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THEATER REVIEW

Political Drama, but the Year Is 1980, and the Stage Is Smaller

By [ANITA GATES](#)

One day 28 years ago, when [Ronald Reagan](#) had just been elected president, a Republican man with bad skin met with his handsome new born-again-Christian assistant in a Washington office and vowed, "We're going to change America forever."

Thomas H. Diggs's "Fair and Decent," the mixed bag of a political drama now receiving its world premiere at Luna Stage, is fiction. But there's no reason not to believe characters like these had conversations like these in real life. In the play's version of events, Trip Nichols III (Alan Pagano) decides to abolish the Fairness Doctrine, which required television and radio stations to present opposing sides of public arguments and give each side equal time. (It was in fact repealed by the Federal Communication Commission in 1987.)

Painting a picture of a future when radio will be ruled by evangelical Christian stations and conservative hosts like [Rush Limbaugh](#), Trip knows he doesn't have the look or the all-American family to be the campaign's public face. So he hires young, blond Reed Albright (Michael Ellison), a golden boy with a wife and two children, to front for him.

Sadly, Reed isn't very savvy about things. When he suggests the slogan "Ban the Fairness Doctrine," Trip carefully explains to him that no one will want to ban fairness. Instead, the two men will frame their argument as a fight for freedom of speech, which the doctrine, Trip says, impedes.

Overall, the five-person cast does a fine job, but a play is in trouble when the most original and complex character is the crotchety old man. That man is Trip's father, Gilbert Nichols II (the charming Thom Molyneaux), who is outraged that his neighborhood coffee shop doesn't have Sweet 'n Low, calls a pair of children Dork and Mindy, and criticizes his son's political plans. "You're in bed with business and Jesus?" he asks, horrified.

The sole woman among the characters is Reed's wife, Marybeth, played by Jennifer Dean, who has a wistful but willful [Hope Davis](#) quality (or, if you don't go to indie movies, think of the young [Shirley Knight](#)). Unlike her husband, Marybeth, who has a job and is bringing up two small children (one of them developmentally disabled), is a realist. And she doesn't share Reed's religious fervor. When Reed says, "You know what your problem is? You lack faith," she answers with perfect simplicity: "I lack sleep."

Maybe the fringe characters are more interesting because they aren't stuck with proving what bad guys or good guys they are. Sometimes the dialogue is slightly off the mark, as when Trip forces a pack of cigarettes on Reed, telling him, "I need you to smoke." So he'll seem at home when networking in smoke-filled rooms, one presumes. Later, Reed announces to Trip, "Staying late at the office makes us men."

But just as many lines are sharp or insightful, or both. The play, commissioned by the [Kennedy Center](#) and the National New Play Network, is a promising piece by a playwright with a voice well worth hearing.

And it's possible that some of the stranger dialogue may be intended with a dash of postmodern irony, but Jane Mandel's workmanlike direction seems to push it in the opposite direction. Mr. Ellison's fits of sudden rage aren't always believable either.

The calmest character is Phil Addison (Richard Bowden), the think tank bigwig who has been kept in the dark about the campaign. Maybe he's already beaten down by what he sees ahead for his country. As he says toward the end of Act I, "I dread the next 30 years."

The stage has been divided into three small sections that set off the action as if it were a series of museum dioramas. Sometimes that works; sometimes it doesn't. And Jill Nagle's uninspired lighting design doesn't help.

But heaven knows the subject is worth writing about. Especially now that this year's presidential campaign is heading into the final stretch, and we can't help noticing that it has been less a debate than a shouting match across the political-party divide. And that's not fair to anybody.

"Fair and Decent," by Thomas H. Diggs, is at Luna Stage, 695 Bloomfield Avenue, Montclair, through Nov. 2. Information: (973) 744-3309 or lunastage.org.

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