

Pacifica Tribune



Lance Huntley photo

Family and friends stand behind newspaperman Doremus Jessup (Louis Schilling), l-r: actors Ben Latham, Jeremy Judge, Dana Reynolds, Pennell Chapin, William Rhea, Jordana Wolf, David Hundsness and Nancy Martin.

Can people who buy lies fool voters?

SPINDRIFT TACKLES PLAY ABOUT WHEN WE TOLERATE EVIL

By **Jean Bartlett**
Tribune Writer

"A country that tolerates evil means – evil manners, standards of ethics – for a generation, will be so poisoned that it never will have any good end." Sinclair Lewis—"It Can't Happen Here."

Sinclair Lewis published his political-satire novel "It Can't Happen Here" in 1935 when Hitler was rising to power in Germany, Mussolini was invading Ethiopia and the U.S., like so much of the world, was gasping for air through the hellish waves of the Great Depression. In Lewis's novel we meet the power-hungry Berzelius "Buzz" Windrip, a charismatic demagogue who promises to end the Great Depression and make all Americans wealthy. Buzz runs on a platform of fearmongering, funded by wealthy businessmen and politicians. Buzz is not in favor of immigrants. He is not in favor of any press that stands against him. He thinks of his inner circle of

followers as "Napoleon's soldiers." His soldiers have "the Jews and the Negroes to look down on." "Every man is king," Buzz says, "so long as he has someone to look down on."

In the Lewis tale, many voters ignore that Buzz is pitting the different parties against each other and that lots of money is being spent to fuel anger. Propaganda floods airwaves, newspapers and mailboxes. Even for those who see what is going on, they trust the system will fix itself.

But can people who buy lies fool voters? Enough of them it seems. In the Lewis tale, Buzz Windrip defeats President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and a nation that plugged its ears falls into the hands of a Fascist dictator.

In 1936, the author adapted his book into a play. In 2016, Tony Taccone and Bennett S. Cohen's adaptation of Lewis's novel had its first staging. Right now in 2018, director Debi Durst has placed "It Can't Happen Here" in full view on the stage of the Pacifica Spindrift Players. She has smartly kept the stage simple and free of distractions so her actors and her audience can chow down on this thinking tale. Her direction nimbly pulls her audience into a house on fire.



Lance Huntley photo
Doremus Jessup (Louis Schilling), Lorinda Pike (Nancy Martin) and Buck Titus (Ben Latham) discuss troubling days.

Louis Schilling plays Doremus Jessup a newspaper man in Vermont who prints what he sees. Schilling's character up to the point of the play has lived a comfortable, safe life and Schilling does an excellent job of reaching inside to what he has known to challenge what cannot be. His heroism comes slowly in a very powerful performance. Nancy Martin's performance as Lorinda Pike is awe-inspiring. Her character is fiercely passionate and she is not nor will she ever be afraid to do what she believes is right. Pennell Chapin as Emma Jessup and as Adelaide Tarr Gimmitich, gives the audience patience and stoicism as one character, and bigotry and entitlement as another – very well played.

Benjamin E. Latham plays Buzz Windrip and Buck Titus and he sinks his teeth into both roles – one a dangerous bamboozler and narcissist with a really bad wig, and the other, a man with the courage of Harriet Tubman. He is excellent. John Neblett is quietly frightening as Shad Ledue, a once working man who has a tendency to think that things are particularly not fair for him and subsequently buys all the lies and gets even. Jordana Wolf's performance as Mary Jessup Greenhill reaches right for the heart and Dana Reynolds as Sissy Jessup kicks up spitfire. Marc Berman plays three characters, one that delivers real chills.

Is democracy such a fragile thing? Certainly this play not only inspires the question but the discussion.

"It Can't Happen Here" plays weekends at PSP Theater, 1050 Crespi Drive, Pacifica, through November 4. Friday and Saturday at 8 p.m. Sunday at 2 p.m. Box Office: 650-359-8002 or online at www.pacificaspindriftplayers.org. Tickets: \$25/adults, \$20 seniors and students.

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