

Picasso interrogation painted with broad stroke

[Robert Hurwitt, Chronicle Theater Critic](#)

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A Picasso: Drama. By Jeffrey Hatcher. Directed by Jonathan Moscone. With James Carpenter and Carrie Paff. (Through Feb. 22. San Jose Repertory Theatre, 101 Paseo de San Antonio, San Jose. 75 minutes. Tickets: \$19.50-\$61. Call (408) 367-7255 or go to www.sjrep.com.)

Casting doesn't get more counterintuitive than assigning the role of Pablo **Picasso** to a very lean actor, but James Carpenter makes the physical disparities evaporate before there's time to notice how little he resembles the great artist. Partly, it's the gaze - the eyes that seem to assess everything as a composition. More than that, it's the attitude - an innate assertion of genius and sexual prowess, and a childish desire to shock, even, in Jeffrey Hatcher's "A **Picasso**," while being interrogated in Nazi-occupied Paris.



Pat Kirk

The triumph of acting over body shape fits perfectly with director Jonathan Moscone's approach to this underwhelming drama. If the by-the-book cat-and-mouse-game script has anything to say beyond rehashing interesting details from **Picasso's** much-examined life, it's about the necessity of art as humanity's spiritual center and its fragile resilience.

Every aspect of Moscone's regional premiere, which opened Friday at San Jose Repertory Theatre, reinforces an air of theatrical artifice, from the vaulted concrete ceiling and rounded wooden door atop an extra-long flight of stairs in Erik Flatmo's underground art-warehouse set to Meg Neville's black-on-black femme fatale costume for **Picasso's** interrogator, Miss Fischer. For the duration of a concentrated, 75-minute performance, Moscone and actors Carpenter and Carrie Paff transcend Hatcher's script.

A journeyman author of many plays - including "Compleat Female Stage Beauty" and widely produced adaptations of "The Turn of the Screw" and "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde" - Hatcher resorts to a standard interrogation format for "**Picasso**." He adds a potentially sly twist by pitting the notorious womanizer against an alluring blond Nazi, but he doesn't get much mileage out of the device.

Though it wouldn't be fair to give away Hatcher's many plot twists, beyond noting that the setup is that Fischer wants **Picasso** to authenticate some drawings, many are pretty

gratuitous. Much of the content - autobiographical monologues, analyses of **Picasso's** work and genius, odd and familiar tales of his life (but what's that oft-told Gertrude Stein anecdote doing here?) - seems to exist mostly to fill time until Hatcher gets to his juicy ending.

Such drawbacks are only minor nuisances, though, while Paff's Fischer and Carpenter's **Picasso** circle each other, probing for weaknesses and perhaps something more. Breezily sexy and wielding cordiality like a stiletto, Paff makes Fischer not only a chillingly worthy opponent but at times even empathetic. Wary and proud, Carpenter exudes the impatience of a workaholic artist and an inability to keep his mind on his personal danger when his work is questioned - a combination that skillfully hides the canniness of a survivor.

As hackneyed as the story can be, Hatcher gives his characters some sharp one-liners, and interesting material about **Picasso's** life and work. For the most part, though, just as in the story of **Picasso** drawing with burnt matchsticks, the performances represent a triumph of art over the materials at hand.

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