



PHOTO BY ED KRIEGER

Judith Moreland and Bo Foxworth star in the new play, "Building the Wall," by Tony and Pulitzer Prize winner Robert Schenkkan at the Fountain Theatre in Los Angeles.

# 'Building the Wall' reveals a few construction defects

By Dany Margolies

Unlike other plays that are about a real-life person but speak metaphorically or use a pseudonym, "Building the Wall" refers to Donald Trump by name and by policy.

This 90-minute work, by Robert Schenkkan ("The Kentucky Cycle," "All the Way," "Hacksaw Ridge"), hides behind nothing.

Though Schenkkan is a Pulitzer- and Tony-winning playwright, his premiere of this work is at Hollywood's tiny but mighty Fountain Theatre, which repeatedly attracts world-renowned playwrights. The current collaboration resulted from friendships and fleet-footedness. Schenkkan reportedly wanted the piece on the boards quickly, having written it in one week, and artistic director Stephen Sachs at the Fountain was able to provide the time slot as well as a superb slate of designers.

Here it packs punch after punch. Schenkkan postulates our nation in 2019. Trump's notions of curtailing immigration and deporting immigrants have become fully fledged policies and then grown monstrous.

And as always seems to happen, a hardworking family man, ultimately responsible for horrific deaths in the tens of thousands, was only following orders.

We meet this man, Rick (Bo Foxworth), after he has been tried and convicted and sits in a Texas

## BUILDING THE WALL

★★★

**When:** 8 p.m. Saturdays, 2 p.m. Sundays, 8 p.m. Mondays, through May 21.

**Where:** Fountain Theatre, 5060 Fountain Ave., Los Angeles.

**Tickets:** \$15-\$35 (avoid sitting at house right, where sightlines may be impeded).

**Suitability:** Teens and adults for intense subject matter.

**Length:** 90 minutes.

**Information:** 323-663-1525, [www.fountaintheatre.com](http://www.fountaintheatre.com).

prison, apparently awaiting a death sentence. A history professor, Gloria (Judith Moreland), is prepared to interview him, to hear the story his lawyers didn't let him tell during his trial.

He served his country honorably in the Army, then went into private-prison management, where Trump spotted him and asked him to head detentions that would lead to deportations. The politics and logistics involved are the subjects of Schenkkan's storytelling, as they head down a dark, dangerous and strikingly familiar path.

Gloria tells him they have very limited time for this interview, but somehow the black Gloria gets to talking about her background and her reactions to racial insensitivities. That's the audience's first clue that this work may need a firm-handed rewrite.

Michael Michetti directs.

He maintains suspense yet keeps the interview relatively balanced, even between this academic woman and the Southern, squarely blue-collar man who was squeezed up the ranks.

Under Michetti's helmsmanship, the characters are multidimensional. Moreland is softer and less confident, and Foxworth brighter and more introspective, than they could have been in stereotypical portrayals of their "types."

But Schenkkan took an easy way out, putting an interviewer in an interrogation room for the purpose of prompting the prisoner to tell his story. In the playwright's haste, he gave Gloria such ungainly lines as "What did they say?" and "What did you say?"

Dramaturgically, there is no conflict in this room, made worse because Gloria already knows what Rick is going to admit, so the piece doesn't build to an ending of any dramatic action. Instead, the story Rick tells Gloria comes to a peak, albeit a stunning one. But, playing to theatergoers in Southern California, it's likely preaching to the choir.

At this point, "Building the Wall" is a conversation more than a work of theater. It's a conversation well-worth having, but it could use renovations. Considering Schenkkan's skills, the results would be of far greater earthly use than a thousand-mile wall.

*Dany Margolies is a Los Angeles-based writer.*