

My Cultural Landscape

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MONDAY, AUGUST 24, 2009

Best Kept Secrets? Or Secrets Best Kept

When one examines situations that involve potential abuses of power, one quickly learns that things are seldom what they seem:

- A person's oldest and dearest confidante may be laying plans to sabotage his future bliss ([My Best Friend's Wedding](#)).
- A bitter teen princess and her ruthless mother may be plotting to deprive a young girl of her chance to win a dance contest ([Hairspray](#)).
- A former lover may turn out to have once been a Nazi ([The Reader](#)).
- A military hero's most trusted advisor may be planning his downfall ([Othello](#)).
- A handsome airline pilot may be jockeying back and forth between two marriages while planning to marry a third woman in another city ([Frequent Flyer](#)).
- A President could insist that he "never had sexual relations with that woman."
- An innocent young woman's new boyfriend could kill her brother ([West Side Story](#)).
- A young girl could wake up to discover that her fantastical adventures had been nothing more than a feverish dream ([The Wizard of Oz](#)).

From self-righteous bible-thumping adulterers like [John Ensign](#) to slimy politicians like [Joe Lieberman](#), from idiots like [Sarah Palin](#) to media clowns like [Glenn Beck](#), there is more than enough hypocrisy to go around. If you think I'm kidding, try hiking the [Appalachian Trail](#) to see if it ends in [Argentina](#)!

Only when a person examines how power is being manipulated to strengthen one party's influence over another does disillusionment set in. Truth may be an honorable goal, but finding the truth often involves an ugly voyage across a vast sea of deception filled with terrifying monsters.

In an October 2002 letter to [Ron Suskind](#), [John Dilulio](#) (who briefly served as [President George W. Bush's](#) first Director of the [White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships](#) and was also the first of Bush's advisers to resign his post) described his

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contempt for [Karl Rove's](#) team of [Mayberry Machiavellis](#) by defining them as:

"...staff, senior and junior, who consistently talked and acted as if the height of political sophistication consisted in reducing every issue to its simplest, black-and-white terms for public consumption, then steering legislative initiatives or policy proposals as far right as possible."

While Dilulio's comments caused quite a ruckus, most people had a greater familiarity with the fictional town of [Mayberry](#) than with [Niccolo Machiavelli](#) or his political treatises. As a result of his writings, however, Machiavelli's name has become synonymous with the use of deceitful measures in power struggles (whether they involve political intrigue or flat-out war).

One of the Bay area's best-kept theatrical secrets, Berkeley's [CentralWorks](#) recently debuted their interpretation of [Machiavelli's The Prince](#) in a production that was written and directed by resident playwright Gary Graves. In his program notes, Graves explains that:

"Machiavelli was an experienced diplomat at the height of the [Italian Renaissance](#). He visited the courts and palaces of many of the most powerful figures of his day as an emissary of the [Republic of Florence](#). He saw first-hand how the dangerous games of power politics were played, and he began to draw a whole range of conclusions about the nature of those games in general. These conclusions, and the reasoning behind them, constitute the text of [The Prince](#). But he wrote the book during the low point of his life.

After many years of service to the Republic, the government rather suddenly collapsed and Machiavelli was forced to leave Florence when the powerful Medici family returned to take control of the city. What followed for Machiavelli was a kind of exile, when he lived on the family farm seven miles outside Florence, reduced to a life of idleness and insignificance. It was then that he began to reflect upon his career in politics and wrote *The Prince*.

Most scholars agree that Machiavelli's *The Prince* is one of the most influential works ever written in the history of political science. Though it was composed some time around 1513, the short book wasn't actually published until five years after Machiavelli's death in 1527. The text of the book includes a dedication to [Lorenzo de Medici II](#) (the grandson of [Lorenzo the Magnificent](#)), and makes it clear that Machiavelli intended to present the work to young Lorenzo, the new Duke of Florence, as a gift. It is also fairly clear from the dedication that Machiavelli was hoping the small book would impress the new ruler enough that he might bring its author into his service.

Though we know from Machiavelli's letters that he considered trying to present the book to Lorenzo in person, there is no historical record of such a meeting ever actually taking place. Our play, however, imagines what might have happened if it

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did."



With Richard Frederick as Machiavelli and Michael Navarra as Lorenzo, the latest production from CentralWorks becomes a tightly-wound battle of wits between two men: a youngster who has suddenly risen to great power and his former tutor, who has become a master of political intrigue. The younger man is extremely idealistic, finding it hard to believe how cynical his former teacher has become. The teacher, however, is a master manipulator, more than willing to twist his way into his former student's new circle of power and authority.



Richard Frederick and Michael Navarra (Photo by: Eduardo Soler)

Whereas, with many Bay theater companies, one may hope for a good evening of theater but end up being disappointed, with CentralWorks the opposite happens. Even if a person arrives feeling tired, worn down, or uninformed with regard to the subject of the play, it doesn't take long before that person is on the edge of his seat, totally involved in the drama unfolding before him.

More than anything else, CentralWorks probably sets the highest

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artistic standard in the Bay area for consistently intelligent, provocative, and relevant drama. The performances by Richard Frederick and Michael Navarra (who occasionally bore an uncanny resemblance to Gavin Newsom) were absolutely riveting. Gregory Scharpen's meticulous, almost cinematic soundscape added an eerie undertone to the proceedings.



Michael Navarra as Lorenzo (Photo by: Eduardo Soler)

At one point in the play, young Lorenzo is asked to recall a lesson in which a man was asked if he would prefer to live with a wild creature (half man/half satyr) who could teach him all about life and

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creature (that man/that satyr) who could teach him all about life and war -- or with a priest who could keep him safe. As I sat in the [Berkeley City Club](#) watching this drama unfold, I asked myself: Would I rather sit through 70-minutes of political philosophy transformed into a gripping piece of theater or three hours of overproduced commercial drek?

The answer required little deliberation.

That CentralWorks continues to maintain such a high level of intellectual acuity in its work is a great tribute to Graves' artistic vision and the company's collaborative process. Graves teaches playwriting at the [Berkeley Rep School of Theatre](#) and has helped to develop 16 scripts for the company since 1996. He directs and lights many productions at CentralWorks.



Richard Frederick as Machiavelli (Photo by: Eduardo Soler)

Because CentralWorks performs in such a tiny room, Graves has become a master of crafting his scripts to unheard musical rhythms.

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If you're looking for an unsung hero of Bay area theatre, this is the man whose work you should be following. There is a flow to many of his texts that pulses like chamber music. As a result, the CentralWorks experience has taken on a legacy of "total immersion theatre."

I've said it before and I'll say it again. If you want to experience some of the best theater in the entire Bay area, you owe it to yourself to check out CentralWorks. Their production of *Machiavelli's The Prince* runs through September 19 at the Berkeley City Club. You can order tickets [here](#).

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Just as Gary Graves poses a triple threat (playwright, director, lighting designer) with regard to staged productions, producer, director, and cinematographer [Andy Abrahams Wilson](#) is a triple threat filmmaker. The recipient of a [Pew Charitable Trust Fellowship](#) in Dance/Media, Wilson was recognized by the [Marin Arts Council](#) as an Outstanding Artist of 2003. He has produced films about dance and dancers and has been nominated for an [Emmy award](#). Wilson currently teaches video as art and discovery at [Sausalito's Open Eye Pictures](#) (which he founded in 1994). The studio's mission statement reads as follows:

"Open Eye Pictures is an award-winning, nonprofit production company specializing in creative, educational media. Taking a unique, humanistic approach, we open the eyes of viewers to see the extraordinary in the ordinary and the bigness in the littlest of things. We turn the lens on places where worlds and assumptions collide, illuminating the new life that springs forth. Telling stories through rich and poetic imagery, Open Eye Pictures moves its audience in unexpected ways."

If I stress Wilson's artistic achievements it is because he has done a remarkable job of making a documentary -- that looks absolutely gorgeous -- about a truly depressing disease that has reached epidemic proportions in America. Part of Wilson's motivation for making [Under Our Skin](#) was personal: His twin sister and another close friend had both been diagnosed with [Lyme disease](#). Over a period of four years, the filmmaker amassed 375 hours of footage for his documentary.

Under Our Skin, which focuses on patients struggling with Lyme disease, is that rare documentary that can hold a cruel mirror up to the insurance companies and other power players within the medical field and contrast their shallowness and deceptive practices with the real life pain being experienced by patients who are routinely denied coverage for their illness.

Connecticut's Attorney General, [Richard Blumenthal](#), investigated allegations that serious flaws were to be found in the [Infectious Diseases Society of America's](#) process for writing its 2006 Lyme disease guidelines. Blumenthal charged that IDSA's board of directors