now this. All have contemporary resonances, although some of Vidal's plot elements have gone the way of the whistle-stop campaign: the meaningful convention, the importance of an endorsement, the notion that these men's secrets could remain secrets.

But in a political landscape where one of our presidential candidates seems to have largely abandoned ideals that once gave him a certain elan, and another seems willing to remake himself into absolutely any flavor the situation requires, the play's central question still burns. How bad can you be to do good?

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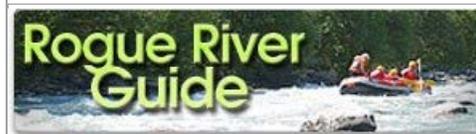
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