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Tom Jacobs

When the president loses it, it's women to the rescue

Depending upon your political persuasion, the word "farce" describes either the current presidential administration, the previous one, or both. Reassurances by smiling aides that everything is under control can't quite override persistent mental images of aides running around, trying to figure out how to fulfill the commander-in-chief's whims without causing an international incident or an economic meltdown.

Given this daily reality, what better location than the White House for an actual stage farce?

Enter "POTUS," Selina Fillinger's hit comedy, which the UC Santa Barbara Department of Theater and Dance will stage Nov. 14-22 in the Performing Arts Theater. Its disturbingly appropriate setting helps explain why the work has been one of the most produced American plays of the past few years, with hit productions on Broadway and in regional theaters, including the Geffen Playhouse in Los Angeles.

To be clear: It is not a specific satire of Donald Trump, Joe Biden or any president in particular. In a sense, the character of the commander-in-chief — who is never seen — is a stand-in for any powerful man who has gotten in over his head, and must rely on the people who work for him to keep him out of trouble.

In this case, those stressed-out underlings are all women, making “POTUS” a feminist farce. In his New York Times review, Jesse Green called it “an encyclopedia of enabling, a natural field guide to the various poses that women who subcontract their souls get into.”

“The play is NOT about the president,” said director Michael Bernard, a continuing lecturer in the department. “That’s one reason I was attracted to it. The play is about the women — how hard they have to work, and the double and sometimes triple standards by which they are judged.”

That point is made through humor — much of it raunchy. “There is a lot of profanity, a lot of screaming and running around,” Bernard said. “If you watched the television show ‘VEEP,’ it’s filled with beautiful ballets of profanity. This is in that tradition.”

It also adheres to the centuries-old conventions of farce, with slamming doors and physical bits that require pinpoint timing to pull off.

“It’s sort of a ball toss: I do something, and it gets thrown to the next person,” said UCSB senior Vivian Oxley, who plays the president’s harried chief of staff. “Their reaction creates magical moments that you can’t fully see when reading the script. They have to be discovered in real time. It’s been great fun finding and exploring them.”

Importantly, though, those moments have to emerge from the characters and their relationships.

“For the actors, the key is keeping two things in mind,” Bernard explained. “First, they have to convey the urgency the character feels. This is a high-pressure situation, and to the characters, it is all very serious. When people are in a situation where the stakes are crazy high, they often start to behave in crazy ways!

“At the same time, they need to be aware of everything that is happening on stage at all times. You have to open the door at exactly that moment. Otherwise, the joke falls flat — or somebody can get hurt!”

“That’s something Michael is so great about — finding where half a beat can make such a difference,” added Oxley. “You do have to lock things down. But even when you have to deliver a certain line at a specific speed, the delivery of that line is something you are constantly playing around with. The mechanics are the same, but

how you’re doing it can be ever-changing.”

Bernard believes his facility with farce is a major reason he was asked to direct the play (along with the fact he submitted it as a possible production). But he is fully aware of the irony of a man directing an all-female cast in a decidedly feminist work.

“I try to work in a collaborative environment,” he said. “Everyone in the cast and crew is free to offer suggestions. It’s OK to tell me I don’t know what I’m talking about.”

Asked if anyone has said that to him, Bernard paused before answering, “Not in so many words.”

There are breast-feeding jokes, which a male director might not be as adept at picking up on. On the other hand, “My wife had twins, and I was around all the time,” Bernard said. “I don’t know what it means to be a mother, but I do know how to use a breast pump.

“The cast has been sharing life experiences in exciting ways that are enhancing the work,” he added. “The actors are brave and smart. They’ve come up with some of the best moments in the show. It’s just about the most fun I’ve had directing a play.”

The production kicks off a theater season that, appropriately for our times, has a decided political tint: Winter quarter will feature an adaptation of George Orwell’s “Animal Farm,” a once-again-relevant parable about the slippery slope into autocracy. The students’ interest in these works suggests the cliché one often hears about the next generation feeling apathetic and hopeless about politics is, at the least, overstated.

“I’ve read those stories, too,” Bernard said. “But that is not my experience. Our political discussions among the company are lively.

“I have found in my cast, and in my classes, that a great many students are politically aware. Some of them are politically active. There’s definitely a sense of ‘What can I do?’”

Perhaps the first step is remembering how to laugh. To that end, “POTUS” should be a great help.

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About UC Santa Barbara

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