

History Theatre's '1968' captures that monumental year

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How do you pack the violent, transformative, manifold and chaotic events of a watershed year into just a couple of hours of theater? History Theatre's Ron Peluso decided to tap not one but seven writers in "1968: The Year That Rocked the World."

Each creates an emotionally resonant miniplay that illuminates one key facet of the power-packed year, with the disparate pieces stitched together by snippets of music, quotes from popular TV shows and news stories of the day. It's a compelling crazy-quilt of facts, memories and ideas that presents plenty of food for thought.

Given the bloody start of 1968, with the infamous Tet Offensive in Vietnam, the show aptly begins with a scene based on the trauma of a vet who returned from Vietnam with horrific memories, only to be villainized by strangers back home. Rising weekly death counts cited between scenes keep the Vietnam War top-of-mind throughout.

The expanding push for Civil Rights shows up in three different segments. One takes on the conflicting needs and fears of black sanitation workers who struck for better wages in Memphis - and suggests the impact of the 1968 assassination of Dr. Martin

Luther King Jr. Joe Nathan Thomas is especially strong as an older worker tempted to quit the strike because he desperately needs money to feed his family.

Thomas turns in another fine performance as an audience member who, when asked by a supposed TV interviewer to tell which event of 1968 most affected him, recounts

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the impact of seeing two black Olympic medalists raise their fists into the air in a symbol of Black Power for the world to see.

In another segment, we get a glimpse of the police brutality that fueled the American Indian Movement that was founded in Minnesota in 1968. It ends with a glimmer of hope.

Oddly enough, women's rights get shortchanged in the production. They're barely mentioned, even though the first national women's liberation conference took place in 1968.

Given that 1968 was a huge election year, politics get personal in a couple of segments, including the most moving tale

of the seven, "Rosemary" by Kevin Kautzman. A big supporter of Robert Kennedy, Rosemary Clooney was present



Paul de Cordova, one of the ensemble members in the "timeline" segue between the short plays. (Scott Pakudaitis)

when he was assassinated. Karen Weber turns in a powerful performance as the singer who can't sing in the aftermath of the assassination - struggling to come to grips with his death in a mental hospital.

A satiric look at Richard Nixon's political maneuverings provides welcome comic relief. Paul de Cordova is hilarious as Nixon, and E.J. Subkoviak makes a wonderful sidekick as John Mitchell. There are a couple of crowd-pleasing Minnesota jokes in Dominic Orlando's funny little play, with despicable machinations behind the comedy that are truly disturbing.

Hope reaches its pinnacle in a segment that examines the impact of Apollo 8, the first capsule to orbit the moon. Its image of Earth gave people a sense of how we were all on this one fragile planet together, helping to drive the environmental movement and progress toward peace.

"1968" is an idea-packed review of an amazing year that's well worth revisiting 44 years later - and it's bound to spark some spirited discussions afterward.

What: "1968: The Year that Rocked the World"

Where: Minnesota History Center, 345 W. Kellogg Blvd., St. Paul

When: Through Feb. 19

Tickets: \$38, \$34 and \$15 for students (5-18)

Information: 651.292.4323; historytheatre.com

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