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THEATER REVIEW | 'THE MAN WHO ATE MICHAEL ROCKEFELLER'

# A Primitive Artist and His Patron



Lia Chang

A scene from "The Man Who Ate Michael Rockefeller."

By RACHEL SALTZ  
Published: September 16, 2010

*"The Man Who Ate Michael Rockefeller," which opened at the West End Theater in September, has moved to Off Broadway. It is at the Arclight Theater, 152 West 71st Street, Manhattan; (212) 868-4444 or [dogrunrep.com](http://dogrunrep.com). Following is Rachel Saltz's review, which appeared in The New York Times on Sept. 20.*

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Lia Chang  
Aaron Strand in "The Man Who Ate

Who better to tell the story of Michael Rockefeller's disappearance than the people among whom he disappeared? That's the simple but smart narrative idea behind Jeff Cohen's play "The Man Who Ate Michael Rockefeller," a Dog Run Rep production that has a light, sure touch even when it treads on weighty cultural ground.

Some background: In 1961 Michael Rockefeller, an anthropologist and a son of Nelson Rockefeller, then the governor of New York, disappeared off the western coast of the island of New Guinea. Michael probably drowned after his canoe collapsed; he tried to swim to shore but his body was never found. But because the Asmat people he was studying practiced cannibalism and headhunting, there was [plenty of speculation](#) about how he met his end.

Mr. Cohen and Christopher Stokes, whose short story inspired the play, invert the classic encounter between anthropologist and "primitive" culture. Here the Other is the white man who has come to call.

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Michael Rockefeller."

The Asmat are decked out in body paint and minimal clothes, but they speak perfect American English. We see

Michael (Aaron Strand) through their eyes: a khaki-clad grinning, babbling fellow who, they learn, is a member of the rich Rockefeller tribe of New York.

Michael has seen carvings by Designing Man (the excellent Daniel Morgan Shelley) and commissions him to make more. But Designing Man becomes ensnared in the political machinations of his best friend, Half Moon Terror (David King, also very good), and Michael, too, becomes a pawn in this game.

At just under an hour, "The Man Who Ate Michael Rockefeller," directed by [Alfred Preisser](#), is brisk and entertaining. It helps that Mr. Preisser and his excellent cast have found a tone — a lightly comic seriousness — that so well suits the play's themes of culture-on-culture violence and misunderstanding.

A high point (and a demonstration of Mr. Preisser's skill) is the long, burlesqued sex scene between Designing Man and his best friend's wife, Plentiful Bliss (Tracy Jack, who almost steals the show). While Plentiful straddles Designing Man in ever more creative and acrobatic ways, she is planting an idea in his mind — Michael Rockefeller must die.

There's more here than just enmity, though. Michael may be a pale cipher with odd paper money and a camera around his neck, but Designing Man senses his good will and openness. What's more, he shares it. Brotherhood exists, even if it is quickly and decisively quashed.

*This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:*

**Correction: September 24, 2010**

*A theater review on Monday about "The Man Who Ate Michael Rockefeller," at the West End Theater, misidentified the area where Rockefeller disappeared in 1961. It was off the western coast of the island of New Guinea; not in the eastern part that is now the country of Papua New Guinea.*

A version of this review appeared in print on September 20, 2010, on page C6 of the New York edition.

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– *t barry, ny ny*

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February 20th, 2011 4:33 pm

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1. **"...Rockefeller" is fascinating live theatre**

Saw this edgy, creative play today. And while I don't understand everything about the play, I have to say it was a fascinating 65 minutes of theatre. This piece reminded me of why I love attending live theatre events, and embracing the work of new playwrights. I'll be thinking about this one for a while.

– *Naimawan, New York, NY*

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