

'Picasso' is a bona-fide hit about art, politics and desire

[By Karen D'Souza](#)

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The city of lights has gone pitch-black in "Picasso" at the San Jose Repertory Theatre.

The Nazis have rolled into Paris, crushing the spirit of the city, rounding up the usual dissidents, intellectuals and, of course, artists. At the height of the German occupation, Pablo Picasso finds himself arrested.

When the lights come up on Jonathan Moscone's vivid production, we find the father of cubism locked in a bunker of gray concrete. Erik Flatmo's set evokes a vast lonely tableaux in which people are dwarfed by their circumstances.

Onto this canvas, Jeffrey Hatcher etches a play about art, politics and desire in which the mind game is the thing. As in "Turn of the Screw," and "Jekyll & Hyde," the prolific playwright thrusts the actor's craft to the fore. While the text feels schematic at times, the exquisitely detailed performances make this 75-minute tete-a-tete a bona fide hit.

Tautly directed by Moscone, artistic director of the California Shakespeare Theater, "Picasso" becomes a sexy game of cat and mouse between the famously philandering artist and a woman who holds all the cards.

Carpenter, an actor of inestimable skill who has left his mark on roles from Shakespeare to Dickens, finds the spine of Picasso. The Bay Area veteran digs beneath all the stereotypes of the iconic artist to find an inner core of coiled energy that suggests power, even genius.

Hubris and lust put the swagger in his step as Picasso paces the vault, fearful that his fame will not protect him from fascism. Carpenter rides a roller coaster of mood swings as the fiery Picasso jousts and parries with his nemesis, the icy Miss Fischer (Carrie Paff), an emissary from the Ministry of Culture.

Part femme fatale, part storm trooper, Fischer says she needs him to authenticate some of his works. Only as the interrogation progresses does it become clear that the Third Reich always has ulterior motives.



Miss Fischer (Carrie Paff) lights Pablo Picasso's (James Carpenter) cigarette... (Photo by Pat Kirk)

At first, Picasso is openly scornful that the Nazis would have any interest in his school of art: "Germans want kittens and dogs and ... Poland." But he is also a legendary womanizer and Fisher's glamorous 1940s-style beauty quickly gives her the upper hand.

Paff, always an engaging actress, uses her cheekbones like daggers here, finding his weak spot and then going in for the kill.

While the playwright is better at sketching characters than fleshing them out, he certainly has a gift for glib. Happily, Carpenter and Paff generate enough tension (sexual and otherwise) to distract us when the dialogue veers from cunning to formulaic. Their supple chemistry charges every interaction with tantalizing hints of sex and violence.

The director vigorously fills out the subtext of the play in between its digressions into biographical gossip and art history. The passages about "Guernica," for instance, don't deepen our understanding of Picasso's psyche as much as they should. But Moscone keeps the pulse of the production racing so fast, you hardly notice the flaws in the text.

Certainly the play's probing insights into the tug of war between artists and the state resonate as loudly today as they did during World War II.

The constantly shifting balance of power between man and woman, interrogator and detainee, has a magnetism all its own. The fluidity of authority here gives the play its zing. "Picasso" may not be a masterpiece on the page but it is a genuine pleasure to watch onstage.

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"A Picasso—

by Jeffrey Hatcher

The upshot:

Where: San Jose Repertory Theatre, 101 Paseo de San Antonio, San Jose

Through: Feb. 22

Running time: 75 minutes (no intermission)

Tickets: \$32-\$61; (408) 367-7255; www.sjrep.com