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Review: 'RFK'



Russ Widdall as Robert F. Kennedy in New City Stage Company's production of "RFK."

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The history play *RFK*, which opened Saturday in Center City, is special in several ways. It has a rare quality for a one-person play because it operates through two acts that feel genuine, not like the usual forced conversation with unearned extremes. *RFK* also puts us easily into another era — and in this production, with time-machine force.

And it's exceptionally performed, by Russ Widdall, the co-artistic director of New City Stage Company, the play's producer. Widdall does not look like Robert F. Kennedy, the man he inhabits for two hours, but he sounds and moves like him — or at least like the

general memory of him, which for an audience is as good as the real thing.

The force of Widdall's performance, though, comes not from the way he carries himself or appears — it's because of the passion he gives Kennedy or maybe, he appropriates from Kennedy. Either way, at RFK you're in for a portrayal that comes across as genuine and straightforward.

RFK is directed by Ginger Dayle, the company's producing artistic director — it's the first time she herself has staged a play. She does a fine job of pacing Widdall and neatly melding the plays intricacies; *RFK*, like many single-character plays, shifts back and forth in times, but does so with grace and electricity. One minute you're watching Kennedy fail at making a good campaign ad, the next he's at home trying to fend off his children — 10 of them, while he was alive. And the next, he's off in South Africa giving a speech.

Jack Holmes, a playwright who's done much research, weaves us solidly into the '60s with realistic talk from President John F. Kennedy's brother, who was his campaign manager and then, attorney general and later, a U.S. senator from New York. At his assassination in 1968 at the age of 42, Bobby Kennedy was a Democratic contender for president.

If are of an age to remember that time, Widdall's performance will resonate with you. If you're not, look and learn. RFK's concerns and interests, and the way Widdall telegraphs them in his portrayal, are a catalogue of the era's issues — everything from the new music (Grace Slick et al) to Vietnam (he split vocally with President Johnson, who supported and enlarged it), to his brother's mistakes and challenges and to his own.

The feel of that time is made complete by Ren Manley's superb video and sound design — she's collected just the right footage and smartly put it together, not just for the show, but for the minutes before it begins and all through its intermission. One point becomes clear: It was the era of Camelot, and it was also a terrible time.

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RFK: Produced by New City Stage Co. through Oct. 21 at the Adrienne Theatre, 2030 Sansom St. Tickets: \$10-\$30. Information: 215-563-7500 or www.newcitystage.org.

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