

Review: History Theatre's 'Courting Harry' a powerful portrait of a friendship



Pearce Bunting, front left, and John Middleton, front right, in History Theatre's "Courting Harry," a play about the almost lifelong relationship between St. Paul-bred U.S. Supreme Court justices Warren Burger and Harry Blackmun. The show runs through June 7, 2026, at the St. Paul theater. (Rick Spaulding / History Theatre)



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Warren Burger and Harry Blackmun were two poor kids from St. Paul's Dayton's Bluff neighborhood who met in kindergarten and forged an almost lifelong friendship. Blackmun was best man at Burger's wedding, and, when they both became lawyers, they talked about forming a firm together.

That never happened, but their partnership proved far more high-profile than that: They served together on the U.S. Supreme Court, with Burger being chief justice from 1969 to 1986. Dubbed "the Minnesota twins," they often voted together in Blackmun's early years on the court, but grew gradually further apart in their views, especially after Blackmun wrote the majority opinion in the landmark reproductive rights decision, *Roe v. Wade*.

Theirs was a complex friendship that comes to gripping life in History Theatre's excellent production of "Courting Harry," a play by another Minnesotan who's gone on to bigger things, playwright Lee Blessing (best known for his Pulitzer- and Tony-nominated drama "A Walk in the Woods," also about the bonds and conflicts between two men).

Originally premiered on the same stage in 2013, "Courting Harry" is a drama that's aged well, serving as an ideal example of how to present history with both a human face and a palpably beating heart. Driven by two powerful performances – Pearce Bunting as Burger and John Middleton as Blackmun – it feels like an absorbing courtroom drama that never sets foot in the courtroom, instead taking us to the chambers where America's thorniest disputes are debated and decided.

If you're a stickler for historical accuracy, you'll find little to quibble with here, for Blackmun left behind 1,585 boxes of paperwork at his death in 1999, and longtime New York Times Supreme Court reporter Linda Greenhouse pored through them in creating the 2005 biography that inspired Blessing's play.



John Middleton, left, and Pearce Bunting in History Theatre's "Courting Harry," a play about the almost lifelong relationship between St. Paul-bred U.S. Supreme Court justices Warren Burger and Harry Blackmun. The show runs through June 7, 2026, at the St. Paul theater. (Rick Spaulding / History Theatre)

Yet it's not just a drama about the law, but a compelling portrait of a friendship that frays when tested by the passions that can pervade our country's dominant legal issues.

The pair's shared history is presented as a memory play, Blackmun looking back from a nebulous afterlife and inviting the reluctant Burger to offer his perspective. Their disparate personalities are immediately clear, Bunting presenting Burger as a blustering bundle of ambition, Middleton's "Wary Harry" dry-witted and deferential – until he isn't.

Joel Sass offers admirable work as both director and set designer, placing the action in a large open circle that begins to feel like a wrestling ring when the disagreements heat up. As the exchanges grow more brutally honest, Bunting and Middleton make their conflicts compelling.

Set against a wall full of boxes that serve as Blackmun's archives, the story is aided by four other actors who portray multiple other characters, including several Supreme Court justices and two presidents made believable by EJ Subkoviak without resorting to cartoonish imitation.

Yes, it's historically accurate, but Blessing takes the liberty of letting Burger and Blackmun eventually have the piercingly insightful argument onstage that they never had in life. That scene serves as a reminder of what power lies in stripping away the stagecraft and presenting unalloyed vulnerability. It's the climax of a show that could inspire you to examine your most enduring friendships and take good care of what's holding them together.

'Courting Harry'

When: Through June 7

Where: History Theatre, 30 E. 10th St., St. Paul

Tickets: \$70-\$15, available at 651-292-4323 or historytheatre.com

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