

Cultural Daily

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Building What Wall?

Sylvie · Wednesday, March 29th, 2017

“History is a battleground at present between liberals and conservatives. It’s very much a question of who gets to tell the story. The story has become increasingly politicized and the winner gets to determine what history is.”

— Robert Schenkkan, playwright

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This is slightly personal, so do forgive, but I have seen a fair amount of Robert Schenkkan’s work over the years, I also have reviewed it and remember with special awe the Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Kentucky Cycle*. I have interviewed the man and done a Q&A with him about *All the Way*, his Tony Award-winning play about LBJ.

I’m not big on awards, but they lend heft. The laundry list above is not there to score points, but only to explain that *denying* Schenkkan points of any kind does not come easy. It especially does not come easy when his informed political viewpoint is very well taken, as it continues to be in *Building the Wall*, a new play of his that just opened at Hollywood’s Fountain Theatre, in which the playwriting does not entirely live up to the passion that inspired it.

This does not imply that I or anyone else could do better. Nor should we expect of successful playwrights that they bounce from one major achievement to the next without tripping now and then. Artists are not dancing dogs. And this is not exactly a finished product yet. Schenkkan has stated that the idea for *Building the Wall* came to him in “a white hot fury” and that he, a normally careful and precise writer known for taking his time, uncharacteristically wrote this play in a single week. So it stings a little to say that the piece — a fantasy construct of one of the current U.S. president’s worst ideas — does not meet expectations.



Judith Moreland and Bo Foxworth in *Building the Wall* at The Fountain Theatre.

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From a physical standpoint, *Building the Wall* could not be simpler. It takes place in real time on a single set consisting of a table, two chairs and a (two-way?) mirror on the wall — the answer to the prayer of every producer or community theatre in the nation. In this spare prison detention room, in

the future year 2019, a woman is being allowed to interview a tightly held federal prisoner. The play intends to show how easy it is for a people to be led into folly by hubris and an accumulation of unintended errors in one self-aggrandizing leader's pursuit of misguided policy — or how easily a nation can *inadvertently* slip into apocalypse without ever planning to do so. It is a big, ambitious theme that, to a substantial degree, this play fulfills.

So what's my beef?

There are several reasons why it doesn't manage to entirely meet its goal. The first is simply the format of the two-character play that predetermines the roles these actors will play. One person is condemned to be the questioner and the other the responder. We are confronted by Gloria (Judith Moreland), a writer and academic who has been granted an important interview with Rick (Bo Foxworth), a former security guard formerly in charge of running a private prison, who stands accused of having committed a grave political crime. We don't know what that crime might be, nor does Gloria. That's what she's here to try to find out.

Suspenseful? Not yet. It takes time – a little too much time – for these two to stop circling one another like cats before displaying any desire to tackle the issue before them. The long lead-in provides a few tantalizing clues, but we don't get to the heart of the matter until halfway through this 90-minute play.

At that point things are heating up for Rick, while Gloria, who has done her homework and has not been shy about using it, is by now relegated to asking empty-calorie questions designed chiefly to move things along: “What do people do when they're there?,” “Can you give me an example?,” “Why?” and so on. The distinctions between the two of them become more clearly drawn. As does the balance of power.

Moreland's Gloria at the Fountain remains almost inexplicably subdued and, in some instances, too consciously passive, perhaps urged by director Michael Michetti to cede the emotional space to Rick, because the play increasingly belongs to him as it moves forward. Foxworth, who starts out prickly and guarded, grows more and more restive, more and more contorted and disturbed in his effort to be honest in confronting the recent past and the role he played in it — even as he remains unwilling to take on blame.

The core idea here is very intriguing, while the craftsmanship is strained by the chosen format. Moreland certainly can afford to present a stronger, more vocally aggressive and physically motivated Gloria, with no concerns of overtaking Foxworth's Rick. Rick owns the play much as he owns the crime. In a subtle if predictable performance, Foxworth exhibits all the painful manifestations of a man of no particular education or conviction, whether religious, philosophical or political — keys to his failure to act on the strength of *any* principle since he has none. He is trapped by — and in — the rigid and false parameters of unquestioned law and order, a choice that fails him utterly. While Rick's defenses are smartly argued in Schenkkan's dialogue and his final speech is beyond devastating, it comes too late to save him.



Bo Foxworth in *Building the Wall* at The Fountain Theatre.

Building the Wall is part of a National New Play Network called Rolling World Premieres which “supports three or more theatres that choose to mount the same new play within a 12-month period. Within this framework, a playwright develops a new work with multiple creative teams in at least

three different communities. The playwright is part of the process, working on the script and making adjustments based on what is learned from each production.” *Building the Wall* has been so chosen and this Fountain Theatre production is the first of five, the other four being at Denver’s Curious Theatre, the Forum Theatre in Silver Spring, Maryland, Borderlands Theatre in Tucson and Miami’s City Theatre.

So no matter what flaws *Building the Wall* might have at this early juncture, they may very well change thanks to the playwright’s opportunity to work on them in these upcoming stagings. But whether they do or not, *Building the Wall* is virtually assured of plenty of attention because the *frisson* it has generated and the buzz it has stirred up in the world of theatre are very strong already.

That’s in large part because the play comes from the well-earned reputation of Schenkkan’s pen and perhaps, because the chosen topic is not only politically hot, but in light of human history and the demonstrated power of the banality of evil, the crime that it eventually reveals is an abomination only a hair away from plausible.

Top Image: Judith Moreland and Bo Foxworth in Building the Wall by Robert Schenkkan, now in its world premiere at The Fountain Theatre in Los Angeles.

All photos by Ed Krieger.

WHAT: *Building the Wall*

WHERE: The Fountain Theatre, 5060 Fountain Avenue (at Normandie), Los Angeles, CA 90029.

WHEN: Saturdays & Mondays, 8pm; Sundays, 2pm. Ends May 21.

HOW: Saturday & Sunday tickets \$15-\$35, available at www.FountainTheatre.com or by phone at 323.663.1525. **Pay-What-You-Can at every Monday performance.**

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