



◀ From left, Robert McNamara (Mark Murphey), President Johnson (Jack Willis) and Vice President Hubert Humphrey (Peter Frechette) react to the rising cost of the Vietnam War in "The Great Society," which just had its world premiere at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival.

▼ Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (Kenajuan Bentley) considers the cost of the civil rights movement.

Photos by JENNY GRAHAM

'Society' draws out a second hit from LBJ

By Kathleen Alaks
of the Daily Courier

A time of civil unrest, sweeping social change and an unpopular war, the presidency of Lyndon Johnson makes for great theater.

Playwright Robert Schenkkan captures those tumultuous times in "The Great Society," which premiered Sunday at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival in Ashland.

Rich, complex and dramatic, the production, directed by Bill Rauch, manages to turn what could have been a dry civics lesson into a living, breathing slice of history.

"The Great Society" is a compelling sequel to Schenkkan's "All the Way," which premiered at OSF in 2012. That first play, which portrayed the events of a single year — from November 1963 when Johnson took office after John F. Kennedy's assassination to his landslide election in November 1964 — was packed tight and focused on LBJ's struggle to pass the landmark Civil Rights Act.

"The Great Society," which covers Johnson's first full term in office, 1964 to 1968, is more sweeping, using broader

strokes to paint the picture of a president struggling to pass important social programs — Medicare and Medicaid, the Voting Rights Act, the War on Poverty — while becoming mired in the brutal escalation of the Vietnam War.

Perhaps because it covers so much ground, the play, at more than three hours with two intermissions, is over-long, especially losing some steam in the second act.

But the driving force from start to finish is Jack Willis, giving a powerhouse performance as LBJ.

Willis portrayed Johnson in "All the Way" two years ago. This time out, he plays the part with a bit less bravado and less physicality, sitting through many meetings rather than bullying his way through them and pacing the stage stiffly instead of raging across it. (This reviewer suspects Willis was suffering some kind of back or other physical problem that required him to limit his movements.)

But his raspy, booming voice and his big, burly presence still dominate every scene. He cleverly manipulates representatives from the American Medical Association into supporting Medicare. He fast-

talks Gov. George Wallace (played with puffed up cocky swagger by Jonathan Haugen) into allowing a protest march in Alabama. He wheels and deals, bribes and blackmails his way through every situation.

By the play's end, though, he becomes a more tragic figure, head bowed, shoulders slumped, announcing that he will not run for re-election.

His downfall is brought on by two key issues, one domestic, one international.

On the home front, Johnson works to launch programs that would reduce poverty and transform the face of America. But he's powerless as cities go up in flames and angry calls for black power begin to supplant Martin Luther King's (a brilliant Kenajuan Bentley) pleas for nonviolence.

We see: the violence of a civil rights march in Marion, Ala.; the confrontation between black protesters and police troopers on the Pettus Bridge in Selma, Ala.; the casualties of the Watts Riot in California; the abject poverty of Chicago slums.

Then there's that pesky thing called the Vietnam War. Johnson reluctantly gives in to Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara's (Mark Murphey) calls for

more and more troops, more and more funding to expand the Vietnam conflict. "My answer is yes," LBJ says, "but my judgement is no."

We see: the war's toll on the country tallied in onscreen projections of the numbers of American's dead and injured, numbers which keep increasing throughout the play; Vice President Hubert Humphrey (Peter Frechette) stifling his early calls to pull out of the war and instead going with the flow; a minister set himself on fire in front of the White House to protest the war; the growth of the anti-war movement, with Sen. Bobby Kennedy (Danforth Comins) at the forefront.

With each act, the set, designed by Christopher Acebo, deteriorates a little more — benches overturned and smoldering — mirroring the deterioration of LBJ and his impact on the Vietnam War and the deterioration stemming from race riots in the U.S.

"The Great Society" is both triumphant and tragic, an insightful look at history and the morality of power.

Reach reporter Kathleen Alaks at 541-474-3815 or kalaks@thedailycourier.com.



The LBJ plays' back story includes Tonys, HBO

By Kathleen Alaks
of the Daily Courier

Playwright Robert Schenkkan's twin plays about the contentious, nation-changing, presidency of Lyndon B. Johnson are on quite a journey.

Part one, "All the Way," which begins when LBJ takes over for the slain John F. Kennedy and ends with his landslide election in 1964, was a commission of American Revolutions: The United States History Cycle, the Oregon Shakespeare Festival's 10-year program to commission plays about turning points in American history.

It opened at OSF in 2012, moved to the American Repertory Theater in Cambridge, Mass., and then went on to Broadway, winning a host of prizes,

including Tony Awards for Best Play and for Best Actor for Bryan Cranston in the role of LBJ.

Bill Rauch, who directed all the productions, earned a Tony nomination for Best Director.

"All the Way" also won the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award for Best American Play, the 2013 Harold and Mimi Steinberg/American Theatre Critics Association New Play Award and the Edward M. Kennedy Prize for Drama Inspired by American History.

Earlier this month, it was announced that Schenkkan will adapt "All the Way" for HBO, with Cranston reprising the role of LBJ for the film.

Part two, "The Great Society," spans November 1964 to November 1968, Johnson's first full term in office.

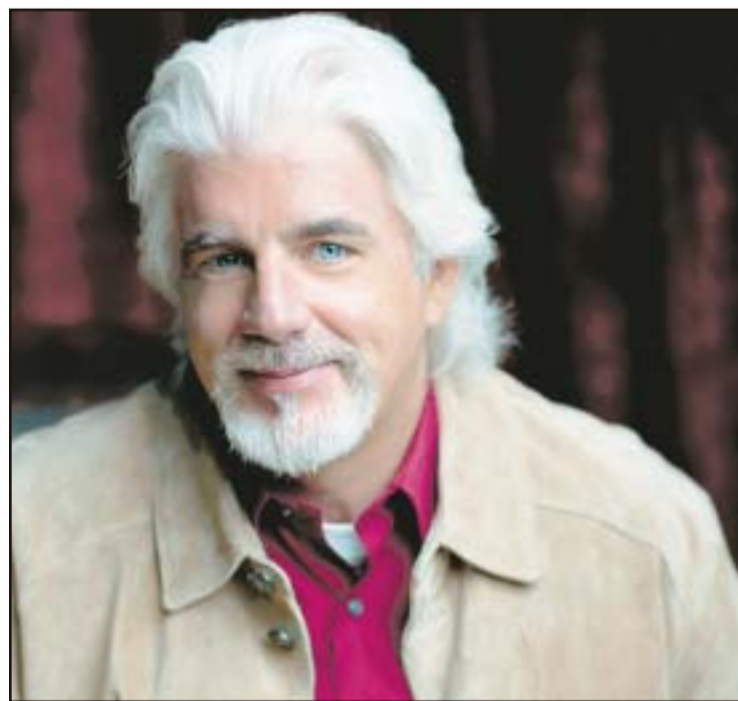
Seattle Repertory Theatre commissioned "The Great Society" and agreed to let OSF develop and mount the first production, which opened Sunday and continues through Nov. 1.

Most of the actors from "All the Way" returned to their same roles in "The Great Society" and Rauch returned to direct.

This fall, Seattle Rep will stage both "All the Way" and "The Great Society" in repertory for the first time, again with Rauch directing.

OSF actors in the original production will get first dibs on the roles, and Seattle actors will fill in the rest.

Reach reporter Kathleen Alaks at 541-474-3815 or kalaks@thedailycourier.com.



Michael McDonald will perform at Seven Feathers Casino's showroom on Friday.

McDonald set to sing his hits

Doobie Brother turned soloist is in Canyonville

By Edith Decker
of the Daily Courier

Former Doobie Brother, now solo singer/songwriter, Michael McDonald will be at Canyonville's Seven Feathers Casino and Resort for a special concert Friday night.

McDonald's hits include "Ain't No Mountain High Enough," "Sweet Freedom" and "On My Own" (with Patti LaBelle) as a solo artist and "What A Fool Believes," "Takin' It to the Streets" and "It Keeps You Runnin'" with the Doobie Brothers.

His most recent CDs are "Soul Speak," made for Motown and "Unfinished Business" from last year, made with Robben Ford.

On tour, he's backed by a six-piece band, including veterans like guitarist Bernie Chiaravalle, who's been with McDonald

since 1988, keyboardist Pat Coil, who worked with Travis Tritt, Natalie Cole and Trisha Yearwood previously and sax player Mark Douthit who played with Elton John, Lionel Ritchie and Toni Braxton, among others.

McDonald is kicking off his summer tour at Canyonville, then moving on to Portland and Marysville, Wash., then sliding into California before heading east through Oklahoma to the Southern states. His home base is now Nashville.

McDonald has chosen an interesting career path, often passing on more lucrative projects to enjoy collaboration with artists like James Ingram or joining Donald Fagen's New York rock and Soul Revue and sometimes returning to tour with the Doobie Brothers.

Most recently, he signed on with Motown to make a series of recordings devoted to

their catalog.

He started out with a move from his native Missouri to Los Angeles and had his big break when he was hired as a back-up singer for Steely Dan in the early 1970s.

He started with the Doobie Brothers in 1975 as a temporary lead singer, in for Tom Johnston. He kept the job and the band had its biggest successes ever. He earned a Grammy for song of the year for "What A Fool Believes" with Kenny Loggins.

At press time, some tickets remained at \$50 or \$40 each for Friday's 21-and-over show. See www.sevenfeathers.com or call 877-772-5425.

If you miss it, meanwhile, LeAnn Rimes is due Aug. 22 and John Anderson on Sept. 13 at Seven Feathers.

Reach reporter Edith Decker at 541-474-3724 or edecker@thedailycourier.com.

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