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Review: 1940s Comedy 'Born Yesterday' proves timely at Center Rep

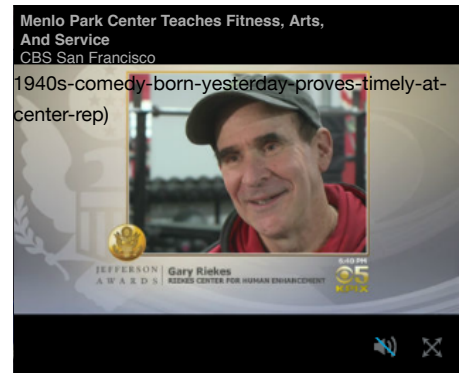
By Sam Hurwitt | Correspondent

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Center Repertory Company's latest show, "Born Yesterday," is a classic comedy from 1946, well loved for the kookiness of its main character. It's probably best known for the 1950 movie based on the play, which won Judy Holliday an Oscar for the role she'd originated on Broadway. (There was also a 1993 remake starring Melanie Griffith, but the less said about that the better.)

But Garson Kanin's play is more than just a popular chestnut. It's also a biting commentary on the corrupting influence of money on politics that feels all too relevant today, in an election year where that very subject has been hotly discussed.



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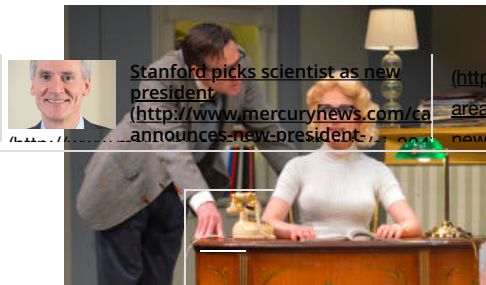
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KEVIN BERNE/CENTER REPERTORY COMPANY A journalist (played by Jason Kuykendall, left) tries to teach a former showgirl (Sharon Rietkerk) how to behave in polite Washington, D.C., society in the political comedy "Born Yesterday," playing at Walnut Creek's Leshner Center through Feb. 27. (crc)

In "Born Yesterday," a very rich, very powerful and very crooked junkyard magnate named Harry Linden (played by Jason Kuykendall) cancels calls with his cabinet to Washington and pushes through Congress by any means necessary. Embarrassed by his ex-showgirl girlfriend's ignorance and lack of social graces (not that he has any himself), he hires a local journalist to educate her. Of course, he soon finds that her wising up may not be a very good thing for him after all.

Much of the humor of the play comes from not only how appallingly uneducated Billie Dawn is, but how defiantly she owns it. If there's a hero to be found here, it's not the moralizing reporter Paul Verrall, who takes it upon himself to teach her, although actor Jason Kuykendall's portrayal makes Paul's calm, confident intelligence very appealing. It's the formidable, defiant Billie who owns this show, and Sharon Rietkerk makes a stupendous Billie Dawn, with a squawking voice, blasé coarseness and sharp comedic delivery.

Of course, part of the point is that the bullying big shot Brock isn't any less ignorant and is much more boorish than Billie is. Will Springhorn brings an explosive belligerence to Harry, a need to always feel on top by putting everybody else down, that makes the pair's scenes together crackle with an electricity.

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Harry is surrounded by yes-men: his all-purpose henchman (an endearingly eager-to-please Colin Thomson), his corrupt lawyer who drinks to forget any ethics he may once have had (Jackson Davis, amusingly wobbly) and the senator he's bribed into subservience (a stoic Jesse Caldwell). But, as Billie wisely observes, why should guys like Harry get to call all the shots? "Who ever voted for him?"

Deftly directed by Timothy Near, Center Rep's production brings out all the humor beautifully but also makes you feel the emotion of Harry and Billie's souring relationship, as well as the simmering sparks between her and Paul. The staging is full of marvelous details, sometimes just as simple as the expression on somebody's face in the background. Monica Cappuccini has a wonderful bit as the senator's politely disapproving wife, silently getting good and drunk to withstand Harry and Billie's loutishness.

The setting itself speaks volumes: Erik Flatmo's elegant set is a palatial hotel suite with two-story-tall windows with a direct view of the Capitol building, so close up it looks like it's right across the street. It's an omnipresent visual reminder of that this sprightly comedy is ultimately and always very much about dirty money getting way too close to the workings of government, and the complicity of those who just sit by and do nothing to stop it.

Contact Sam Hurwitt at shurwitt@gmail.com (<mailto:shurwitt@gmail.com>), and follow him at [Twitter.com/shurwitt](https://twitter.com/shurwitt) ([http://Twitter.com/shurwitt](https://twitter.com/shurwitt)).

'BORN YESTERDAY'

By Garson Kanin, presented by Center Repertory Company

Through: Feb. 27Where: Leshner Center for the Arts, 1601 Civic Drive, Walnut Creek

Running time: 2 hours and 20 minutes, one intermission

Tickets: \$33-\$53; 925-943-7469, www.centerrep.org (<http://www.centerrep.org>)

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