

Theater review

# ‘Oslo’ historic — and thrilling

- By Jim Lowe Staff Writer
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Front from left, Israeli Uri Savir (Matthew Cohn) and Palestinian Ahmed Quirie (Tom Mardirosian) square off, while Israelis Ron Pundak (Max Samuels) and Yair Hirschfield (Todd Cerveris) look on helplessly.

Photo by Kata Sasvari

WHITE RIVER JUNCTION – While historical theater can be dry, “Oslo,” J.T. Rogers’ re-creation of the story behind the 1993 Oslo Accords that brought Israel and the Palestinians together for the first time, is less documentary than mystery-thriller. In fact, it won the Tony Award for Best Play, the Drama Desk Award for

Outstanding Play and the 2016-17 New York Drama Critics' Circle award for Best Play — for a sweep of the 2016-2017 awards season.

And testament to Northern Stage's exciting production, currently being presented at the Barrette Center for the Arts, is that, despite knowing the script, Saturday's performance left this reviewer on tenterhooks as events neared their climax.

“Oslo” is based on the little-known story behind the 1993 Accords. An inspired married couple of mid-level Norwegian diplomats decided, against the established protocols, to attempt to broker a peace agreement. Against all odds, Terje Rød-Larsen and Mona Juul were able to convince the Palestinian Liberation Organization and the Israelis to send unofficial representatives to Norway for “back-channel negotiations” under the threat of arrest for the Israelis and death for the Palestinians.

The Norwegians, who had to deal with their own country's disapproval at risk of their careers, counted on the desperation of both parties. Through a series of tense meetings, unexpected friendships and a lot of laughs, these brave folks pushed forward to a nearly circumvented “photo finish.”

Rogers' substantial play sticks largely to the facts, and the invented dialogue rings true. More importantly it delivers the humanity of those who made it happen. The length of the play, nearly three hours with intermission, was certainly mitigated Saturday at the Barrette Center, with its riveting storytelling.

In the Northern Stage production, David Mason was most earnest as the dreamer Terje, while his understanding wife Mona, equally responsible for the talks' success, was given a rich and deep portrayal by Susan Haefner. Tom Mardirosian gave particular dimension to the Palestinian Ahmed Qurie, as did Louis Sallan to Hassan Asfour.

Most of the Israelis were effective and convincing as well. Paul West was the appropriately fearful diplomat Yossi Beilin, who needed to risk his career to make it happen. And Todd Cerveris delivered Yair Hirschfield, merely a history professor, as a real character. Matthew Cohn and Dominic Comperatore also delivered the strong personalities of Uri Savir and Joel Singer. Already a large cast at 16 actors, many roles were doubled, largely successfully.

Directed by Peter Hackett, the action was taut, and yet it breathed to allow for its kaleidoscope of emotions. Rebecca Surratt's broad, elegant stage made the nearly constant comings and goings feel seamless, and Alek Deva's projections within the staging illustrated the historical context.

Imaginative lighting by Jennifer Reiser and Hunter Kaczorowski's seemingly authentic costumes rounded out the picture.

Northern Stage's substantial "Oslo" was not only exciting storytelling, it illuminated an important moment in history.

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