

## Future Tense: "Omniscience," at Augustana College through May 10

Written by Mike Schulz  
Monday, 04 May 2009 06:49

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In the science-fiction drama *Omniscience* - currently playing at Augustana College - playwright Tim Carlson imagines a not-too-distant U.S. future in which several Midwestern states are under Asian control, violent militia activity is commonplace, behavior is governmentally regulated through mood-leveling drugs, and surveillance systems monitor our every move.

There is, however, a considerable upside to this new order, at least if the in-character pre-show to Augustana's presentation was to be trusted: Prior to entering, we were not only required to show the theatre's "guards" some identification - to the aghast surprise of the folks standing in front of me - but required to show them our cell phones, and prove that they were, indeed, turned to "silent," "vibrate," or "off" positions. (Any chance the not-too-distant future could arrive *now*

?) It was an amusingly cheeky intro to Augustana's 100-minute one-act, but as director Scott R. Irelan's frequently ingenious production demonstrated, preemptive strikes against cell-phone disturbances are apparently among our *only* futuristic perks.

Set in an unnamed North American region in an unspecified year (post-2013), *Omniscience* concerns the plight of two lovers, Warren Atwell and Lieutenant Anna Larson, whose recent actions have caught the attention of a shadowy, CIA-type organization. Warren (played by Jeremy Hoffman) is a documentary filmmaker whose latest, unfinished project - an account of a destructive uprising nicknamed Operation Open City - has raised numerous red flags, as has the mysterious disappearance of his filmmaking partner. Anna (Jen Altenbernd) is a former

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Special Operations agent whose involvement in a purportedly accidental friendly-fire incident - one that resulted in dozens of American casualties - has led to her post-traumatic stress disorder.

While the duo acts out their individual dramas, a third is offered in the form of Central Intelligence Operative George Ellis (David Cocks), who interrogates Warren's taciturn employer, Beth (Danielle Swanson), on the potential security threat posed by the pair. And I'm loath to reveal much more about *Omniscience's* story, partly because there's so much yet to be told, but mostly because the story, here, also winds up nearly irrelevant; during Friday night's performance, Carlson's engaging and imaginative cautionary tale oftentimes took a backseat to Irelan's fun and fresh *telling* of the tale.

If the cell-phone bit wasn't enough to convince you, you'll know you're not in for a typical theatrical experience as soon as you see Adam Parboosingh's set, which is outfitted with working video cameras and a sizable center-stage screen. (If you wind up in the midsection of Potter Hall's seating area, one of the first images you're likely to see is *you*.) An apt symbol for a world under Big Brotherly control, the screen will, throughout the production, provide plenty of visual context - we're shown snippets from Warren's documentary, examples of Anna's psychotic episodes, surveillance footage from hallways and rooftops. Yet it also provides a significant acting challenge, as the on-stage performers are routinely required to engage in dialogue with others

*vis-à-vis*

the screen; in nearly every other sequence, flesh-and-blood actors must time their conversations to match the pre-recorded silences and responses of their video-projected co-stars.

These are the sorts of multimedia "enhancements" that could easily be distractions, if not outright embarrassments, and there are moments in *Omniscience* when the tech elements aren't quite as well-considered as you'd like. (At one point, Ellis instructs Warren's boss to look at images one through 12 on the video screen, and then images 13 through 24, and then 25 through 36, and each time, only nine images are shown.) But given the extreme challenge of the endeavor, Augustana's participants pull it off with marvelous aplomb. Irelan handles the transitions between live and taped footage in nearly seamless, continually clever ways that never harm Carlson's narrative, and Randall Hall's and Christian Lauba's evocative, saxophone-intensive original score lends the images haunting immediacy and drive. (The music and visuals frequently coalesce in manners that, I thought, brought to mind David Lynch. I mean that as a *huge* compliment.)

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Hypnotic though *Omniscience's* tech is - there must be more than 100 sound, light, and video cues - I did wind up wishing that half of the show's four-person (on-stage) cast was given more chances to stretch. Cocks delivered his lines with sensational vigor and control but couldn't do much to make his disdainful operative more than a generic heavy, and Swanson had little to play beyond a stone-faced Nurse Ratched figure; their exposition-laden scenes were uncomfortably stagnant. Hoffman's character, though, was granted more variety. The actor brought a touching earnestness and confusion to Warren, and was particularly fine in his shouting matches with Altenbernd, who was so ferocious and adventurous and *alive*

that she handily walked off with the show. Lending her demanding role both wildly eccentric (and enjoyable) broad strokes and a beautifully wistful, unforced gravity - she looks and acts a lot like Kate Hudson, but isn't at all irritating - Altenbernd provided Carlson's play of ideas with a much-needed human element.

Those ideas, by the way, are almost uniformly fascinating, and I applaud the playwright for his thoughtful, and sometimes vibrantly pissed-off, meditations on combat, national unity, and the right to privacy. (Carlson's most exceptional, most emotional scene comes when Warren and Anna finally find a "clear room" - the one spot in the city free from video surveillance.) I'm thinking *Omniscience* would make for a terrifically satisfying read. Thanks to Irelan and company, it's also a terrifically satisfying production.

*For tickets, call (309)794-7306.*

*Note: The Saturday, May 9 Omniscience will be performed by Augustana's understudy cast, featuring Anden Drolet as Warren, Anna Dundek as Anna, Ben Webb as George, and Liz Stigler as Beth.*