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## Cornelison makes the case for 'Darrow'

By Jeffrey Bruner

Oh, the irony that so few people saw Michael Cornelison's wonderful one-man show "Clarence Darrow" on Saturday at the State Historical Building.



Michael Cornelison as Clarence Darrow

Cornelison brought the brilliant defense lawyer, champion of the underdog and great civil libertarian to life. Time and time again, Darrow defended people the government wanted to "punish for the crime of thought." Darrow gave up his comfortable job as lawyer for the

Chicago and North Western Railway to defend labor leader (and later socialist) Eugene Debs, who had the audacity to demand reasonable working conditions for Pullman Co. railroad workers.

He represented Pennsylvania miners during a 1903 strike, exposing widespread child labor, and defended labor leader "Big Bill" Haywood, whom authorities were determined to frame for the murder of a former Idaho governor in 1906. Then, of course, there was the Scopes trial of 1925 that was a landmark in civil liberties.

Cornelison was convincing as Darrow, whether talking to the jury, his wife or the audience. The simple set - an office table and chair, the railing in front of the jury box, a defense table and the judge's bench and witness chair - was all that was needed for this extended conversation with a giant of history.

The only flaw in David Rintels' play, based on Irving Stone's "Clarence Darrow for the

Defense," is that it plays up the Darrow myth a bit at the expense of reality of this man, who was complex and imperfect. The play also shortchanges the Scopes trial, especially the relationship between Darrow and writer H.L. Mencken.

Yet there's little doubt Darrow would have nonstop work these days. He'd help those being held at Guantanamo Bay or tortured at the Abu Ghraib prison. He'd work with all of those men off Illinois' death row who were later freed when the governor admitted how flawed the legal system had become. And he'd rail against corporate CEOs who now make 300 times the average worker's salary. But would Darrow have an audience today?

Probably not, judging from the two people and one theater critic who were treated to an outstanding theater performance about the man on Saturday afternoon.

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