

PROGRAM NOTES

FROM THE DIRECTOR

Why 1984? Why now?

I received Michael Gene Sullivan's stage adaptation of 1984 two years ago. I was so excited by his framing of the story — his ability to make the material resonate — that I had suspicions that he, as one of the characters in the play says, "was making this s---t up." I had read the book 20 some odd years ago and, quite frankly, didn't remember some of the passages. I immediately reread 1984 and was floored by its relevance, its insight, its warnings, and unfortunately realized that this book was more vibrant and necessary now than it had ever been.

In 1949, shortly after the initial publication of 1984, George Orwell wrote: "My recent novel is NOT intended as an attack on Socialism or on the British Labour Party (of which I am a supporter) but as a show-up of the perversions to which a centralized economy is liable and which have already been partly realized in Communism and Fascism. I do not believe that the kind of society I describe necessarily will arrive, but I believe (allowing of course for the fact that the book is a satire) that something resembling it could arrive. I believe also that totalitarian ideas have taken root in the minds of intellectuals everywhere, and I have tried to draw these ideas out to their logical consequences."

In the book, Orwell describes three nation states — Eurasia which comprises Europe and the former Soviet Union; East Asia which comprises China, Japan, Mongolia and Tibet; and Oceania which comprises the U.S., United Kingdom, Australia and South Africa.

In the novel of 1984, Orwell writes: "Actually the three philosophies are barely distinguishable, and the social systems which they support are not distinguishable at all. Everywhere there is the same pyramidal structure, the same worship of a semi-divine leader, the same economy existing by and for continuous warfare. It follows that the three superstates not only cannot conquer one another but would gain no advantage by doing so. On the contrary, so long as they remain in conflict they prop one another up."

In the character of the rebel leader, Emanuel Goldstein, Orwell wrote: "The two aims of the party are to conquer the whole surface of the earth and to extinguish once and for all the possibility of independent thought."

This is the aim of each nation state in 1984. But due to the size and power of these three states, an all-out war to conquer another nation state is not possible. Orwell argues that war serves a different function in 1984, and that function is not to attain victory over the other, but to deplete the wealth and resources of one's own society — wealth that could otherwise increase the standard of living. All three nation states operate this way for the benefit of one's own elite minority and, consequently, the specifics of their politics, whether communist, capitalist or socialist, are irrelevant. What Orwell is talking about is totalitarianism of the mind, where free will and free thought are viewed as threats to the overall safety of the state. The citizens of all nation states readily comply with the wishes of the state, however compromising it is to their personal freedom, because of the danger in which they perceive themselves. Big Brother rules through fear and in so doing protects the economic hierarchy of the society. Big Brother provides no vision of the future other than a promise of ultimate victory and perpetual war. People on the upper rungs of government willfully ignore facts and truth in the service of Big Brother, and this willful ignorance is met with compliance in the newspapers and on the telescreens.

We now live in a society that sanctions torture and has set up secret prisons where we keep nameless prisoners from any legal representation. We have a news media that recently functioned as a propaganda arm of the state in the build up to the Iraq War and doesn't seem capable of holding anyone in the government accountable for the deception and outright lies that were told to the American people. If the terms "gulag" and "Pravda" are too close to home, we have only ourselves to blame.

Have we become our enemy? Or, as Molly Ivins said recently, "Why did we bother to defeat the Soviet Union if we were just going to become it?"

—Tim Robbins

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FROM THE PLAYWRIGHT

About 70 years ago, with America in the grip of poverty and starvation, threatened with belligerent militarism from overseas and a growing right/left animosity at home, a new American President stepped up to the mic and told the nation "There is nothing to fear but Fear itself."

Given the situation, being afraid seemed like a reasonable response, but that President knew fear could paralyze a country, and the only ones who benefited from ongoing, blinding fear were those who spread that fear.

And that is still true today. In the new millennium, with a crumbling infrastructure, a startling and growing gap between the rich and everyone else, governmental cronyism, corporate looting and privatization of public wealth, there is a need to distract the citizens from corruption at the top. Our country has been attacked before, but never have we been so blinded by fear. Now we are led to believe we all are under constant threat from terrorists, foreigners, strangers, the different, the guy at the 7/11, the black kid on the corner! Every suicide bombing, Osama Bin Gangsta, Radical abusive nanny Environmentalist is out to get you, so please don't notice that the Nation your parents built is being stolen in front of your eyes, and the rights won with a hundred years of bloodshed are being taken away. Doubt is treason and Fear will distract you, so the message has become "Be afraid — be very afraid."

And at the center of this tornado of fearful despair sits a calm, assured — who?

"Citizens of Oceania! Together we will crush our enemies, and our long road to victory will be over!" But until then do not ask questions — the less you know the better. And in a nation at war, certain rights must be curtailed to preserve Liberty. Oh, and keep shopping.

Or as Big Brother says:

**IGNORANCE IS STRENGTH
FREEDOM IS SLAVERY
WAR IS PEACE.**

—*Michael Gene Sullivan*

FROM THE FOREWARD TO 1984

Prophecy and prediction are not quite the same, and it would ill serve writer and reader alike to confuse them in Orwell's case. There is a game some critics like to play in which one makes lists of what Orwell did and didn't "get right." Looking around us at the present moment in the US, for example, we note the popularity of helicopters as a resource of "law enforcement," familiar to us from countless televised "crime dramas," themselves forms of social control — and for that matter at the ubiquity of television itself. The two-way telescreen bears a close enough resemblance to flat plasma screens linked to "interactive" cable systems, circa 2003. News is whatever the government says it is, surveillance of ordinary citizens has entered the mainstream of police activity, reasonable search and seizure is a joke. And so forth. "Wow, the government has turned into Big Brother, just like Orwell predicted! Something, huh? Orwellian, dude!

Well, yes and no. Specific predictions are only details, after all. What is perhaps more important, indeed necessary, to a working prophet, is to be able to see deeper than most of us into the human soul. Orwell in 1948 understood that despite the Axis defeat, the will to fascism had not gone away, that far from having seen its day it had perhaps not yet even come into its own — the corruption of spirit, the irresistible human addiction to power were already long in place, all well-known aspects of the Third Reich and Stalin's USSR, even the British Labour party — like first drafts of a terrible future. What could prevent the same thing from happening to Britain and the United States? Moral superiority? Good intentions? Clean living?

There is a photograph of Orwell with his adopted son, Richard Horatio Blair, taken around 1946 in Islington. The little boy, who would have been around two at the time, is beaming, with unguarded delight. Orwell is holding him gently with both hands, smiling too, pleased, but not smugly so — it is more complex than that, as if he has discovered something that might be worth even more than anger — his head tilted a bit, his eyes with a careful look that might remind filmgoers of a Robert Duvall character with a backstory in which he has seen more than one perhaps

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would have preferred to. Winston Smith “believed that he had been born in 1944 or 1945 ...” Richard Blair was born May 14, 1944. It is not difficult to guess that Orwell, in 1984, was imagining a future for his son’s generation, a world he was not so much wishing upon them as warning against. He was impatient with predictions of the inevitable, he remained confident in the ability of ordinary people to change anything, if they would. It is the boy’s smile, in any case, that we return to — direct and radiant — proceeding out of an unhesitating faith that the world, at the end of the day, is good and that human decency, like parental love, can always be taken for granted — a faith so honourable that we can almost imagine Orwell, and perhaps even ourselves, for a moment anyway, swearing to do whatever must be done to keep it from ever being betrayed.

—*Thomas Pynchon*

THE WORLD OF 1984

Eurasia comprises the whole of the northern part of the European and Asiatic landmass, from Portugal to the Bering Strait. Oceania comprises the Americas, the Atlantic islands including the British Isles, Australasia and the southern portion of Africa. Eastasia, smaller than the others and with a less definite western frontier, comprises China and the countries to the south of it, the Japanese islands and a large but fluctuating portion of Manchuria, Mongolia and Tibet.

Between the frontiers of the super-states, and not permanently in the possession of any of them, there lies a rough quadrilateral with its corners at Tangier (Morocco), Brazzaville (Congo), Darwin (Australia) and Hong Kong, containing within it about a fifth of the population of the earth. The three powers are constantly struggling for the possession of these thickly-populated regions along with the northern ice-cap.

The inhabitants of these areas, reduced more or less openly to the status of slaves, pass continually from conqueror to conqueror and are expended like so much coal or oil in the race to turn out more armaments, to capture more territory, to control more labour power, to turn out more armaments, to capture more territory, and so on indefinitely.

—*George Orwell, from the novel 1984*

ALLY OR ENEMY?

“At this moment, for example, in 1984 (if it was 1984), Oceania was at war with Eurasia and in alliance with Eastasia. In no public or private utterance was it ever admitted that the three powers had at any time been grouped along different lines. Actually, as Winston well knew, it was only four years since Oceania had been at war with Eastasia and in alliance with Eurasia. But that was merely a piece of furtive knowledge which he happened to possess because his memory was not satisfactorily under control. Officially the change of partners had never happened. Oceania was at war with Eurasia: therefore Oceania had always been at war with Eurasia. The enemy of the moment always represented absolute evil, and it followed that any past or future agreement with him was impossible.”

—*George Orwell, from the novel 1984*

EXAMPLES OF DOUBLETHINK?

A law encroaching on civil liberties is called “the Patriot Act.”

New laws that take away “entitlements” for the poor by pushing them into the labor market are referred to as “reform” and “empowerment” and are said to reflect “tough love.”

Department of War changed to Department of Defense after World War II.

Government agency to disseminate disinformation is called “Office of Strategic Influence.”

Missiles are “Peacekeepers” or “Smart Bombs.”

Innocent civilians killed by errant missiles are “collateral damage.”

Military alliances are “Partnerships for Peace.”

The appeasement of amenable state terrorists (Mobuto, Suharto, apartheid South Africa) is called “constructive engagement.”

1975-78

When Pol Pot killed large numbers of people in Cambodia between 1975 and 1978, official and media attention and indignation were great. When in the same years Indonesia invaded East Timor, killing an even larger

