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## Theater: Harvard's Secret Gay Shame in *Unnatural Acts*

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### UNNATURAL ACTS \*\*\* out of \*\*\*\* CLASSIC STAGE COMPANY

In 1920, when a one-time student of Harvard committed suicide, it sparked a secret investigation and witch hunt to weed out all "inverts" and "homosexualists" from campus, ultimately damaging or destroying dozens of lives. A series of articles in the *Harvard Crimson* about the files of "Secret Court, 1920," sparked national attention in 2002 and ultimately this play by Plastic Theatre. Inspired by the articles, original documents such as the transcripts of the trial, letters written at the time, diaries and other information, *Unnatural Acts* is well-acted, well-directed and often thrilling for the first

act, only faltering in the second when it stops presenting to us what happened and starts telling us how wrong it was. If you make a play about slavery or the subjugation of women in this day and age, you don't really need a speech telling us how wrong it is. And if you do make that speech, you best deliver it in a very original manner.

Presented with CSC's usual care, *Unnatural Acts* moves swiftly in its first act, thanks to the direction of Tony Speciale, who is also credited with conceiving the show, which was written by Members of Plastic Theatre. Here's Speciale talking about the work.

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We quickly meet the circle of friends who congregate in Perkins 28, a room where gay romps take flight or more to the point, where the men feel free to discuss the possibility of gay romps or just be themselves. Edward Say (a nicely fey Jess Burkle) is the clearly gay sort of man who brazens it out by never trying to hide his specialness, to the point of wearing rouge. His stiff but curious roommate Joseph Lombard (played by Will Rogers, who has a great name and an appropriate understated delivery to go with it) both warns Edward about seeming "too much" but is also drawn to the brash boys almost as much as he's silently drawn to unattainable jock Kenneth Day (Roe Hartrampf, convincing in every way as a conflicted object of desire).

Ernest Roberts (an excellent Nick Westrate) is the ringleader who oversees their fun, donning a woman's dress more to make a point of outrageousness than anything else. When the suicide of their friend is presented as a tragic accident, Ernest thinks it's just a bump on the road to graduation (having your father be a powerful Congressman can only reinforce the invincibility assumed by youth). Little do he and the others realize that letters -- incriminating letters -- were found and passed along to the university.

Throughout the show, when the actors are not performing they line the sides of the stage, serving as mute witnesses. They and the audience see Nathaniel Wolff (Joe Curnutte) offer to provide some acting tips to Keith Smerage (Frank De Julio), a transfer student and comely lad. They work on a passage from *Julius Caesar* that works wonderfully. Keith's performance is both subtly fey and not in the proper grand manner. So Nathaniel teaches him how to deliver the passage the way Harvard thespians do (with lots of gesturing and acting out of words that seem silly to our modern eyes) while obliquely trying to get Keith to butch it up without actually saying so. And of course he gets to touch Keith now and then to guide him along, just to help out of course. It's a wonderful section indicative of the play's rich material: we get a glimpse of amateur student dramatics that reminds us of the era we're in and how foreign it is to our time. We also see how even two young men at one of the top universities in the country -- men who should feel confident and flush with knowledge and growing power -- would be afraid to broach the topic of masculinity and how not to appear a nancy boy to others. And we see them slowly dance towards a seduction they both seem to want but are afraid to voice.

Desire quickly turns to fear when a raucous party towards the end of term is followed by the men being called in one by one and asked remarkably blunt questions. When even men who still often speak in code about sex with their closest friends are asked by administrators if they masturbate, you feel the shock of how intrusive and remarkable and frightening such a question would be.

The play is at its best as the men flirt and talk and deal with the painful death of their friend, speaking boldly when no one else is around and putting on a brave face when pressure starts to mount. The trial scenes are especially vivid, with student after student dealing with the pressure of the assault in ways we can always understand and empathize with, even when they're offering up names in a desperate attempt to salvage their lives. And it's very clear their lives will for the most part be ruined.

Max Jenkins is especially good here as Stanley Gilkey, a staunch survivor who cleverly portrays himself as merely researching "the homosexualist" for a career in criminology and ready and willing to offer any assistance he can. Watching Gilkey flounder when he inadvertently mentions a banned text on homosexuals is the only chink in his otherwise unflappable armor. He gets the biggest laughs of the night merely by almost -- almost! -- crossing his legs.

A genuine peak is reached when we see different students grilled simultaneously, each one having to respond to the accusations and confessions of another. This works most effectively when Keith is shown auditioning that speech from Shakespeare where he talks of betrayal while Nathaniel gives him up to the



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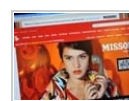


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administration. When Keith breaks down and describes how he has felt seduced by Nathaniel and so many men before that, we get another layer of insight. We understand how a man who has been told all his life how terrible being gay is might indeed see his attraction to other men as a curse where those men relentlessly approach him, how he might just want a friend but finds himself again and again in the company of men who want something more. We know his true nature, but can feel a heartbreak for how someone like Keith can be taught to hate themselves and might then feel victimized by his own desire and blame it on the men who he wants just as much as they want him.

By the end of Act One, I was convinced this had the makings of a truly special night. The problem, in part, was the break. This play's descent into the nightmare of the trials would work better without interruption. Further, we don't really need any speeches telling us how wrong all this is, but we get not one but two. One is delivered melodramatically by Devin Norik as Harold. The other is much more effective, as performed marvelously by Brad Koed as our narrator Eugene Cummings, who spends the entire play slowly coming to life until his final impassioned plea. It, however, is undercut by having the rest of the cast appear onstage during his speech in a series of dramatic, choreographed movements both completely out of character from how the rest of the show is directed and distracting from the genuine fireworks Koed is providing all on his own.

Eugene also features in a scene that must have been irresistible given the facts that presumably support it, but feels from a different play altogether -- there was no real mystery about why the investigation began if you gave it a moment's thought, so revealing that info and tacking on some violence merely drums into us a point that had already been made more eloquently before. Ditto the scenes where we're told the obvious -- that there's no happy ending for these men.

Despite the flaws of the second act, *Unnatural Acts* is a strongly acted play that showcases a lot of talent. Beyond the excellent cast, Walt Spangler's set seems ideal, Andrea Lauer's costumes flattering and convincing, the lighting by Justin Townsend superb at navigating the shadowy tribunals, and the music and sound design by Christian Frederickson evokes the era well. When the real fates of the people involved are delivered at the end, it's a credit to the show's effectiveness how moving those simple facts can be: shattered lives, dashed dreams, and sometimes triumph (however compromised), all sparked by the suicide of someone who had given up hope.

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*Unnatural Acts* \*\*\*

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**Note:** Michael Giltz was provided with free tickets to this show with the understanding that he would be writing a review.

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