

## Theater

# The crime of punishment

*Guilty ... until proven innocent.*

BY MARTY FUGATE  
Arts and Entertainment Editor

This is a very good play — and very hard to take. The good ones are like that. The good plays are true and the truth hurts.

Playwrights Jessica Blank and Erik Jensen tell the stories of six people wrongly sent to death row and ultimately acquitted. The stories are real, but that's not what makes them true — that's just journalism. The stories are true because they cut you to the heart. Blank and Jensen get you into the inner lives of these characters, make you identify with them, make you care. That's art.

The stories are told in the characters' own words culled from transcripts, letters, diaries and interviews. The stories aren't told one at a time. Blank and Jensen artfully arrange the play as a kind of verbal fugue — point and counterpoint, bouncing from one tale to another echoing themes of pain and partial redemption.

Sunny (Anne O'Sullivan) is a peace-and-love flower child at the wrong place at the wrong time. (Sadly, that's usually in Florida.) She and her husband are taken hostage at gunpoint after a sleazebag kills two cops. That sleazebag knows the system and how to plea-bargain. He fingers his hostages — and they wind up on two death rows. Sunny gets out — after 16 years. Her husband gets out first — to the next world. His last minutes in this world become 13 minutes of torture when the electric chair goes haywire. The justice system also goes haywire. The sleazebag recants his perjured testimony. His confession rots, until activists reopen Sunny's case.

Delbert Tibbs (Leroy Mitchell Jr.) is another child of the '60s — a light-skinned black poet who decides to hitchhike across America in the '70s. He does, encountering friendly people of all races along the way. He encounters some not-so-friendly people in Florida, sad to say. They work in law enforcement. They send him to jail for an unsolved murder committed by a light-skinned black man — 200 miles away from where Tibbs was hitchhiking, but close enough. He gets out after two years. That's long enough.

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*"The Exonerated"*

Gompertz Theatre

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Running through May 5

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Kerry Max Cook (Stephen Hope) spends 20 years on death row for the rape, murder and mutilation of a secretary. DNA evidence ultimately clears him. Turns out, a jealous professor did it. There was plenty of suppressed conventional evidence pointing to that professor at the time. But

the prosecution liked its pet theory that Cook was a kill-crazy sex pervert better. This doesn't help him in prison. Neither does the murder of his brother on the outside.

Gary (David Sitler) expects a visit from his parents. At first he thinks they're late. Then he finds out they're dead. He calls the police. To Gary's surprise, they take him down to the station, badger him for 12 hours and trick him into making a confession. He's convicted, serves two years on death row, and then his conviction is thrown out — typical bleeding heart chicanery from the State's Attorney's point of view. Wiretapping on a sociopathic Wisconsin motorcycle gang proves differently a year later. His parents' murder was an initiation ritual.

Cops badger a confession out of David

Keaton (Nate Jacobs). He's a black guy walking by a store. Earlier that day, a black guy killed a cop inside the store. Keaton is a black guy; he did it; QED. Actually he didn't do it. He's a man of faith. Eight years facing the electric chair test his faith. He gets out when the real killer's caught.

Robert (Gregory Mikell) is a horse-trainer from Mississippi — a black man who occasionally talks to white women and has even dated a few. A white woman has been raped and killed. Robert talked to her once. That's good enough for the local police officers, who promptly haul him in. Robert is smart enough not to confess. It doesn't help. He spends six years in death row. Georgia, his black girlfriend, stands by him the whole time. Physical evidence clears him. But he doesn't get his license for training horses back.

Bad people get away with bad things; bad things happen to good people; innocence doesn't always help. That's bad enough. Worse — innocent or not, if you're thrown in jail, you feel like a criminal. Worse than that — even if your name is cleared, you're never the same when they let you out. You're damaged goods.

Director Kate Alexander presents this awful truth with bone simplicity — just two rows of actors sitting on chairs and telling their stories. O'Sullivan, Mitchell, Hope, Sitler, Jacobs and Mikell melt into their characters, creating sympathy without milking you for it. Steve Mountain and Robert Mowry stand in for various unsympathetic cops, finks and judges.

The electric chair, of course, is the rarely glimpsed star of the show. (There's a mock-up



Forrest Mac

You're not a free man — you're a number

of one that occasionally hums and s behind a scrim.) Throwing innocent p in jail is bad; killing them's worse; get the death penalty is the obvious concl though Blank and Jensen would probabl tle for cleaning up the criminal-justic tem. Their play lets you draw your own clusions. "The Exonerated" keeps polemics hidden most of the time — lik sizzling chair behind the scrim. It keep pain of its very real people in plain sight truth of that unjust pain cuts deep.

You start up in the realm of single politics. You end up in the Book of Job.