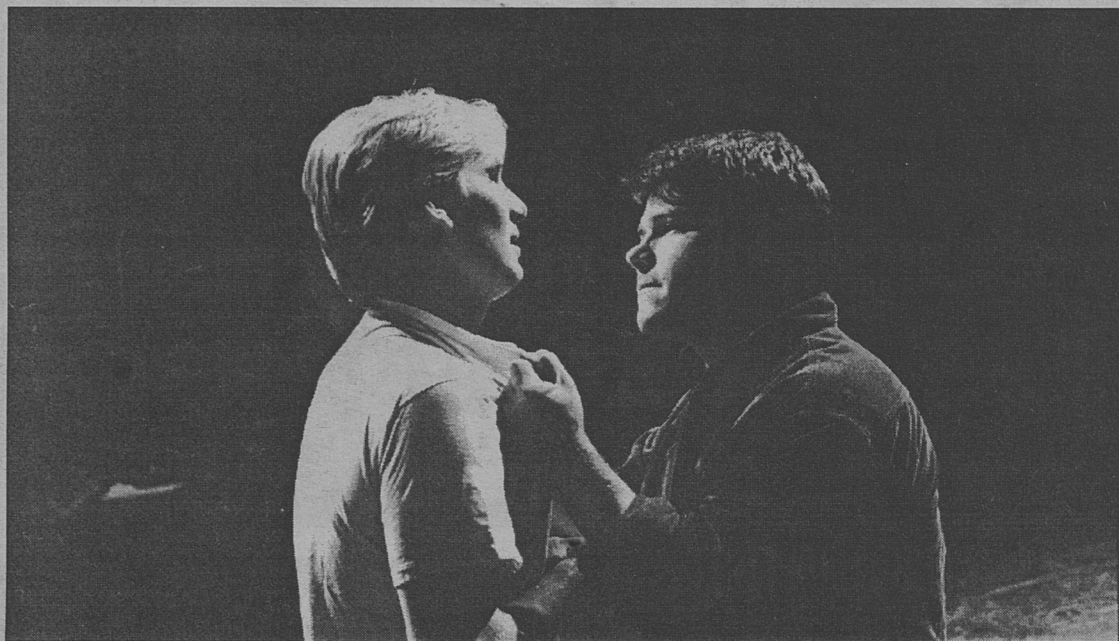


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# Play is a Powerful Execution of History

*Execution of Justice*, a review by Cathy Resmer



Rich Price (left) portrayed Dan White and Sam Elmore was Inspector Frank Falzon in a play about the trial of Harvey Milk's murderer.

On November 27th, 1978, Harvey Milk and San Francisco mayor George Moscone were assassinated. A gay rights activist and member of the San Francisco Board of Supervisors, Milk was the first openly gay person elected to US office.

A week after the 20th anniversary of Harvey Milk's death, I was talking to some students at the University of Vermont. Milk's name came up. "Who's Harvey Milk?" someone said. One of the other students spoke up. "He did something in San Francisco," she said. "He was in the government, and he and his aide were killed."

Talking to Claudio Medeiros, who directed the Middlebury College production of *Execution of Justice*, Emily Mann's play about the trial and the events following the assassination, I realized that ignorance of Milk's story is not uncommon. "I would say most people in the audience — probably 75 percent of them — had never heard of Harvey Milk," says the director and Middlebury College grad. Even the cast, he says, needed a refresher course in recent political history.

"One of the first things we did after reading the script was that everybody watched the documentary *The Times of Harvey Milk*. My cast, regardless of their own personal orientations, was not only incredibly moved, but some of them were, in fact, angry because they had never heard of him. They were asking, 'Why don't we know about this?'"

Medeiros, who got his B.A.

in Theatre from Middlebury in 1990, is pursuing his Ph.D. at the University of California at Berkeley. He was in residence at Middlebury during the fall term. *Execution* was the product of his residency. We spoke over the phone on his last day in Vermont, a week after the end of the play's three-day, four-show run.

Medeiros says he felt it was important to direct a gay-themed work at Middlebury, especially in light of the national climate toward the queer community, and in particular because of recent anti-gay incidents at the college. The production also held personal significance for Medeiros. "I was very isolated when I was a student here," he says, and the production "was a reaction to my own experience at Middlebury."

Medeiros is quick to point out that both he, and Middlebury, have changed since he was a student. "When I came back," he says, "I found a group of 26 students who embraced me, and this message, wholeheartedly. It was such an incredible lesson." The play was also a lesson to its audience. "I had grandmothers of actors come and talk to me about how much they enjoyed it," says the director.

*Execution of Justice*, written in 1982, and first produced in 1984, garnered the HBO New Plays USA Award, and the Bay Area Critics Circle Award, among others. Most of the text emerges directly from the transcripts of the trial of Dan White (the Board of Supervisors member who killed both Milk and Moscone), and from interviews

conducted shortly after the killing. As in most legal dramas, the dialogue tends to be dense and difficult to follow at times.

Medeiros, however, did an excellent job of staging the play; the transitions between scenes were precise and electrifying. The cast was also engaging, and did a remarkable job of portraying the humanity of both the killer and the outraged community that mourned his victims.

I was particularly moved by the riot scene that ensued after the verdict — a sentence of voluntary manslaughter rather than the recommended first-degree murder — was read. Scenes of a burning city played across a video screen behind an angry mob that screamed at the audience, "We want justice!" The intensity of the performance was terrifying; it seemed as if no one was *acting*.

Perhaps the actors drew on outrage they might have felt over the death of Matthew Shepard, or perhaps they were motivated by the anger they might have felt at their own ignorance of these crucial events in our nation's history. Whatever their motivation, it worked.

There were a number of notable performances: Meg Taintor as Gwenn Craig, Rich Price as Dan White, both of the attorneys (Alex Cranmer and Clark Freeman), Peter Makrauer as the D.A., and Steve Waltien as Sister Boom Boom, a very believable and often frightening nun in drag.

I was especially impressed with the way Medeiros and his cast were able to make this play a living, breathing-down-your-

**"Some of them were, in fact, angry because they had never heard of him. They were asking, 'why don't we know about this?'"**



Alex Cranmer (standing) and Clark Freeman played the attorneys in the Middlebury College production.

throat entity. Watching it was a creepy experience. At one point, I was empathizing with Dan White. Minutes later, I was wrapped up in the rage of an angry mob. For the first time in my life, I felt a visceral reaction to the threat of anti-gay violence. It seemed nearer to me than it had before. People who had been names became faces, and "the queer community," which often seems large but faceless, became manifest in the diverse mob of angry people on stage.

Afterwards, I wanted to talk about it with anyone who would listen. "I keep hearing that it generated discussion," says Medeiros. "Students have said that after seeing it they went home and had to talk about it." For a generation that was born too late to remember the man who said, "If a bullet should enter my brain, let that bullet shatter every closet door," this production was a powerful history lesson. ▼