

The Play as Powerful Social Statement: *The Exonerated*¹

Can live theater make an important statement about sociopolitical themes? You bet. Jessica Blank and Erik Jensen make no excuses for the purpose of this dramatic work: to illuminate the need to eliminate the death penalty, if for no other reason than that justice is not served when innocent people are wrongly convicted. The play is moving and often painful, and I'd say Blank and Jensen are highly successful. If only more people, especially those who shape public policy, were to see it, I think it would have a lasting positive influence on the U.S. "justice" system.

The playwrights amassed hundreds of pages of transcripts of interviews with 40 people who had spent from two to 22 years on death row. They decided to focus on the stories of six individuals, "in order to tell each one more fully" (5).

Blank and Jensen bring the stories of these disparate people to life via this live testimony, as well as personal letters, court proceedings, affidavits, depositions, and police interrogations. They use first-person monologues supplemented by short scenes involving cops, lawyers, judges, spouses, cellmates, fellow inmates, and others, all played by two men and two women.

This is tricky casting and staging, and it can be rather confusing, especially if, as in a version I saw this week, female ensemble 1 is played by an African American (having an African American woman play Kerry's judge was highly disconcerting). I think the playwrights might have done better to be less specific

¹ Blank, Jessica, and Erik Jensen. *The Exonerated* (play). New York: Dramatists Play Service, 2004

about the awarding of the secondary parts to so few actors, and have left it to the director to make that decision based on the availability of appropriate actors.

I also think it would have benefited from paring down even more – five rather than six stories, told even more fully, might have been better – but I would not want to be the one to decide which story was dropped.

Generally in plays that take the form of live testimony told via individual actors, the playwrights supplement the real words with some dramatic invention, or at least with some opportunity to stage scenes with set pieces and costumes, as in, for example, Moisés Kaufman and the Tectonic Theatre's *The Laramie Project* or in Deborah Brevoort's *The Women of Lockerbie*. But Blank and Jensen deliberately stage *The Exonerated* with just "several chairs and multiple entrances and exits." The words are indeed powerful, but in parts the play lags and would benefit from some interesting staging.

Most of all, this is a play about six human beings who were so abominably mistreated by the U.S. "justice" system that one feels strongly that they should not only have been released from death row, but they should have been compensated in some way for the injustices that were perpetrated upon them. Not only has that not happened for any of them in the present, but they also have not even had their wrongful convictions erased from their records. Robert has been unable to regain his professional license, and his "relaxation. Lotsa other things too. You know, you can't really

put your thoughts on what you could have lost, or what you *have* lost. I said I could have been a millionaire, or I could have been the Police Chief. I could have been one of the famous black horse trainers . . . The Trotting Association, they wouldn't even give me my racing license back . . ." (48). Kerry will never be able to get over the abuse he suffered for 22 years on death row: "The state of Texas executed me over a thousand times, man, and it just keeps on doin' it. I get nightmares . . . And every day when I get in the shower I'm reminded of it, 'cause I cannot avoid the scars all over my body" (49). David has been unable to regain his faith: "I had a relationship with God when I got in here, but somehow I've lost it" (36). Delbert continues to "practice a bunch to be human again" (47). Sunny says, "When I was in there my parents died, my children grew up without a family . . . and my husband was executed – very, very brutally" (51).

Sunny has the last word in the play, except for Delbert's final poem. Blank and Jensen decided to leave us with something uplifting at the end: "My life," she says, refusing to give into bitterness, "is my monument" (52). Some of the exonerated had champions whose persistence eventually led to their release. Should death penalty laws be overturned, Blank and Jensen will have contributed championship work to the effort, and I applaud them for bringing conscience to their theatrical work – something to which I too am deeply committed.