

LINE IN THE SAND

By Chris Hanna

Virginia Stage Company

Wells Theatre

Feb. 24 - Mar. 15, 2009

For tickets: (757) 671 8100 or (757) 627 1234

Hello, I'm Edgar Loessin with Loessin at Large.

Chris Hanna has written a cogent account of explosive, life changing events that took place in Tidewater Virginia fifty years ago. I strongly urge you to see it. For natives of Norfolk, the 1958-1959 story is, and probably will be forever, a part of their souls and deepest inner existence. For those of us who come here from somewhere else, the sad tale is both baffling and familiar. It could have happened any where in the country.

And yet, there is something uniquely "Virginia" in how the Commonwealth coped with the delicate issues of desegregation of its public schools.. In Norfolk, the struggle is personified by the "Norfolk 17". The one of a kind Senator Harry Byrd coined the term "Massive Resistance" as a manifesto for state's rights. For a year or more that almost closed the argument.

Playwright Hanna Had mountains of data to use in creating his drama which can probably best be described as a chronicle play. According to theatre historian and critic John Gassner, "chronicle plays are plays drawn from historical sources in which important issues of public welfare are emphasized." No drama can possibly contain all the events of a major story. If an author attempted to do that, the work would go on forever. The playwright must select from an infinite number of events that illustrate the meaning and most important elements of a story. The writer may even augment facts with fiction to make clear his or her point of view. Hanna has done this brilliantly.

He doesn't try to portray literally the painful ugliness and hard headed stupidity of the times. He utilizes a forthright manner that grips our hearts and minds. He even finds a fair amount of humor in the conflict.. In other words, we are in a theatre and not a lecture hall. We are watching selective human beings facing social change that will affect the rest of their lives and ours.

Hanna has received remarkable support from every single member of the company. The intensely sensitive and perfectly modulated direction of Timothy Douglas allows the play to build and grow like a snow ball rolling down a hill as it works its way to truth and quite simply what is right. Tony Cisek's revolving set with walls of school desks is a masterful metaphor of why we are assembled.

One hesitates to single out any special performances because all are memorable. However, I am compelled to mention Stephen Bradbury as Judge Hoffman, Inga Ballard as Bernice and Caroline Clay as Vivian Carter Mason. They articulate the play's theme with artistic restraint and humanity. Equally impressive are Shakiem Evans, Tracy Griswold. Ivy Vahanian and Dathan B. Williams.

Finally I should say that the play does not imply that all problems between black and white have been solved. The powerful ending has a white girl and a black boy looking at each other and then at the world. They are both then and now. They represent fifty years ago and today where the president of the United States is Barak Obama. It's a haunting image..

This is Edgar Loessin with Loessin at Large and I'll see you at the next opening.