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Two Tonys and Their 'Tiny' Five-Act Play

As a title, "Tiny Kushner" sounds like a joke, and it is, of sorts, a self-deprecating acknowledgment by the playwright Tony Kushner that he generally writes

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long. His most famous work, "Angels in America," began as a commission for a 90-minute play with three characters and ended up as a two-part extravaganza clocking in at more than seven hours.

But the West Coast premiere of "Tiny Kushner" took place on Wednesday at Berkeley Repertory Theater, where so much of the nation's talked-about dramatic product seems to come from these days, and the double pedigree — playwright and theater — is attention-getting. The new work consists of five one-act playlets that feature both fictional characters and those borrowed from real life — including Dr. Arnold Hutschnecker, who was Richard M. Nixon's psychiatrist. Two plays have therapy sessions in them, actually. Three have dead people as characters. One takes place on the moon.

All five, however, resonate on the subject of America and the moral complexities created for its citizens by its various advantages in the world, a theme that reaches a climax in "Only We Who Guard the Mystery Shall Be Unhappy." Set just before the invasion of Iraq in 2003, and written out of fury at the Bush administration's rush to war, it posits Laura Bush reading to a class of dead Iraqi children. Essentially a monologue (it was published by The Nation), it portrays a first lady wrestling with her conscience and betraying the agony of perpetual self-justification. As Mrs. Bush, Kate Eifrig is truthfully pained enough to make even Democrats cringe in sympathy.

Individually and even collectively, the five entries here are snacks in the Kushner canon. However, that doesn't make them nonnourishing or the evening unsatisfying; Mr. Kushner's fierce liberal conscience (he's Arthur Miller's heir, in that regard), colossally fanciful imagination and virtuosic gift for composing verbal arias are too much in evidence for that.

"Tiny Kushner" continues through Nov. 29 at Berkeley Repertory Theater, 2025 Addison Street, Berkeley, Calif.; (510) 647-2949, berkeleyrep.org.



MELLOPIX.COM

Kate Eifrig, above, as Laura Bush in one act of "Tiny Kushner," written by Tony Kushner, far right, and directed by Tony Taccone, near right.

But the plays were initially written to be read — either on the page or aloud by Mr. Kushner himself — rather than staged. They have been directed with wry precision by Mr. Kushner's longtime collaborator, Tony Taccone, the Berkeley Rep's artistic director; the four actors all handle Mr. Kushner's serious humor with engaging aplomb, but you never lose the sense that it's the playwright who is performing.

The show is a hair self-indulgent; certain of the left-wing conceits are obvious or worn — Nixon is, after all, a pretty well shot-up target — and some of Mr. Kushner's verbal fusillades begin to ring a tad prolix. But the intelligence and wit in the show, a thinking person's comedy, is otherwise so overwhelming that "Tiny Kushner" might well find a wide audience.

Given Berkeley Rep's recent



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history, that wouldn't be a surprise. Like ballplayers, theaters sometimes get hot, rapping out hits with unlikely regularity, and the Rep, 41 this year, is on fire. Since 2006, seven shows that originated or were revised there have moved to New York (and elsewhere), including "Wishful Drinking," Carrie Fisher's solo show now on Broadway, and Sarah Ruhl's "In the Next Room (or the vibrator play)," which began Broadway previews on Thursday. "American Idiot," the adaptation of Green Day's wildly pop-

ular album, is currently filling Berkeley Rep's larger house, the Roda Theater, with sudden teenage converts to musical theater, and it seems inevitably bound for other destinations.

"The stars are in some sort of weird alignment," Mr. Taccone said last week.

Indeed, the recent successes are largely unrelated, the shows having landed at Berkeley Rep by varied means. Ms. Ruhl's play was a commission, but "Wishful Drinking," which was brought to Mr. Taccone's attention by a local producer while Ms. Fisher was working on it in Los Angeles, was initially intended to be a special event. Then a planned show in last year's schedule was canceled, so Mr. Taccone took over the direction of Ms. Fisher's show and dropped it in the slot. It became the top-grossing show in the theater's history.

"American Idiot" arose from a friendship between Mr. Taccone and Michael Mayer, the director of "Spring Awakening"; it was a producer of that show, Tom Hulse, who called Mr. Taccone with the idea of adapting the album by Green Day, whose members live in the East Bay.

Officially, "Tiny Kushner" didn't start at Berkeley — its premiere in April was at the Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis — but Mr. Taccone, who also directed it there, helped Mr. Kushner pare the contents from a menu of a dozen or so plays, and endlessly discussed with him the changes necessary to adapt the material for the stage.

Their partnership began more than 25 years ago, when Mr. Taccone was artistic director of the Eureka Theater in San Francisco, now defunct, and Mr. Kushner, a struggling playwright, was recommended to him by a Stanford professor who had once taught him. The Eureka's dramaturg, Oskar Eustis (now artistic director of the Public Theater in Manhattan), found him in New York, and brought back a script, "A Bright Room Called Day," Mr. Kushner's first produced play. The Eureka commissioned his next work, a play about Roy Cohn and two Mormons. Thus was "Angels in America" born. It was given its world premiere by the Eureka in 1991.

"It's called luck," Mr. Taccone said, asked to explain his theater's current good fortune. "That's the word you're looking for."