

1-5-1972

Rep stages 'White House Murder' [Review of the
play "The White House Murder Case" at the
Milwaukee Repertory Theater, Milwaukee WI]

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by Curtis L. Carter

What is a president to do when six weeks before an election an experiment in chemical warfare backfires, killing 750 American soldiers in a Brazilian jungle? The situation is complicated by another factor: the president's wife is a militant anti-war demonstrator whose expose of the "situation" would undoubtedly produce a crisis leading to the president and "the party's" demise.

The problem arises in "The White House Murder Case" by Jules Feiffer.

In the play, being staged at the Milwaukee Repertory Theater, the first crisis yields to a second when the president's wife is found slumped in the president's chair with a steel rod bearing a "Make Love Not War" sign implanted in her heart. She has been murdered either by the president or one of his trusted cabinet advisors.

The president treats both situations as national crises. The facts must be concealed in the interest of national security until they are reinterpreted for

the world by the president (Charles Kimbrough) and his co-conspirators: Attorney General Cole (Jeffry Tambor), Professor Sweeney (Jack Swanson), General Pratt (Jim Baker), Postmaster General Styles (William McKerrigan) and Secretary of Defense Parson (Ray Birk).

The play intends to be an indictment of the government's decision making and policy practices. But even though you see it happening on stage and it confirms your skepticism concerning political power games and the like, the message isn't gripping. There are few — surprisingly few — really clever lines, these seldom warranting response above a chuckle.

Program notes state that Feiffer's kind of satire forces "onto an audience a certain unwelcome awareness," using "dialogue aimed at sophisticated minds, usually with the purpose of shaking them into real awareness." Well, if this is what is supposed to happen, it didn't. Strikingly absent was any real basis for a moving theater experience.

Perhaps the greatest deficiency is with the characters in "The White House Murder Case." They are mainly bloodless and flat. It could be argued that the characters are appropriate to the situation, but they do not make very interesting drama. I don't think Feiffer gives the actors much to work with in the way of possibilities for interesting character development.

Furthermore, acting in major roles suffers from failure to find distinctiveness and freshness. Particularly in the eyes of regular repertory audiences.

Charles Kimbrough's characterization of President Hale differs little from others Kimbrough has given us in his

last several plays at the repertory theater.

Much the same holds for William McKereghan's postmaster general role. The roles have changed, but the characterizations we are getting have not. Both might profit from some soul-searching reflection on their approach to character variation.

For those who believe all is well in Washington, there is a message. For those who do not, there is reinforcement.

The play continues through February 6.