

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Constitutional Playground

Sylvie · Wednesday, January 22nd, 2020

How appropriate it is to have Heidi Schreck's New York hit, *What the Constitution Means To Me*, play out on the Music Center's Mark Taper stage against the backdrop of the impeachment trial of Donald J. Trump. History has rarely been so present or theatre so prescient. And how about this timing for a refresher course on our nation's constitution? It's not only a welcome reawakening, but also an entertaining one.

Schreck's *Constitution* is as much a game as it is a play. It's seductively playful, leaning more toward the gaming option. By digging comfortably into her own past, Schreck's script delivers her adventures and misadventures as a 15-year-old facing down growing up. When her mother, a debate coach, suggested she could earn money for college by debating the merits of the constitution at American Legion Halls around the country, Schreck took her up on it. It worked, eventually becoming the inspiration for this show.

Schreck wrote and performed this quasi-solo piece on Broadway, becoming the surprised and surprise finalist for the Pulitzer Prize for Drama and earning some prestigious nominations, including for two major Tony Awards. But with Schreck's blessing, the performer who plays Schreck at The Taper is Maria Dizzia. I did not see Schreck do this on Broadway, and on rare — very rare — occasion, Dizzia is tempted to push the impishness of the piece a bit too far, but mostly she's simply delightful as Heidi. And while Schreck claims in her script to be "psychotically polite," Dizzia, in the part, seems at a most enjoyable ease.



Maria Dizzia in *What the Constitution Means To Me* at the Mark Taper Forum.

So this is the story of how one smart teenage cookie monetized her study of our constitution, with an emphasis on amendments 9 and 14, section 1 (it has four sections in case you've forgotten or never knew). Getting from point A to point Z is a surprising amount of fun, even when parts of the Schreck experience are more traumatic than funny. So that her "psychotic" politeness seems to have paid off.

Schreck's real experience was not all hearts and roses. She uses the difficult history of the women in her family to personal advantage, because along the way, we also get a rather merry recounting of the horrifically checkered history of women and their non-rights in this country.

You may be surprised to discover — or rediscover — that abortion was legal in America until the late 19th century, while many other rights for women simply did not exist. Some only came to pass

as recently as the 1960s and 70s. Ratification of the ERA clocked in a mere couple of weeks ago, with a vote in Virginia *still* being subjected to some disagreement as to whether it's legal or not!

Instead of doling out solemn details, however, Schreck manages to amuse us with factual tales of how older white males in our government, willfully blind to the absurd contradictions in their own behaviors, succeed in completely circumventing common sense.

Going back to her German great-grandmother, who was “ordered from a catalogue” by her great-grandfather, Schreck describes how the women in her family were hugely affected by this rights disparity (not to call it affliction, since this show is intended to be entertaining as well as truthful).

Great-grandma's lack of preparation for her descent among a horde of drunken ruffians who beat their wives and children, was a horrific transcultural experience. Marriage to one of them resulted in her being institutionalized and dying of “melancholia” at age 36. It also had its unintended consequences over three subsequent generations of the family's women. But Schreck keeps it light and, yes, “psychotically polite,” as does Dizzia.



Maria Dizzia & Mike Iveson in *What the Constitution Means To Me* at the Mark Taper Forum.

Under the well-paced direction of Oliver Butler, the entire performance takes place in designer Rachel Hauck's re-imagined American Legion Hall of Wenatchee, WA, the town where Schreck grew up. Without the slightest attempt at physical change, Dizzia charmingly announces that she's now going to be Heidi at 15. So there. She's Heidi. She also is being prompted by a slightly flummoxed Legionnaire (Mike Iveson) who's ostensibly been assigned to time her speeches and make sure she follows all the rules. When he later ditches his Legionnaire cap and persona, revealing himself to be, like Dizzia, just impersonating the man, he proves to be a friendly and far more liberated fellow.

If everything so far has been chiefly focused on the painful history of women in the United States, with the injection of those discomfiting personal twists, the final third of the show shapes up as a thoughtful debate between our Heidi and a real-life teenage debater (the impressive Rosdely Ciprian, reprising her Broadway performance on opening night and rotating in the role with Los Angeleno Jocelyn Shek).



Rosdely Ciprian & Maria Dizzia in *What the Constitution Means To Me* at the Mark Taper Forum.

This is the gaming part of the performance, with some easy audience participation to spice things up. The exchanges are lively and sharp, with plenty of animated back-and-forth. And the quirky central discussion as to whether our constitution needs to be overhauled or entirely replaced could not be timelier.

A lot of what we're seeing on our television screens right now has everything to do with this vivid verbal ping-pong. Where it goes nobody knows, but the time spent in the theatre watching this creative riff on history, is eminently worth your time — and your money.

Top image: Maria Dizzia in What the Constitution Means To Me at the Center Theatre Group Mark Taper Forum.

Photos by Joan Marcus

WHAT: *What the Constitution Means To Me*

WHERE: Center Theatre Group/Mark Taper Forum at The Music Center, 135 N. Grand Ave., Los Angeles 90012.

WHEN: Tuesdays-Fridays, 8pm; Saturdays, 2:30 & 8pm; Sundays, 1 & 6:30pm. NO Monday shows. NO public performances on Feb. 11 & 12. Ends Feb. 28.

HOW: Tickets: \$25–\$125 (subject to change), available at (213) 628-2772 or online at CenterTheatreGroup.org, or in person at the CTG Box Office. Groups: (213) 972-7231. Deaf community: Info & charge, visit CenterTheatreGroup.org/ACCESS.

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