

**Review: 'Tranced' more didactic than dramatic**  
[Robert Hurwitt, Chronicle Theater Critic](#)

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The patient, a college student, has debilitating panic attacks. Her new doctor, an expert in using hypnosis - or "trancing" - to recover repressed memories, learns things that lead him to break his oath of confidentiality. When her memories reveal the hushed-up massacre of a remote village in her African homeland, the doctor, an investigative reporter and a State Department official become entangled in a case of impending genocide related to a Central African nation's planned major hydroelectric project.

"Tranced," by clinical psychologist turned playwright Robert Clyman, is a psychological mystery centered on issues of international development, African politics, genocide in both its physical and cultural forms and the level of horror that has to be reached before Americans will pay attention to injustices in an African state. Those issues are compellingly presented in the local premiere that opened Friday in a brilliantly staged and performed San Jose Repertory Theatre production. The play, however, is less successful as either the thriller Clyman intends or even as a coherent drama.

"We must never assume the obvious answer is right," the therapist asserts, warning us of the shifting realities and illusory transparencies that are to come. Barbara Damashek's staging makes the theme palpable in everything from the carefully shaded performances to the fusion of African, Middle Eastern and American musical motifs in Jeff Mockus' sound design and the play of Daniel Ordower's transformative lights on Kris Stone's stunning set. The smartly furnished therapist's and State Department's offices rest within high glass walls with thin vertical blinds and rivulets of rain that turn into streams of blood.

Thom Rivera cuts a commanding figure as Philip, a therapist so confident in his work that he reacts to every difficulty with breezy assurance. Born in Syria, but raised in more countries than he can count, he's very much a self-invented man, as a professional and as an American. Rivera skillfully depicts the cracking of his facade as Philip is forced to face traumas of his past and present.

Kenya Brome is pitch-perfect as his patient and sometime antagonist Azmera. Speaking forcefully in a melodic African accent, she's a magnetic blend of assumed privilege and frank need, riveting in the trance-induced scenes she recalls. A driven Stacy Ross embodies the urgency of the moral stakes at risk as she shuttles between confrontations with Philip and an undersecretary for African affairs, played with bureaucratic aplomb and ulcer-gnawing tension by James Carpenter.

Clyman crosscuts between scenes, jumbling plot chronology in a manner that builds tension at the risk of creating confusion - leading him to insert another of too many overtly explanatory passages later. The action also raises issues of therapeutic and journalistic ethics that are acknowledged and cavalierly tossed aside. But that's the least of the play's problems. To keep from giving too much away, let's just say that "Tranced" is the kind of thriller that cheats to achieve its final twist, and then doesn't know how to wrap things up.

The ending works better in terms of the themes Clyman is addressing, and he succeeds in raising consciousness about the rapacious immorality of profit-driven development projects and the invisibility of their rural, subsistence-farming victims. If he does so at the expense of dramatic coherence, Damashek and her excellent cast manage to keep the action engrossing - if not

entrancing - for most of the evening. Making the ending work, however, is more than mere mortals can achieve.



**Tranced:** Drama. By Robert Clyman. Directed by Barbara Damashek. (*Through Feb. 24. San Jose Repertory Theatre, 101 Paseo de San Antonio, San Jose. Two hours, five minutes. Tickets: \$15-\$59. Call (408) 367-7255 or go to [www.sjrep.com](http://www.sjrep.com).*)

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