

By taking on this risky play, Mad Horse makes its point about censorship

pressherald.com/2023/01/23/censorship-takes-center-stage-in-mad-horse-play-about-marquis-de-sade/

By Eric Russell

January 23, 2023



Nate Stephenson and Mark Rubin rehearse “Quills,” coming to Mad Horse Theatre next month. *Photos by Jennifer Battis Photography*

The company at Mad Horse Theatre in South Portland had a lengthy and spirited debate over whether to bring the play “Quills” to production this year.

IF YOU GO

WHAT: “Quills,” by Doug Wright

WHERE: Mad Horse Theatre, 24 Mosher St., South Portland

WHEN: 7:30 p.m. Thursday, Friday and Saturday, 5 p.m. Sunday, except for the final day, which is a 2 p.m. show; Feb, 2-26

HOW MUCH: All shows at Mad Horse are now “pay what you decide.” No charge reservations are strongly suggested, but patrons can pay whatever they can afford or whatever they think is appropriate.

Written in 1995 by Doug Wright, “Quills” is a fictional story about a historical, and controversial, character – the French writer and philosopher known as the Marquis de Sade.

The story has graphic depictions of sexuality and violence, keeping in line with the Marquis’ well-documented sordid interests (the term sadism is named for him, after all), but at its core, the play is about censorship.

“Some people were like, ‘Why would we want to do this? Is this appropriate for our audiences?’” Mad Horse artistic director Mark Rubin said. “But the fact that we were having these conversations internally made me think that it was appropriate. It’s a play about the power of words and the power of words to incite and about how and where we draw the line. That seems so relevant right now.”

Wright wrote the play in the ’90s in response to attempts by conservative lawmakers to censor artwork, but those same conversations are happening today with people who want to ban books in schools and libraries that address gender identity and other topics.

Rubin said there was a bit of irony in the theater considering passing on the play.

“Then we would be the ones censoring,” he said.

“Quills” opens Thursday, Feb. 2, and runs through Feb. 26 at the South Portland theater. The play is meant for mature audiences only, and those under 18 will not be admitted.



Stephenson with Rubin, right, who plays the Marquis de Sade.

The production stars Rubin in the role of the Marquis and is directed by Stacey Koloski, who has been with the company since 2010.

Koloski said she saw the play in Washington, D.C., in 1996 when she was an intern at a stage company.

“It blew my mind,” she said. “It was my first real experience with theater as an adult, and I just had the feeling that this is what I wanted to do.”

Koloski first brought “Quills” to the company at Mad Horse for consideration eight years ago. It wasn’t chosen then and almost wasn’t chosen when she brought it back this time.

“It was fraught ... not an easy conversation,” she said. “It’s not an easy play to produce, and it’s not really an easy subject matter to talk about.”

In the end, Rubin, Koloski and the rest of the company felt like Mad Horse was the local theater most equipped to try and tackle such a play.

“I think if you look at our seasons, we’re often bringing plays people might not have heard of,” Rubin said. “We’re not afraid of doing classics, but in the last few years we’ve tried to find plays that are intriguing and different and not the norm.”



Mad Horse Theater, since here in 2014, is a small theater in South Portland that likes to take big risks.

Shawn Patrick Ouellette/Staff Photographer

“We’re a small company, and I think we have the ability to take risks in picking plays that might not be the easiest to market.”

Wright has written 18 original plays, five of which have reached Broadway. He won a Pulitzer Prize and a Tony Award in 2004 for his play “I Am My Own Wife.” He also wrote the books for the Broadway productions of “The Little Mermaid” and “Grey Gardens.”

His latest, “Good Night, Oscar,” is set to premiere on Broadway this spring, starring Sean Hayes as Oscar Levant, a composer, pianist and sometimes actor who was prominent in the mid-20th century.

“Quills” never reached Broadway, but it was made into a 2000 film starring Geoffrey Rush as the Marquis de Sade and co-starring Kate Winslet, Joaquin Phoenix and Michael Caine.

The story focuses on the Marquis, an infamous writer and an early banned book author, and the conflict between those who tried to silence him. Indeed, the Marquis spent much of his adult life locked away in institutions because powerful church leaders and others considered him mentally ill.

Koloski said the big risk in staging a production like this is that it might offend or turn people away. But she said the play doesn’t exist just to shock.

“It’s funny and it’s disarming. There is a charm to it,” she said. “And it’s no more shocking that what we’re inundated with every single day on social media.”

“This whole play is a big wink, and I think that’s what is fun about it.”

In preparing to play a character that is, at times, loathsome, Rubin said he had to focus less on the awful acts the Marquis wrote about (and committed) and more on the discourse around the writing and the attempts to censor it.

“That really is the heart of the story,” he said. “And I think one of the reasons I got into theater ... I like to create, but I also want whatever we produce to have some resonance and prompt people to reflect.”

In addition to Rubin, the cast includes Mad Horse Company members Janice Gardner and Marie Stewart Harmon and guest artists Josh Brassard, Tyler Costigan and Nate Stephenson.

The production team includes company members Koloski, Savannah Irish (production manager), and Christine Marshall, prop design) and guest artists Florence Cooley (lighting design), Michelle Handley (costume design), Joshua Hsu (sound design), Connor Perry (Set Design) Keegan Perry (stage manager) and Hollie Pryor (intimacy coordinator).

[« Previous](#)

[State’s only biennial to showcase 35 established and emerging artists](#)

[Next »](#)

[Two artists with Maine ties win \\$50,000 fellowships from national organization](#)

filed under:

[Times Record Ticket](#)

© 2023