

Cornelison sparkles as Darrow

by John Busbee

Challenges abound when an independent theatrical production selects a one-man historical play using an unknown producing entity and the hit-and-miss appeal of a biographical subject. The artistic burdens land squarely on the shoulders of one director and one actor. These challenges can be daunting. However, Director/Producer Thatcher Williams crafts a smooth and very appealing production in “Clarence Darrow” while Michael Cornelison’s title character breathes memorable life and passion into one of America’s great leaders.

Thanks to attention to details with the set design, the rather utilitarian space of the Iowa Public Theatre at the State of Iowa Historical Building is effectively transformed into an appealing stage for Cornelison to share his Darrow. Add Designer to Williams’ credits – the set is his design. The wood tones of the courtroom elements, Darrow’s office (complete with miniature bookend statue of the famous ape sculpture contemplating Darwin’s Theory) and extra attention given to the props, lend a strong sense of stepping into Darrow’s era. Minimal area lighting effectively draws focus as Cornelison seamlessly transitions from scene to scene. Williams

skillfully stages this work to allow Cornelison physical freedom for his Darrow. The overall effect is an easily accessible, immensely engaging theatrical experience. A special tip of the hat goes to Michael Meacham of Radio Garage for his Sound Design work, which started the process of drawing the audience into Darrow’s world.



Michael Cornelison as Clarence Darrow

Des Moines and Iowa are fortunate to claim an actor of Cornelison’s talents. His range, depth of character and his stagecraft are a delight to watch, and, selfishly, I hope he continues sharing his gifts with Iowa audiences for a long career. From spot-on physicalization to speech patterns and delivery of the dialogue, Cornelison breathes life into playwright

David W. Rintel’s “Clarence Darrow.” His ability to guide the audience and share insights into Darrow’s life makes Cornelison’s performance a wonderfully memorable delight. Energizing the dialogue of Rintel’s script, he shapes the direction of each scene, sharing Darrow’s delights, frustrations and passions. It is no surprise that the program notes indicate Cornelison’s unabashed respect for Clarence Darrow as one of his personal heroes. This respect and admiration are skillfully woven into a presentation that leaves audience members with a candid and introspective connection with one of America’s great historical figures.

This style of theatre lacks the large cast bombast and splashy production numbers on which bigger productions rely. But, thanks to an artfully developed combination of casting, production and direction, this neatly delivered package is as appealing as a favorite book or favorite comfort food on a cold winter’s night. So, curl up with this tremendous theatrical experience – you’ll smile, empathize and feel a closer kinship to a great American whose character and commitment are worth this more intimate connection.