

History Lives

The Vietnam War, Civil Rights riots, and rock 'n' roll all play a part in 1968: *The Year that Rocked the World*

BY ELLEN BURKHARDT

It's easy to get wrapped up in the drama of the world today: the Arab spring, devastating natural disasters, the Occupy movement, Republicans and Democrats fighting as if it were their job. But all this tumult is nothing new. As the saying goes, history repeats itself, and we're reminded of that with the History Theatre's *1968: The Year that Rocked the World*, playing at the Minnesota History Center.

The 2000s look mild compared to 1968. This was the year of two devastating assassinations (Martin Luther King Jr., Senator Robert Kennedy), the continuation of the Vietnam War, heated Civil Rights strikes and protests, the violent Democratic National Convention in Chicago, Nixon's narrow defeat of Humphrey for the presidency, the Apollo 8 broadcast—and that's just the beginning of what could be a pages-long list. Comprehensively covering such an intense, eventful year is no small task, but director Ron Peluso has done just that. And, for the most part, has done it well.

An open, adaptable stage is crucial in addressing the wide range of topics *1968* covers, and scenic designer Justin Hooper did an excellent job in creating a versatile backdrop. The multi-level, industrial-looking set allows for multiple actors to be on stage at once, even if only a few are acting at a time, and the few props (a bed, a desk, a couple chairs) get their fair share of use in every scene.

Instead of trying to delve into every major storyline of 1968, Peluso chooses to focus on just seven, each written into a unique scene by different playwrights: the Vietnam War from the perspective of a recently returned veteran, the sanitation-worker strike in Memphis, Bobby Kennedy's assassination through the eyes of Rosemary



Photo by Scott Pakudaitis
E.J. Subkoviak as John Mitchell, Paul de Cordova as Richard Nixon

Clooney, former Attorney General John Mitchell's imprisonment, Tommie Smith and John Carlos at the 1968 Olympic games, Minnesota's Native American community, and the Apollo 8 broadcast. Of these seven, only two scenes—Smith and Carlos, and Apollo 8—falter. In "Smith and Carlos," a faux news story with a taped stint from WCCO-TV anchors Frank Vascellaro and Amelia Santaniello was confusing and awkward, and in "Apollo 8" things got

weird with a time-travel scenario.

Addressing all the other newsworthy events, songs, stories, and people of 1968 are small interludes between the main scenes. These entertaining, fast-paced snippets provide necessary insight and context, and keep things moving along nicely. As there is so much to cover, all the actors (10 in total) play multiple characters, and do an excellent job with the quick changes.

For as ambitious a project as it is, *1968* covers its namesake year well. Despite the few hiccups (including forgoing an intermission, making the show feel longer than it really is), this is a worthwhile and entertaining history lesson—one that's worth attending.

1968: The Year that Rocked the World
Through February 19
\$15-\$38
Minnesota History Center, 345 Kellogg Blvd. W., St. Paul, 651-259-3000
minnesotahistorycenter.org