

CURRENT REVIEWS

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Fatherland

Fountain Theatre

According to Merriam-Webster, the second definition of the term "swan song" is: "A farewell appearance or final act or pronouncement."

Last month, just as his new play *Fatherland* was set to world premiere at the Fountain Theatre, the continuously groundbreaking facility's artistic director Stephen Sachs announced his retirement from the pioneering 78-seat non-profit space he founded in 1990.

I myself proudly consider myself part of the Fountain family, having appeared there as the Witch of Capri in Tennessee Williams' *The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore* directed by the Fountain's producing director Simon Levy, with Karen Kondazian and yours truly traveling on to play our roles at the annual Tennessee Williams Literary Festival in New Orleans, and in a special encore presentation of the award-winning Hollywood Fringe Festival hit *The Katrina Comedy Fest* by NOLA playwright Rob Florence.

During that time, Sachs has directed dozens of award-winning productions at the Fountain and across the country, authored 18 of his own plays, including the comedy-drama *Bakersfield Mist* that has toured extensively and was presented in London's West End, and among numerous other achievements gave a welcoming theatrical home to Athol Fugard where several of his newest plays were introduced to the world.

And so, *Fatherland* might indeed be Sachs' crowning achievement while helming the Fountain and nothing could be more celebratory. Created as a "verbatim play," meaning every word spoken and all situations presented in the script come from actual court transcripts and testimony, interviews with the real people involved, and public statements, it provides a riveting, unsettling experience that will hopefully (intentionally) haunt us all as we watch the current unconscionable election season unfold in our poor befouled country besieged from within.

Although the two leading pivotal characters are only listed as "Father" and "Son," Sachs' play is indeed written about Guy Reffitt of Wylie, Texas (where else?), the first defendant convicted and jailed for his involvement in the January 6, 2021 attack on the Capitol, and his son Jackson, who made the incredibly brave and heart-wrenching decision to turn his father in to the F.B.I.

As the blustering deluded father in Sachs' scarily cautionary tale, one of our community's scrappiest and most prolific theatrical treasures, Ron Bottitta, is nothing short of magnificent in the incredibly demanding role.

From loving dad slinging burgers in the backyard to rabid conspiracy theorist ready to overthrow the government in a brief 80-minute ride, Bottitta brings an uncanny believability to the challenge, making his character alternately both pitiable and absolutely terrifying. It is a *tour de force* performance that, if I were currently back teaching the craft on a daily basis, I'd insist each and every one of my acting students attend to see a true master craftsman at work.

As his 19-year-old son, the trajectory of the Carbondale, Colorado native and LA newcomer Patrick Keleher's journey from backpacking around 11 African countries, Asia, and Australia to his current incarnation being cast in *Fatherland* is the stuff of which, in a fair world, future legends could possibly begin.

Back in his hometown after reading about the Fountain's search to cast his character, on a whim and with a lot of *chutzpah* Keleher flew to LA, auditioned for Sachs, and the next day while debarking back home from his brief trip, received a text that he'd been cast.

His performance is a gripping, amazingly multi-layered thing of wonder, quite unexpected from someone who hasn't been around this nasty ol' business long enough to have become disillusioned or have had time to doubt himself in any way. Resembling a kinda corn-fed, farm-grown version of a modern-day James Dean, Keleher is the heart of this production as a sensitive kid torn between his love for his father and his family and what he knows is a twisted assault on the very fabric of democracy.

Guy Reffitt began his career as an oil worker and eventual rig manager before the 2016 collapse of the price of oil. Losing his \$200,000-a-year position as an international oil industry consultant, he moved his family back to Texas and, as his savings began to dissipate, his interest in politics concurrently began to move dangerously right as he sucked in Trump's laughably masturbatory *The Art of the Deal*.

To the horror of his son, he linked and quickly fell under the twisted spell of a virulently ultra-conservative Texas militia group called the Three Percenters—naming themselves that because they believed only three percent of A'murkins had the *cajónes* to stand up against what they saw as a police state.

"When tyranny becomes law," Bottitta's father bellows to his horrified son, himself turning in the other direction after the murder of George Floyd, "revolution becomes duty."

This of course leads to him becoming instrumental in calling for 10 million equally deluded souls to join him and his ragtag tribe of racist fake Christians for the infamous storming of the Capitol under the spell of that orange-hued monstrous antihero unable to believe he lost an election and enjoy a brief almost orgasmic high that made him finally "feel like a fucking American." Eventually, of course, his euphoria led to Reffitt's sentence of 87 months in federal prison.

What *Fatherland* perhaps inadvertently exposes is what causes such a person to become radicalized. It's not necessarily a "patriotic" rational calling for justice and change as it is a desperate need to be a part of something, to be right about something, to be better than others in a world that has continually left such people behind and their voice unheard. It's what my partner and I refer to as Little Pee-Pee Syndrome, a far more dangerous version of souping up one's car with oversized wheels and a sound system able to blast all those people who ignore you on that arduous and treacherous road we call life.

Under Sachs' passionate leadership and sharply fluid direction on a nearly bare stage framed by Joel Daavid's exquisitely simple set and Alison Brummer's jarringly effective lighting plot, Bottitta and Keleher are nothing short of mesmerizing as their characters' relationship tragically devolves and their lives are forever changed by the boy's commitment to help spare our democracy from his father and his twisted band of treasonous cohorts.

As the defense and prosecuting attorneys grilling the son in court, characters here utilized as conduits to present the material—again completely gleaned from actual testimony and other statements craftily manipulated by Sachs to become a play—Anna Khaja and Larry Poindexter are sufficiently serviceable in roles which by their very nature are rather thankless.

Kudos are especially in order for Khaja, who must introduce each of the play's new thought by the questions her U.S. Attorney asks the boy. As I try to impart to every actor I coach, dialogue is best memorized by learning lines thought-by-thought but, as with the psychiatrist Dr. Martin Dysart in Peter Shaffer's classic play *Equus*, Khaja must have had to learn her lines in some kind of sequence without the benefit of prompts from the lines themselves; one random question asked out of the proper scripted order and she could singlehandedly wipe out pages of dialogue.

To say that *Fatherland* is arresting and highly polished playmaking is a given but still, as brilliant and perfectly seamless as this production and its performances may be, it is by nature not something that can simply be referred to as an entertainment. It is incredibly disturbing and, as any such project sadly preaching basically to a likeminded choir, I wish there was a way it could be presented to a far wider audience. It might even change the minds of people we as left-coast liberals only began to realize existed and were about to crawl out from below their Morlockian rocks with the rise of that malevolent antichrist Donald J. Trump.

So, I mentioned Merriam-Webster's second definition of the term "swan song" at the beginning. Actually, the first is: "A song of great sweetness sung by a dying swan." This in no way reflects the retirement of Stephen Sachs from the incredible theatrical space that has benefited immeasurably from the many projects he has championed into existence despite what must have been some thorny challenges and ups and downs over the past three decades.

One can only hope that, although Sachs has quite literally left the building, his new life will lead him to develop many, many more amazing artistic statements such as the world premiere of his remarkable *Fatherland*. This "swan song" isn't sung by a swan on his way off to Valhalla by any means; it signals the flight of a great and unstoppably majestic creature with an enormous wingspan ready to travel off into new directions that will surely prove the betterment of everyone and everything in his path.

THROUGH MAY 26: Fountain Theatre, 5060 Fountain Av., LA. 323.663.1525 or fountaintheatre.com