

NY1 Theater Review: "The Man Who Ate Michael Rockefeller"

By: Roma Torre



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A new off-Broadway play focusing on the final days of Michael Rockefeller, the son of former New York Governor Nelson Rockefeller who died at the hands of a cannibalistic tribe in New Guinea, enforces some stereotypes while shattering others. NY1's Roma Torre filed the following report.

?When you consider that Michael Rockefeller, the real-life son of Nelson Rockefeller, disappeared in 1961 while visiting a cannibalistic tribe in New Guinea, titling a play about that tragic event "The Man Who Ate Michael Rockefeller" is pretty callous -- and it's a comedy no less.

Yet it's hard to imagine a more respectful treatment of the subject, with, if you'll pardon the pun, so much *food for thought*.

Told from the natives' point of view, Michael is portrayed much as the facts reveal -- a very bright and inquisitive 23-year-old fresh out of Harvard who is fascinated by the carvings of the Asmat people. Given his extreme wealth, he is able to arrive on their shores with the philanthropic intention of buying their artwork and setting up a museum to showcase it.

At first, the culture clash is humorous. The Asmat characters are cleverly directed to speak gibberish when addressing Michael to indicate the language barrier, while speaking perfect English amongst themselves. The effect

allows viewers to see the Asmats as innately intelligent people but also extremely ignorant. Their mating habits are especially amusing.

Of course, there's a dark side to this tale. The encroachment of Western culture is pollution to the Asmat. Money has no meaning, and Michael's arrival has a disruptive effect on their natural order. That order is ruled by a delicate balance between nature and their ancestral spirits.

It's well-cast and the actors playing the Asmats achieve the nearly impossible task of humanizing the head-hunting cannibals. As written and performed, they carry out the most off-puttingly bizarre customs while still managing to seem in many ways much like us.

Based on a short story by Christopher Stokes, playwright Jeff Cohen crafts a uniquely theatrical vision of primitive life. Shaped by director Alfred Preisser, the story unfolds vividly, enforcing some stereotypes while shattering others.

Their perspective is really quite eye-opening; and otherworldly as the natives may seem, this boldly original play ultimately forces viewers to rethink their superior notions of "civilized" society
