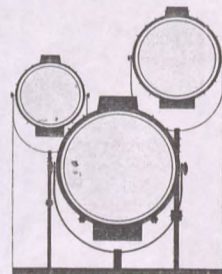


Stages

WINTER 1991 ▼ VOLUME II, NUMBER 2

OTTERBEIN COLLEGE DEPARTMENT OF THEATRE & DANCE



“Good” is Evil at its Best

This Nazi's immoral path is paved with good intentions

While *Good* can be described as one man's story, it is also the story of every person's struggle with moral decisions. *Good*, being performed Jan. 30-31 and Feb. 1-3 and 5-10 at Otterbein, follows the life of John Halder, a seemingly decent, liberal-minded German literature professor who is pulled into the Nazi party and learns to rationalize his actions to the point of accepting mass murder.

While set in Nazi Germany, Director Dennis Romer says the play is not about that time in history.

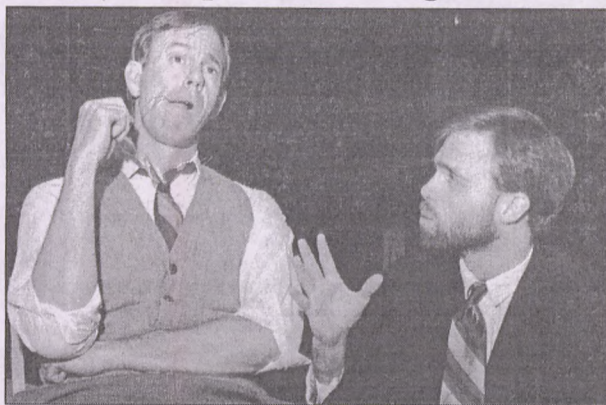
“The play is a warning against compromise,” he describes. “That’s the way I’m going to try to portray it. The author used Nazism as a metaphor for what can happen when a person is seduced into a philosophy and ideology and when he doesn’t use his own principles to make choices.”

Good is a powerful examination of how well-intentioned people reach a compromise with evil to make their own lives easier.

In November Romer went to New York to spend time at the Lincoln Center Library researching former productions of *Good*. Romer comments that he has been aware of this play for years.

“I pushed hard for this play,” he says. “Ed Vaughan and I talked about it for summer theatre for years. Now it seemed like this was the right slot at the right time.”

Romer maintains in the past, Halder has been portrayed as a distant figure and he wants to make that character more “available” to the audience.



Guest artist David Combs (left) finds himself the midst of a moral dilemma in OCT's production of *Good*. Jess Hanks plays his confidante.

“It’s a very human play,” he insists. “Halder could be anyone. He’s faced with a moral test probably most of us would not want to take. The major aspect of the play is the human dilemma. It’s about perceptions versus reality. I want to place heavy emphasis on the relationships that lead to this kind of situation where a person is unable to deal with reality.”

In this play music is used as a device to move the action along. Halder explains that music has been a part of every major event of his life and a three-piece band on stage will provide music that triggers Halder’s memories.

According to Romer, the music exists only in Halder’s mind and is a way to represent his escape from reality. The music runs the gamut

from Beethoven and Bach to a dance hall band.

“It is a potpourri of what is going on in his mind,” Romer says.

The band in the Otterbein production will be directed by the Music Department’s Associate Professor Michael Haberkorn. Romer has worked with Haberkorn on past productions and feels fortunate to have him involved in *Good*.

Comedy is a part of the play too. Romer points out the play does contain a great deal of comedy although at first glance, *Good* doesn’t seem like a subject that lends itself to humor.

Guest actor David Combs will take on the lead role of John Halder at Otterbein. Combs’ career has in-

cluded appearance in the film *The Accidental Tourist* and the Broadway play *Equus* as well as numerous performances in television and off-Broadway shows.

For Romer, choosing Combs for the role was a case of finding the right person at the right time. He says the description of Halder is a man in his early 40s with an Aryan appearance who shows his vulnerabilities.

“Combs has all those qualities,” Romer claims. “He is a strong actor and the right age. When I read the script, he was the actor that came to mind. And I think he’ll be very good in working with the students. Usually, we don’t have a guest for this large a role. But in this case it was a perfect match and there are enough other meaty roles for the company.”

In addition to Combs, there will be six men and four women who will take on the roles of 14 different characters. Most of the actors will remain on stage throughout the play and the stage itself will be bare for the most part. Romer says his aim is to “just tell the story.”

This play was the last written by British playwright C.P. Taylor before his death in 1981 at the age of 53. He wrote more than 70 plays during his 22-year play writing career and *Good* is considered by many to be his masterwork.

Note: Good is a sophisticated work intended for mature audiences only.

FEB- 1-91

'Good' fails to surmount own barricades

By Michael Grossberg

Dispatch Theater Critic

"Good is good indeed." That is what I had hoped to say about Otterbein College Theatre's latest worthy project, which continues through Feb. 10.

But C.P. Taylor's icy portrait of evil, quite frankly, left me cold.

To some extent, that was inevitable. No one should expect heartwarming entertainment from a historical drama about those whose cowardly complicity made possible the Nazi rise to power. Yet, *Good* defies its audience by going to the opposite extreme. Sobering and disquieting drama? Of course. Evil is sobering. But onstage, evil should never be boring.

Or mystifying. The best historical dramas transcend their era by reaching out to our common humanity. The connections make us care — and comprehend. *Good* pushes us away.

Taylor's script is fragmentary; his dialogue, often ponderous. Worst of all, *Good*'s infrequent emotional confrontations seem forced. Such barriers prevent us from developing any real sympathy for John Halder, a well-meaning German professor whose neurotic passivity enmeshes him in the horrors of Adolf Hitler's National Socialism.

Any brute can burn books. But it takes an intellectual of Halder's academic credentials to

AT A GLANCE

Good, Otterbein College Theatre's student production of British playwright C.P. Taylor's Nazi drama. Directed by Dennis Romer.

The Cast:

John Halder..... David Combs
Maurice Jess Hanks
Major (Freddie)..... Benjamin Hodges

Icy, fragmentary, self-conscious portrait of complicity with evil

Performances are at 8 tonight and Saturday, 2 and 8 p.m. Sunday, and Feb. 5-10 in the Campus Center Theatre, 100 W. Home St., Westerville.

Tickets, \$7.75 to \$8.75. Call 898-1109.

cloak such barbarity with high-minded rationalizations. When Halder joins the Nazi Party, it's easy to believe that he doesn't foresee the awful consequences. But his later willful obliviousness, at the Nazi threat to his Jewish friend, tests the limits of credibility.

Jess Hanks' impassioned Maurice is more sympathetic — perhaps *Good*'s only truly likable character. At the conclusion of Wednesday's opening performance, the audience gave Hanks an

extra burst of applause, as if to express its gratitude at finding someone — anyone! — to relate to onstage.

Guest artist David Combs makes Halder a faceless, spineless Everyman. His motivations are obscure, if not opaque. Men like Halder really did betray themselves and those around them to the Nazis, but Combs' nervous, stuttering performance doesn't show us why.

Part of the problem is that Taylor's Brechtian approach, reinforced by director Dennis Romer's self-conscious staging, distances us from the characters needlessly.

In theory, the concept must have seemed workable: Imagine the Campus Center Theatre's almost-bare stage as Halder's flashback-wracked mind, haunted by ghosts. Even when they are not re-enacting Halder's tortured memories, the nine-member supporting ensemble remains in the background, on chairs against a blood-red wall.

In practice, such theatricality (including an onstage band) draws attention to itself at a heavy cost: the audience's inability to suspend its disbelief long enough to feel anything for these doomed souls.

Good's depressing cautionary tale about one man's descent into hell remains a daring choice for a student production. But Otterbein's production ranks as a major disappointment. *Good* intentions go only so far.

JAN-29-91

'Good' shows how quickly things can turn bad

389
By Michael Grossberg
Dispatch Theater Critic

Evil can be seductive. Its power isn't always obvious. Its image needn't be sinister. Often, evil wears camouflage: grand appeals to nationalism, idealism and self-sacrifice.

Consider the plight of John Halder, the "good" professor in *Good*. Otterbein College's production of C.P. Taylor's historical drama opens Wednesday.

Halder, played by guest artist David Combs, is a liberal-minded literature professor asked to advise a recently elected government.

Innocent enough. But consider that the place and time is Germany in the early 1930s. And the group that has just assumed power is Adolf Hitler's National Socialist Party.

"People think evil is like the devil, something that you can see right away and put a label on," Combs said. "But evil is never exactly what you think. It can be a very slow kind of seduction."

In Halder's case, that seduction starts when his book on euthanasia attracts Hitler's attention.

At his father-in-law's suggestion, Halder joins the Nazi Party in the belief that he can work for reform — for "good" — from within.

Or that, at least, is what he tells himself. For joining the Nazis also benefits Halder by preserving his status and academic position.

"Halder wanted the things in life that people consider success: respect, money, the house, the love of a good woman," Combs said. "The Nazis were the ones that gave it to him."

But Halder pays a steep price. Or more accurately, others pay the price.

"He thinks that when Hitler said, 'I will never ask you to do something that goes against your conscience,' he meant it," Combs said. "He doesn't expect to obey orders leading to the Holocaust."

First, Halder condones book-burning incidents at his university. Later, his moral inertia allows his best friend, a Jew, to be killed. From there, it's only a few more rationalizations to complicity in mass murder.

Not a handsome sight, despite Halder's "blond, tall, Aryan" looks. Nor, to say the least, an admirable character. For Combs, though, that's precisely what makes Halder such a challenge onstage.



David Combs, left, Jess Hanks

Ken Chamberlain/Dispatch

"It's kind of an Everyman role," Combs said. "They (the audience) have to like me and identify with me. But you can't be totally sympathetic to a man who ends up as Eichmann's righthand man at Auschwitz."

To keep in character, Combs tries to avoid thinking of Halder as a Nazi. From their own point of view, Nazis such as Halder weren't evil.

"Halder does not give up his conscience all at once, but piece by piece."

Adding to the challenge is the performance's duration. Combs must remain onstage throughout both acts.

With intermission, *Good* is close to three hours long.

During that time, Combs' character ages 13 years, from the Nazi Party's electoral victory that brought it to power in 1933 to Hitler's last stand in 1945.

On Broadway, Combs played Nugget in *Equus*. Off-Broadway, he starred as Dracula in *The Passion of Dracula* and played eight parts in *No End of Blame* at the Manhattan Theatre Club. He also toured with *The Lion in Winter* and appeared in *The Accidental Tourist*.

Unlike most Otterbein guest artists, Combs did not attend the college. But his friendship with director Dennis Romer, an Otterbein graduate and theater instructor, explains Combs' willingness to leave Los Angeles for a student production. Combs and Romer attended graduate school together at Detroit's Wayne State University in the 1970s.

"I am tremendously impressed by the talent of the kids I'm working with here," said Combs. Since graduate school, his only other college performance was at his own school, the University of Nevada at Reno.

"I've worked with some professionals who are not as talented as these people."

Good should test the entire cast's mettle. More than most of Taylor's 70-plus plays, *Good* reflects the Scottish dramatist's concern for political ideas and commitment to honesty without undercutting its story with polemics.

After Taylor's next-to-last play premiered at the Royal Shakespeare Company in 1981, it proved to be such a popular and critical hit that *Good* transferred the following year to a commercial West End run.

Today, *Good* is widely considered Taylor's best play.

"They say subjective terms like 'good' and 'bad' don't mean anything," Combs said. "They say that you should do what you're supposed to do, what is right for your country or your leader, without questioning."

"With the world situation today, I think it's important that people see this play — because the same thing can happen anywhere, at any time."

Otterbein College will present *Good* at 7:30 p.m. Wednesday; 8 p.m. Thursday through Saturday; 2 and 8 p.m. Sunday; and Feb. 5-10 in the Campus Center Theatre, 100 W. Home St. in Westerville. Tickets are \$7.75 to \$8.75. Call 898-1109.

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

A 'Good' play about war

I talked to Dennis Rohmer the day the missiles began to fall in Israel.

"We're concerned about what's happening in the world," said the director of "Good" at Otterbein College. "And I'll ask the cast tonight if they want to go through rehearsals or not, under the circumstances."

The main character of the play "Good," John Halder, is a college professor in Germany who wrote



After
Five
**JOHN
HEGENBERGER**

then it goes on to show the horrific effects — suffering terminal brain damage from the fall. This shifting of emotions is what life's all about, and the play thus seems very real, instead of artificial.

"It's a very human play. There's a lot the audience can grab onto. We can see this man having to make choices, and we'll wonder 'What would I have done?'" says Rohmer. "Students are excited by it, because they are left to their own thoughts. There's a lot of comedy in it and everyone should have a different response to the work depending on their background."

Last year, Rohmer directed "Evita." He likes to tackle "issue" plays with larger-than-life characters making major decisions. "What's unique about this production," he says, "is that the on-stage band is used as Halder's escape from reality. Whenever he can't deal with reality, he goes to his music; this is his fantasy. Ah but in the end... he can no longer escape."

The college welcomes guest actor David Combs as he takes the leading role in "Good." Combs' career has included appearances in the film "The Accidental Tourist" and the Broadway play "Equus."

"I read this play three years ago and immediately wanted to act in it," states Rohmer. "Then I got over that, realizing that it's one of the greatest roles I'd ever read, and I'm really not right for it. It's different from what we usually trot over to the theatre and see; it challenges you without alienating you."

"C.P. Taylor is a British playwright who wrote 70 plays in his 22-year play-writing career and never compromised," explains the director. "The war is affecting the rehearsal process, making it deeper. The cast wants to encounter the work, rather than run from it. It's a conscious-raising experience."

"Good" plays Jan. 30 and 31, Feb. 1-3 and 5-10. The opening night performance is 7:30 p.m. and Sunday matinees are at 2 p.m. All other performances begin at 8 p.m. See "Good" in the Campus Center Theatre on the Otterbein Campus. Call 898-1109 for ticket prices. ♦



Katy Bowers, Colby Anne Paul and David Combs (l to r) perform a scene from 'Good,' which runs through Feb. 10 at Otterbein.

a novel about euthanasia. He's a good man, but he's seduced by money and prestige and sells himself out and become a member of the Nazi party. Finally, standing in an SS uniform at Auschwitz, Halder becomes the symbol of man's ability to slide down the path to evil.

"I don't think it's an anti-war play," says Rohmer. "It's a story that deals with issues of personal choice and how we can rationalize what we do. The main character should represent every man who faces a moral dilemma that none of us wants to face. C.P. Taylor has written a play using the Nazi party as a metaphor of how people can sell out and get to a point where they can't turn back."

Why go to the theater to see a play that deals with war, racism and death?

Because it's funny. How can it be funny, you ask? Because it's black comedy.

What's most fascinating about black comedy is that it's funny in an odd sort of way, and then with very little change it's chillingly frightening. Black comedy focuses on the weaknesses within us all and shows our pathetic side — slipping on a banana peel — and

OSU, Otterbein do war dramas

By Karen Simonian

By some uncanny coincidence, the theater departments at OSU and Otterbein both are staging plays with war themes. And though the action in both plays takes place 50 years ago, they hit close to home today.

The OSU Department of Theatre is presenting the American premiere of *Tomorrow Was War*, a play by Soviet author Boris Vasilyev about idealistic high school-age students in Stalinist Russia just before World War II.

It was selected last year, according to director Jeff Stephens. "We didn't choose it because we thought we'd be at war with Iraq. But it's been really strange working on it. During one of the rehearsals with the students, they heard on the radio that we'd declared war. And the play is about students and what war does to them."

The conflict, Stephens explained, revolves around a student who reads aloud works that have been labeled decadent by the ruling party. "She reads this poetry at a party. She knew there would be problems, but she does it anyway," Stephens said.

War is imminent in *Tomorrow*, but the play doesn't dramatize the war or focus on the politics of it. "The play doesn't dwell on the political aspects of Soviet policy," he said. "It's more emotional and visceral. It's more about youth than Soviet policy."

"Their [the students'] futures were all cut short by the war. They couldn't act on the hope that was instilled in them."

Stephens said this play is more accessible to American audiences than many other Soviet plays. "A lot of Soviet plays are very, very philosophical and highbrow. They're often grounded in a Soviet world view." *Tomorrow Was War*, he said, reflects the openness in the country that enables Soviet authors to examine previously ignored or undiscussed issues.

Tomorrow Was War is presented through Feb. 9 at Mount Hall, 1050 Carmack Rd., on OSU's West Campus. Curtain times are 8 p.m. with a Saturday matinee at 2 p.m. Tickets are \$5; call 292-2295.

Otterbein College Theatre is presenting *Good*, a play set during World War II. Written by British playwright C.P. Taylor, *Good* is an attempt to understand how the Germans were swept along by Hitler. The play centers around a German literature professor who is drawn into the Nazi party.

Director Dennis Romer wanted to do the play for a couple of years because, he said, "I thought it had something important to say to human beings."

When the play was chosen last year, German reunification was under way. It was timely then, as it is now.

"It's a work of the imagination, but it's placed in time in 1933 Germany," Romer said. Connections can be made, he said, to the current war with the recent references to Hitler

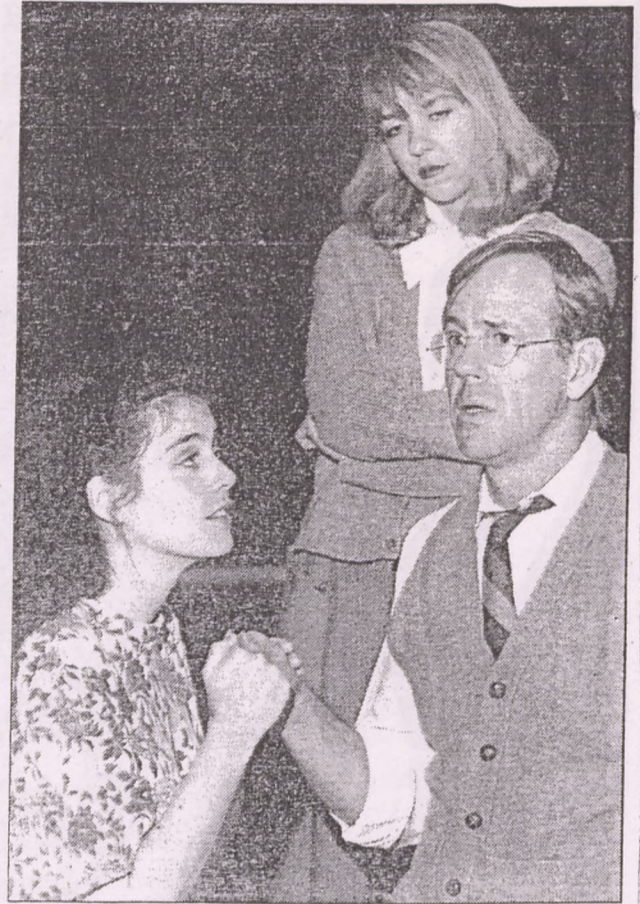
and the domination of a race of people. "Some people make that association; others don't," he said.

"To me, it's a warning against compromise. It's about a man's struggle to find reality—to find the difference between reality and fantasy. It's about what happens to us when we make choices that aren't our own moral decisions—out of security, out of fear."

Romer said the play makes people think about themselves. "It gets you to look in your own back yard and think, 'It could've happened to me. It *could* happen to me.'"

Playing the lead in *Good* is guest actor David Combs, who has appeared in the movie *The Accidental Tourist*, the Broadway play *Equus* and many television and off-Broadway shows. Combs and Romer worked together while in graduate school.

Good will be presented through Feb. 10, with showtimes at 8



Katy Bowers, Colby Paul and David Combs star in Otterbein College Theatre's production of *Good*.

p.m. Thursday, Friday and Saturday and a Sunday matinee at 2 p.m. Performances are held in the Campus Center Theatre, 100 W. Home St. at Otterbein. Tickets are \$7.75; call 898-1109.