



RFK

The past 30 years have seen a fall in Kennedy stock. The family that once represented heroism and sacrifice tends to be portrayed now as a collection of power- and sex-hungry vulgarians — from Camelot to “came a lot,” as it were. So it’s heartening to see a positive spin in Jack Holmes’ small-scale, touching one-man play *RFK*.

It’s possible that people under 50 won’t instantly know that RFK is JFK’s younger brother, Robert Francis Kennedy. A quick bio: As his brother’s attorney general, RFK famously cracked down on organized crime and enforced civil rights. After John Kennedy’s death, he won a seat in the Senate and became a presidential front-runner himself in 1968, but was assassinated the night he won the California primary.

Historical monodramas are, for me, a tough sell. Almost always, they oversimplify and overpraise. And what is an actor to do when playing someone who is instantly recognizable?

RFK mostly avoids these potential pitfalls. Russ Widdall’s no ringer for Robert Kennedy, but he’s a fine actor who clearly connects with the character. He’s mastered the accent and vocal mannerisms, and looks just enough like Kennedy that it’s not jarring to see him next to actual newsreel footage (one of the many forms of period media employed in a sort of recurring collage by director Ginger Dayle — ideally, this conceit would be more seamlessly executed, but somehow the almost-homemade quality emphasizes the humanity behind the whole enterprise).

Robert Kennedy was a controversial figure, dogged by allegations of high-handed manipulation. But the person we see here is an enormously likeable, deeply principled man who continually worked to prove himself worthy of his family name. (A trope in *RFK* is that the Kennedys overlooked and underestimated this middle child.) It’s fair to say the show is pretty much a love letter to its subject, but what makes it work is that it’s at least as much about the political turmoil he lived through — and fought to change — as it is about the man himself. Vietnam and civil rights are front and center, as they should be.

RFK will be self-recommending to many people, but I hope some younger audiences get there, too. The show — and RFK himself — deserves it.

Through Oct. 21, \$24-\$26, The Adrienne, 2030 Sansom St., 215-563-7500, newcitystage.org.

—David Anthony Fox

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