

Theater review: 'Speech & Debate' at Rep Stage

By Celia Wren, Wednesday, April 20, 8:04 PM

You might think a play that grapples with serious modern social issues — homophobia, teenage alienation, the limits of online privacy — would have no room for a warbling Abraham Lincoln doing an interpretive dance. But then you might not expect to encounter a piece of theater as ingenious and cannily plotted as Stephen Karam's "Speech & Debate." A suspenseful tale that fuses keen-eyed civic critique with riotous and even campy humor, Karam's work is currently on view in a resonant and marvelously acted Rep Stage production, directed by Eve Muson. If you have never seen the nation's 16th president sing about tolerance while doing disco moves in a stovepipe hat, now is your chance.

"Speech & Debate" focuses on three maladjusted Oregon teenagers who, feeling slighted by the adult world, join forces in an alliance that's part self-defense, part mutual manipulation and part strategic showmanship. When Solomon (Sam Ludwig), an overly serious kid who writes for his school paper, hears rumors about a sex scandal involving a teacher, he resolves to get the scoop. His sleuthing leads him to Howie (Parker Drown), an openly gay 18-year-old who's new to town, and Diwata (Florrie Bagel), a flamboyant would-be actress. Having failed to snag the lead in a school production of "Once Upon a Mattress," Diwata has settled for the extracurricular discipline known as speech and debate, and the two young men, grudgingly, allow her to recruit them into a speech-and-debate club — an activity that, she assures them, will advance all of their interests.

A co-author of "columbinus," a play about a high school shooting that Round House Theatre produced in 2005, Karam is aware that adolescence can be a dangerous business. The three protagonists of "Speech & Debate" know they're living in a social minefield, where peers are judgmental, adults are dictatorial and condescending, and the Internet has opened up a new realm of promise and threat. For the audience, the stoy's menace quotient only adds to the delectable giddiness of the comic scenes, which include numbers from Diwata's wholly unauthorized musical-theatre adaptation of "The Crucible" (a text that, not coincidentally, is itself a portrait of communal pressures and accusations). After she splices the character of a time-traveling Lincoln into her show (don't ask), Howie solemnly tackles the role.

In director Muson's hands, the moments of outrageous humor fuse seamlessly with the gripping naturalistic narrative and the portraits of teenage angst. Her actors are a major asset. Drown (a Helen Hayes Award winner for his role in Keegan Theatre's "Rent") plays up the incongruity of Howie's song-and-dance turn, and the actor is even better in serious scenes, modulating his character's quiet, fragile demeanor with flashes of skepticism and self-assurance. Ludwig is splendidly stubborn, nerdy and haunted as the journalism-obsessed Solomon, and Bagel is a hoot as Diwata, whose habits include improvising sung updates to her video blog when she's tipsy. Karen Novack ably doubles as two adults who are out of touch with the students' reality, while costume designer Melanie Clark bolsters all the characterizations with telling details, such as Diwata's sweat shirt-and-leggings look.

As if to remind us that social reality is all a matter of rhetoric and display, Karam has given each scene a title borrowed from the lexicon of speech-and-debate ("Extemporaneous Commentary," for instance). Lighting and projection designer Dan Covey turns these titles into patterns that splay across the backdrop's rectangular frames, behind set designer James Fouchard's spare evocation of homes and classrooms. The projected words call to mind school presentations, but also cyberspace. References to investigating the world via Google crop up often in "Speech & Debate": For Diwata, Howie and Solomon, the Internet is far more trustworthy than any adult.

Speech & Debate

by Stephen Karam. Directed by Eve Muson; music direction, Aaron Broderick; sound design, Elisheba Ittoop; properties, Lian French; choreography, Renee Brozic Barger. Two hours. Through May 1 in the Studio Theatre of the Horowitz Visual and Performing Arts Center, Howard Community College, 10901 Little Patuxent Pkwy., Columbia. Call 443-518-1500 or visit www.repstage.org.

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