

BUILDING THE WALL, A PLAY BY ROBERT SCHENKKAN, PULITZER PRIZE AND TONY AWARD WINNER.

WRITER'S NOTE ON BUILDING THE WALL

"The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing."

Several years ago I stumbled across, *"Into That Darkness"* by Gitta Sereny. It is an attempt to understand the bleakest of the Nazi horrors by focusing on one ordinary man who for a brief moment, found himself with unlimited power. The past is often the future and in this play I have imagined a not so distant time to come in which President Trump's rhetoric has found its full expression. While the current political crisis is extraordinary it is not new, the authoritarian play book is well established. Create a constant state of crisis which only a "strong" leader can solve. Encourage fear, divide the populace, and scapegoat minorities with appeals to nationalism, racism, and isolationism. Smear your opponents as unpatriotic and tell the press to "just shut up and listen." The question, of course, is not so much what the Authorities will do but how we, the citizens, will respond. Sickened by the hate, by the constant assault, will we succumb to our fears, avert our gaze, and look after our own interests? Or will we enthusiastically put our shoulders to their dark wheel? Or will we resist. To those who say that could never happen here in this country, I reply, maybe so, but that of course will depend entirely on what *you* do?

The Story:

Building a border wall was a central theme during Donald Trump's presidential campaign. And it's now at the heart of a new play called "Building the Wall." The play by Robert Schenkkan is set a few years from now. Martial law has been declared after a terror attack and the federal government has rounded up thousands of immigrants and sent them to deportation camps, but things take a very bad turn when a former security officer named Rick, who helped oversee the detention camps, is awaiting sentencing and is being interviewed by a history professor named Gloria.

"[A] terrifyingly plausible work of dystopian fiction... Step by step, Schenkkan gets us to see the way the collapse of institutions leads to the collapse of morality and the rule of law." —LA Times. "In his mesmerizing two-hander, Schenkkan illustrates the chilling speed at which fascistic tendencies can

overtake ordinary Americans.” —Hollywood Reporter. “At present, BUILDING THE WALL sounds far-fetched; one lesson of the first 100 days is that even presidents must operate within legal confines...but Schenkkan’s project puts down a marker declaring that the American theater always can be—and had better be—a swift-moving imaginative and intellectual platform.” —Washington Post. “There’s a hold-your-breath inevitability to what is finally disclosed in BUILDING THE WALL, [a] powerful dystopian drama about life in the Donald Trump era...what the writer imagines is not so much a fanciful futurist leap but a calculated cautionary tale...[a] scorcher of a play...” —Variety.

How the play came about:

KCRW spoke with Robert Schenkkan about how the play came to be, and how he’s continually rewriting it as news changes.

Robert Schenkkan: I wrote “Building the Wall” in October of last year. Even though this was before the election and I, like a lot of people, anticipated a different result. I felt that even then a line had been crossed and damage had been done. And I felt this very, very strong need to respond in the moment. It wasn’t simply the race-baiting and kind of outrageous comments by the then Republican candidate, about border control and immigration, so much as the response by educators, journalists, politicians, smart people who should know better, who tried to normalize this abnormal rhetoric and behavior, and that to me was really the red flag.

KCRW: What were you looking to accomplish?

RS: What I hoped to achieve with “Building the Wall,” like any piece of theater, is to engage the audience emotionally and intellectually. I want them to be provoked. I want them to be prodded into thinking a little bit more deeply about their own lives, about their own experience and about what’s happening. No radical ideology becomes law and public policy without the buy in of millions of people, and the play very much deals with that. About this process about which good people can accept compromise after compromise, until without realizing it they find themselves in a really terrible, even tragic position.

KCRW: You wrote the play before the election, have you made any rewrites or changes to reflect events that have happened since President Trump was inaugurated.

RS: I have indeed. There have been multiple productions already, beginning with the very first production in Los Angeles at the Fountain Theater, but has also been produced in Denver, Miami, Washington D.C., Santa Fe, etc. And each of these productions have given me an opportunity to keep us abreast enough of current events, so that the play itself feels solidly anchored in our current reality. And so that has meant periodically, going into the play and adding a line here or a line there.

KCRW: The play has gotten some strong reviews, including from the LA Times, but it's also gotten some less than glowing reviews, including from the New York Times, which basically said the characters are stereotypes and that the play is propaganda, reinforcing people's preconceptions, not challenging them to think. What do you say to that?

RS: I don't pay a whole lot of attention to the critics. I would expect that a play like this, which is provocative and contemporary, and written to speak to the moment, would generate varied responses across the entire spectrum. And I haven't been disappointed in that regard. You know, I'm under no illusions that I am going to dramatically change someone's perspective, particularly in a political, partisan way. But I do think that I can bring people a little more understanding of each other, of their different perspectives and positions, and generate a meaningful conversation about the issues. I was in Aspen the other day, at the Aspen Ideas Festival, where the Denver Curious Theater remounted their production for one night for festival participants, and then the next day I was on a panel talking about theater and politics. This couple came up from the audience, and the husband said to me, "You know I just wanted to tell you this, I've been at the festival now for three days and primarily we've been going to political panels and listening to speakers on politics. You know I didn't really understand the appeal of Trump until I heard your play." I take that as kind of highest form of complement.