The 13th Earl of Gurney and his servant Tucker are standing center stage, and a noise is swinging below the Earl's head.

Tucker and the Earl exchange pleasantries, and eventually Tucker leaves the room, leaving the Earl and the noise to themselves. While delivering a nonsensical monologue, the Earl (played by Adam Niemann) dons a bullet skirt and proceeds to accidentally hang himself while attempting autoerotic asphyxiation.

The absurdity and hilarity of the opening scene is a fitting microcosm of TDPS's "The Ruling Class," a thoroughly entertaining and fast-paced show combining both slapstick humor and a darkly powerful second act with airtight direction from UC Berkeley's Chris Herold.

"The Ruling Class" follows the life and times of Jack Gurney, who takes over as the 14th Earl of Gurney and the head of state after his father hangs himself. The 14th Earl is a paranoid schizophrenic, arriving on stage for the first time with long, flowing brown hair and a beard, resembling Jesus Christ. The 14th Earl believes he is Jesus, and his actions are dictated as such. His Uncle Charles and Aunt Claire, the elder statesmen of the royal household, conspire to marry an actress (Grace Shelley, played hilariously by Dasha Burns) to the earl in order to produce an heir and send Jack to a mental institution.

"The Ruling Class," written by Peter Barnes, touches on themes of the treatment of mental illness in modern times and the dysfunctional aspect of families. In its central theme, the play satirizes the lunacy and unchecked power of the British government in the 1960s and 70s. Herold's directorial choices enhance the play's objective of depicting the absurdity of the country's political processes.

The set features a giant cross in the exact center of the stage, where Jack Gurney sleeps upright. Some friends of the royal family sport ridiculous hats with an assortment of fruits and launch into impromptu dance routines in the middle of otherwise realistic scenes. Most impressive in the midst of all of this absurdity is the collective ability of the cast to deliver credible and convincing performances.

Uncle Charles and Aunt Claire, played by Alex Lee and Maya Meisinger, respectively, serve as the backbone of the show. Both project a convincing air of royalty and possess brilliant comedic timing, their quiet personas framing the craziness of their nephew's performance underneath a backdrop of credible anxiety and uneasiness.
Tucker the butler, played by Kevin Singer, emerges as the comedic star. Singer is at his best when performing his spontaneous acts of defiance against the royal family. His acting prowess is demonstrated in a downstage monologue where he flawlessly transitions between three different accents. In this moment, Singer turns Tucker into much more than a caricature — his humanity is on full display as he shows the deep hurt caused by his years of servitude.

But the show doesn't reach its full potential without the execution of Jack Gurney's incredibly difficult role. Stephen Wattrus ranges from playing a incredibly self-confident Jesus Christ to a stammering, recovering schizophrenic while maintaining a faint semblance of a realistic human being. Wattrus walks the tightrope with ease, appearing simultaneously crazy and sane. Wattrus's final monologue, standing downstage center, is viscerally powerful and emotionally moving — as good of an acting performance as you'll see in a college production.

Each component of the show, from the construction of the set down to the stage management of Valerie Tu, is executed convincingly. The jokes consistently hit their mark, and the show leaves one both satisfied and haunted — an overall impressive effort from the Berkeley theater department and performance studies.

Contact Michael Rosen at mrosen@dailycal.org.
I thought the young lady, Sharlee Taylor, that played the psychiatrist was excellent, no mention of her here. I saw the play twice & it was indeed very well acted & directed.

Sandra Sin - 4 years ago

Congratulations Stephen Wattrus! what a wonderful write up! I so look forward to seeing you on the big screen!

Mochi Kismet - 4 years ago

I saw "The Ruling Class" and thought it a magnificent production and the lead actor Stephen Wattrus gave an incredible tour de tour performance. Chris Herold directed the show with a sharpness and expansive eye to focus on the politics that unfortunately ring true today. The production values were high, it was as good if not better than many of the professional shows I've in the past 12 months. Congratulations to the UC Berkeley Dept of Theater Dance Performance Studies.

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- 'The Ruling Class' shines at UC Berkeley TDPS | The Daily Californian
- 'House of Cards' season 5 tense with latent energy