

Deseret Morning News, Sunday, October 08, 2006

Robbins-directed '1984' coming to Utah stage

Oscar winner hails stage adaptation of Orwell's novel

By [Ivan M. Lincoln](#)

Deseret Morning News

In 1948, George Orwell published his landmark prophetic novel, "1984."

This week, Utah audiences will have a rare opportunity to see a new stage adaptation of the classic work directed by Oscar winner Tim Robbins and performed by the Los Angeles-based company that Robbins founded — The Actors' Gang.

The playwright who adapted Orwell's provocative novel for the stage — Michael Gene Sullivan — will also be in Salt Lake City for both live and radio appearances, while the acting troupe will be in residence at the University of Utah for a series of master classes and several public forums.

Robbins (who will not be able to come to Utah for the performances due to last-minute publicity work on his newest film) talked about the "1984" project during a recent telephone interview from his home near New York City.

"I received this adaptation and read it and immediately. I was impressed by it, but it also seemed so relevant that I was sure that Sullivan made some stuff up. So then I read the book and was surprised to find how little Michael had made up. In fact, he had drawn things out of the book and focuses his attention in the play that people tend to forget," Robbins said.

"I first read it about 25 years ago, and I hadn't remembered some of these passages that Michael used, and it is quite shocking," he said.

The well-known actor and director noted that Orwell originally called the novel "1948," for the year it was to be published, but his editors changed the title by transposing the last two figures — and it became "1984."

"It's interesting how different people have appropriated the book over the years," Robbins said, "but the best thing is to let Orwell speak for himself about totalitarianism and about what was happening in the Eastern bloc at the time — fascism and communism."



Brent Hinkley, left, Keythe Farley, Kaili Hollister, Brian T. Finney, Steven M. Porter and V.J. Foster in The Actors' Gang's "1984," directed by Tim Robbins, this Friday and Saturday at Kingsbury Hall.

Ed Krieger, The Actors Gang

"I remember reading it in the early 1980s and thinking how could (Orwell's ideas) be possible. How could someone be monitoring everyone, except when you reread the book it's all there as plain as day — that the "Big Brother" government is monitoring those were were in positions of power — journalists, people in high finance and government.



Brian T. Finney, left, Brent Hinkley and Kaili Hollister in "1984."

Ed Krieger, The Actors Gang

"If you think about that, we have got that now."

In Orwell's book, only a small percentage of the population was monitored.

"Eighty-five percent of the people were stupefied by poverty and overwork and too deadened by the entertainment and the lotteries they hoped to win that they were not a threat to the standing order of things," Robbins said. "But I don't think you have a journalist or CEO or senator or congressman or diplomat that thinks their e-mails are not being looked at."

"Orwell's ideas of 'doublespeak' and 'thought police' and 'newspeak' and that 'ignorance is strength' still ring true today," he said. "It's a topsy-turvy world with cowards calling the heroes traitors."

Robbins said that Sullivan, the playwright, is a member of the San Francisco Mime Troupe.

"But he's pretty faithful to the original. It differs in that it is a play and it has to find a location. What's very clever

about this is that it's set in one room where Winston Smith's interrogators take his diary and take him through the various activities that are in the book. You get everything in the book, but it's all done in this one room," he said.

Orwell's controversial novel foresaw a world where electronic surveillance techniques are used to quietly spy on people considered to be a threat to the ruling regime. With today's war on terrorism and heightened airport security, Orwell's ideas aren't that far-fetched after all.

For this touring production, the Actors' Gang has a six-member performing ensemble that brings its own scenery. Calling themselves "a group of renegade theater artists," their mission is "to create bold, original works for the stage and daring reinterpretations of the classics."

RELATED EVENTS: In conjunction with the Hinckley Institute of Politics, Kingsbury Hall has scheduled several free events and forums during the coming week to discuss the book's relevance in today's society. There will also be master classes with theater students from the U. and Weber State and several local high schools.

Activities include:

—**Monday, 11 a.m.:** Sullivan and other guests on Doug Fabrizio's "RadioWest" program on KUER 90.1 FM, live from the Hinckley Institute.

—**Tuesday, 7:30 p.m.:** "Book Klub Kaffe Klatsch: An Informal Evening Celebrating Our Freedom to Read and Discuss Literature," with the playwright at Kingsbury Hall. (Free, but reservations required, 585-1556.)

—**Wednesday, 7 p.m.:** "News and Propaganda: When Does Spin Go Too Far?" in the Main City Library auditorium, 210 E. 400 South, with local media representatives John Hughes, Rod Decker, John Daley, Ben Fulton, Holly Mullen, Chris Vanocur and Ken Verdoia (free and broadcast live on KCPW, 88.3 FM).

—**Thursday, noon:** "Siciliano Forum: Considerations of the Status of American Society," by Laughlin McDonald in the Dumke Auditorium of the U. Fine Arts Museum, 410 Campus Center Drive (free).

► **If you go ...**

What: "1984"

Where: Kingsbury Hall

When: Friday and Saturday, 7:30 p.m.

How much: \$24.50-\$29.50

Phone: 581-7100

Web site: www.kingtix.com

Also: Several free forums and lectures

E-mail: ivan@desnews.com

© 2006 Deseret News Publishing Company