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Theater review: Central Works' 'The Prince' a riveting reflection of political gamesmanship.

By Pat Craig Correspondent

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Growing up in the pre-Woodstock, "Leave It to Beaver" era, I was raised to believe that, right after God and your dad, the President of the United States was about the swellest, most honest guy in the whole country.

The thought flitted across my mind recently like a cloud on a summer vacation morning, but was quickly replaced with something more dire. Were politicians, I wondered, becoming more slimy in recent years, or had I just been deluding myself?

So I was primed for Central Works' "The Prince," based on the work by Machiavelli. Big Mac wrote, in the early 1500s, a guide based on years of experience for a young prince named Lorenzo Medici, whose family had returned to power after years to rule the Republic

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of Florence.

Machiavelli dedicated his book to the young prince, but in the Central Works production by Gary Graves, Machiavelli actually presents it to him, in hopes of putting to an end his banishment at the

hands of the Republic.

The result is a play running just over an hour that is absolutely captivating — like watching a chess match between morality and practical politics.

Machiavelli (Mark Farrell) has been invited to the palace by Lorenzo (Cole Alexander Smith) to discuss the possibility of reinstatement. But the discussion quickly turns into a sly cat-and-mouse game where Machiavelli has to convince Lorenzo he no longer favors the republican form of government while Lorenzo must extract from Machiavelli some sort of help reforming the hostile politics of the era and bring peace to the city/state of Florence.

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As their conversation moves along, it slowly becomes apparent that the two men are miles apart philosophically. Lorenzo begins to realize his hero is not the man he once believed him to be. Machiavelli realizes his former pupil is not ready to accept the political realities he must embrace to maintain his rule.

Playing on a long, narrow space with audience on three sides, the two men move about the room alternately cajoling and confronting each other in a cerebral ballet that ends with both bloodied. Director Graves created a tension to the piece that the two actors enhance with unflinching characterizations.

With the play performed in the intimate space at the Berkeley City Club, the audience is right on top of the action and feels much a part of the scene. Adding considerably, but subtly, to the performance is the sound design of Gregory Scharpen.

Reach Pat Craig at picraig495@yahoo.com.

THEATER REVIEW

WHAT: Custom Made Theatre Company presents "Machiavelli's The Prince," based on the book "Handbook for Tyrants," written and directed by Gary Graves

WHEN: 8 p.m. Thursdays-Saturdays, 5 p.m. Sundays through Aug. 22

WHERE: The Berkeley City Club, 2315 Durant Ave., Berkeley

RUNNING TIME: 1 hour, 10 minutes

TICKETS: \$14-\$25; 510-558-1381, www.centralworks.org

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