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## 'Castro's Beard' a cutting-edge political satire

By Adriana Ramirez | Thresher staff

What's not to love about the early 1960s? The Beatles, those fun haircuts, the Kennedys, Fidel Castro, the CIA and those skinny, skinny ties. Not to mention the Bay of Pigs, Khrushchev and a heightened fear of imminent death. Ah yes, good times. Stages Repertory Theater sets its newest cutting-edge production, *Castro's Beard*, in the height of the Red Scare. The minimalist production features only four characters, who sit in a static location ? a CIA boardroom ? brainstorming ways to assassinate or destabilize Castro and reclaim Cuba from those 'Red, Commie bastards.' Meet Ted, Bill, Tom and Paul. Together, they form the think tank whose sole charge is to take down Castro's regime. Ted (Rutherford Cravens) is the coordinator of the top secret division of the CIA, Bill (David Born) is a clandestine operative who single handedly took Guatemala, Tom (Jeffery Yaworski) is a Massachusetts Institute of Technology/Yale University scientist always ready with the wackiest new technology at hand, and Paul (John Richard Johnston) is a Harvard Law School graduate with a conscience. The problem? Our four misguided bureaucrats function in a world layered with preposterous science, international politics and pesky laws prohibiting murder. The goal? Elimination with total deniability. Possible assassination methods range from the classic exploding seashell to a revolution-inciting motorized Jesus. The men plot to destabilize the regime by reinstating the Christmas holiday or to take down Castro and his follicle hold over the Cuban people by stripping him of his famous beard. The 2001 play, by English playwright Brian Stewart, is well written. The first act is rather long, but the one-liners and the quick exchange of ideas keep it moving along nicely. The second act takes an odd turn, veering from the play's successful foundation of absurdity into heavy-handed moralizing about the nature of war. Stewart clearly intends the audience to identify with Paul as the voice of reason and morality. Brought in by Bill to provide an outsider's perspective in the boardroom, he is as lost as we are. However, as the show progresses and we learn more about our straight man, we find him less appealing. This turnaround complicates the already twisting plot. In Act 2, Paul attempts to justify his hatred of the system in an unconvincing and unnecessary manner. We do not believe him, and we do not care about his reasoning. Stewart would have done well to stick to his original premise and keep the jokes coming. As Ted, Cravens delivers a solid performance. He is credible as a true-blue soldier and politician, and is reminiscent of George C. Scott in *Dr. Strangelove*. Born and Yaworski do an excellent job of keeping the show fresh. Perhaps the biggest problem stems from the high intensity of the acting. Director Kenn McLaughlin has put together an amazing production with close attention to detail ? the set and music are wonderful. However, I would have liked to see a greater variety of pacing, which would have allowed the audience to breathe. Born, Yaworski and Johnson spend most of their time onstage yelling and red in the face. In the end, though, *Castro's Beard* comes through with both humor and humanity. All four actors merge to form a riveting ensemble cast. Interestingly, Stewart based his story on true but little-known facts. Part of the fun of watching the show is knowing that the CIA came dangerously close to sending Jesus to Cuba on a motorized surfboard cross.

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