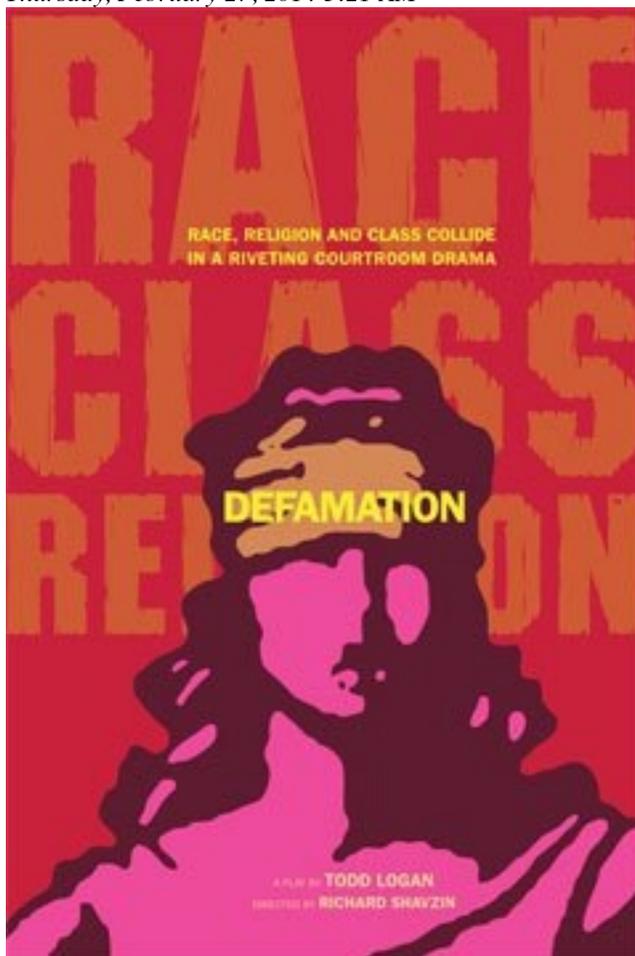


Being Judge And Jury At BIG ARTS

Defamation show guaranteed to keep the conversation going

[By DAN WHICKER](#)

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The BIG ARTS production of *Defamation*, now showing through March 2 at the Herb Strauss Theater, is a courtroom drama that literally pulls the audience right into the action. Written by Todd Logan, *Defamation* follows a realistic lawsuit in which the plaintiff is claiming defamation of character against the defendant. Did the defendant's accusation of a petty theft lead to the destruction of the plaintiff's business? Was racism or religious or social prejudice involved? As a member of the audience, you also become a member of the jury and at the end of the closing arguments you will be asked to render a verdict.

The results will surprise and challenge you. According to director Richard Shavzin, who also plays the defendant Mr. Golden, after performing *Defamation* over 100 times in different cities and before very different audiences, the varied audience verdicts are quite interesting and eye-opening. Shavzin and Logan both state that the audience participation is just as important to the show as the actors' portrayals.

The genius of this production is that Logan wrote it in such a way as to expose the presuppositions and biases of the characters as well as of the audience. In the end, it becomes a brilliant exercise in exploring long-held social opinions of race, gender, class, and religion, and the show is guaranteed to keep you talking for hours or even days after you leave the theater.

Every member of the cast delivers an authentic and believable performance. After the audience is seated, the actors begin appearing on the simple courtroom stage much as would attorneys and their clients, talking quietly, taking notes, and shuffling papers. After a few moments, Malcom Rothman, who plays Judge Adrian Barnes, enters, introducing himself and explaining his courtroom expectations to the audience. Referring to himself as a no-nonsense and "ornery" judge, Rothman grips the audience to a point that one would not dare to allow a cell phone to ring or clear a throat too loudly. He also keeps the attorneys in line, bringing chuckles and a few laughs at just the right moments.

Kimm Beavers, as the defendant's attorney Ms. Allen, is convincing as a sympathetic yet realistic lawyer who, although African-American like the plaintiff, is dedicated to defending her client and exposing stereotypes and reverse discrimination. Likewise, Jonathon Stutzman as the plaintiff's attorney Mr. Lawton delivers an excellent portrayal of a young, go-getter lawyer with a flair for the dramatic.

Gina Taliaferro, who plays Ms. Jordan, is brought in as a witness. Although she is not on stage for the entire performance, the case really hinges on Taliaferro's part as a client of the defendant and a friend of the plaintiff. Taliaferro delivers

her part convincingly as a business-minded woman who is caught between loyalties.

Stacie Doublin as plaintiff Ms. Virginia Wade and Richard Shavzin as defendant Mr. Golden are especially believable in their parts. The minor details that they incorporate into their performances make all the difference, like Doublin's constant, nervous twitching of her foot and Shavzin's average guy demeanor. In fact, the genuineness of all of the performances make it very easy to forget that one is watching a show and not an actual court case.

After both sides close their arguments, the judge approaches the audience and asks for a vote. Those who are undecided get to hear the reasoning of both sides of the vote before a final vote is then taken.

The results of the first round of voting were fascinating, but the final vote was even more so. Aside from the result, it was eye-opening to hear how members of the audience made their decisions.

Following the voting and the final discussion of it, the cast remained on stage and was joined by Todd Logan to answer audience questions about the play. The intimacy of the interaction and the conversation generated are, for Logan and the cast, the most rewarding part of the show. It is obvious that each time Defamation is performed, it exceeds Logan's goals of entertaining people, challenging them, and encouraging conversation about social issues and stereotypes. When you go, be prepared for what Herb Strauss Theater manager Bobby Logue calls a real "entertainment experience."

Defamation is running now through March 2 and also includes one more Sunday twilight show. Visit bigarts.org for dates and ticket information, or call the box office at 239-472-6862.

For more information about BIG ARTS, visit online at bigarts.org or call 239-395-0900.