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Robbins deftly captures grim Orwellian world

REVIEW

1984, The Actor's Gang, Lyric Theatre,
Academy for Performing Arts. Ends tonight

This Michael Gene Sullivan adaptation of George Orwell's classic *1984* is multi-layered, intense and disturbing – exactly how it should be.

Coupled with heavy narrative and direction from Hollywood's Tim Robbins, this production, which finishes tonight, portrays an authoritarian world that is monochromatic, sinister and, at times, frighteningly real.

The drama begins at the point when protagonist Winston Smith (played by Adam Walsh) is jailed and being tortured at the Ministry of Love for keeping a diary – a punishable crime in the fictitious totalitarian world known as Oceania.

Big Brother, Oceania's supreme authority, also learns from the diary of his other "crimes": his love for a woman named Julia (when he should only love Big Brother) and disloyalty to the party.

Most of the play involves recollections of Winston's crimes based on what he wrote in his diary. The important episodes are re-enacted by 1st Party Member (Brian Finney) as Winston, 2nd Party Member (Kaili Hollister) as Julia, 3rd Party Member (y. J. Foster) as Syme, and 4th Party Member (Steven Porter) as Parsons.

It reaches its climax when Winston's "confidante", O'Brien (Keythe Farley), who turns out to be working for the authorities, takes Winston to the feared Room 101, where the prisoner is to be mentally and psychologically coerced into submission (in this case pledging total loyalty to Big Brother) by presenting him with his greatest fear: a cage full of rats.

The way the story was told through various voices – that of Winston and the four party members, with occasional recorded "announcements" from the party – made for a confusing start to the play. But as the show progressed, the multi-voice narrative device worked effectively to tell a tale of love and betrayal.

Robbins' take has no particular political leaning, so it can be read as just a straightforward story about the fears of an authoritarian state.

It is not an easy play to stage, especially when so much of it hinges on words rather than action. But this production successfully captures the grim mood of the Orwellian world, imprisoning the audience within it for two hours.

Kevin Kwong