

“Scarlet Letter” Adaptation Will Stir Audiences

A 17th century plot continues to be relevant today as a new play reveals the Puritan legacy our society still grapples with.

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It's Autumn: school is starting, and election season is in full swing.

But these new opportunities to learn and to shape our society and government sometimes have a dark side. It is that dark side that playwright Naomi Iizuka confronts in her new stage adaptation of Nathaniel Hawthorne's classic "The Scarlet Letter."

"For me, the book is extraordinarily resonant in terms of contemporary American culture," Iizuka says. "I think we're still grappling with a Puritan legacy."

Iizuka utilizes Hawthorne's work to ask: "What happens when your desire is not sanctioned by the larger society around you?"

Recent news has been filled with stories of suicide by teenagers bullied at school and political scandals.

"I think we still are very much dealing with the issue of what happens when you transgress societal rules or expectations around sexuality and desire," Iizuka says.

In this new adaptation, she explores the consequences of these challenges: "What price do you pay? How do you reconcile your private self with your public self?"

Iizuka was invited to write this new "Scarlet Letter" adaptation by Intiman Artistic Director Kate Whoriskey and director Lear deBessonet. "It's been an exciting process," Iizuka says.

This playwright-director collaboration is a new one for Iizuka. "I hadn't worked with Lear before, but I think she's wonderful," she says.

"She's an inspiring and generous collaborator," Iizuka explains. "What is so striking about her is her ability to come at the work from so many different angles. She'd send me these haunting, evocative photographs as I was writing. And then she'd send me some music. Her mind is an exciting mind to be in dialogue with."

Iizuka emphasizes the importance of process in bridging the past and present in this work. "My experience is that a play reveals itself in gradual steps," she says.

"We had an invaluable workshop in the summer where I could hear what I had written, and begin the revision process," Iizuka says.

"You may understand something about a specific character arc early on, but it takes hearing the play read by actors to figure out how to make a particular moment work."

Iizuka has also found support from Intiman's staff. "Kate has been extraordinarily generous in every aspect of this collaboration," Iizuka says. "Her insights about both the book and the adaptation have been terrific."

Iizuka agrees that this is a prescient time for Whoriskey to include "The Scarlet Letter" in Intiman's ongoing American Cycle. "You need only read about school bullying or about the infidelities of a public figure to see that the concerns that animate 'The Scarlet Letter' are still with us today."

"The Scarlet Letter" runs October 22 through December 5, at Intiman Theatre, 201 Mercer Street, Seattle.