



### **Caterham School: 1984 - There was Truth and there was Untruth**

As an NSTA Representative, I had the great pleasure of watching the Caterham School Production of '1984' performed at the school on Friday 6<sup>th</sup> December 2024. This powerful and intense production was staged simply but highly effectively by Caterham's Director of Drama Miss Gabi Guttner, with technical support from Theatre Manager Mr John Baddeley and AV design from Theatre Technician Mr Ethan Barnes.

*1984* has long been a chilling warning against a powerful system in which the individual is lost and exploited. George Orwell's classic tells of Winston, an innocent caught up in the net of powerful Party managers, whose torture and punishment in a dystopian world makes us ask serious questions about our own societal treatment by the regimes and systems that control us. In Orwell's story, Great Britain has become Airstrip One, subservient to totalitarian superstate Oceania and its chilling leader, Big Brother. Surveillance is steered by the Ministry of Truth and it is into their net that Winston ultimately falls, his closet hatred for the Party betrayed by his secret diary, his love for Julia, and fiendish Party agents such as Charrington and O'Brien. Duncan Macmillan and Robert Icke's clever theatrical adaptation of the book centres on these questions of truth and trust, which seem so relevant in today's world of social media and 'fake news'.

Is there anything more beautiful than a large square empty space in which 'theatre-in-the-round' can be created? Peter Brook didn't think so and nor do I, which made the simple but opportunity-rich setting so attractive here. At each corner of the central quadrilateral, a camera had been set up to record and livestream CCTV footage back onto a neighbouring screen. This setup enabled us both to watch pre-recorded acting segments, footage of protests, and military parades, and to experience a sequence of digital manipulation and nightmarish sequences, not least ourselves. Big Brother truly was Watching You. We were also treated to a wonderful if haunting soundtrack, devised by the talented Mrs Richards and beautifully played by Mrs Richards alongside Abi, Ines, Catherine, and Winnie. It all made for a tremendous and atmospheric environment.

The Company worked hard and very effectively to carry along the central story. In a world of doublethink, it was fitting to have two Winstons, whose constant interchanging asked us again and again to question what we thought we knew to be true. Max's Winston was a highly effective portrayal of the ever-hopeful innocent over whom lurks the gloomy threat of ultimate tragedy. Max dealt with the later scenes of torture and despair extremely well, providing a disintegrating character that was compelling to watch. One might additionally add that it takes courage for an actor to put his head into a rats' cage. Charlie's Winston was a lovely contrast to this, capturing the emotional angst and anger of a character that might so easily be seen by the Party as



'troubled'. I particularly enjoyed his scene with Isabelle and Lia which revealed something of Winston's family past. Together, the two Winstons provided an intriguing character study of this pitiable and tortured soul. Emily gave us an equally desperate Julia and was very effective at showing the ambiguity of her character – at times really elegant in celebration of counter-culture womanliness, and elsewhere chilling as the Delilah of the Party machine. George was beautifully spoken and really scary in the pivotal role of O'Brien. She is surely a teacher in the making. Florence's movement, delivery, and poise as Charrington was excellent, and she made the absolute most of this small yet pivotal part. Sam's Parsons was a wonderful portrayal of the big-mouthed and clottish goon, whose goofy lack of awareness drags him into a whole heap of trouble – yes, we all know that type and Sam brought him very effectively to life.

These key figures were supported well by a wider Ensemble who worked hard and did a very good job indeed. Right from the very start, and the grim-faced patrols of Guards Penelope, Finn, Eve, and Sam as the audience entered the theatre, through the refined and eloquent Readers, to the nightmarish conclusion (were Marusia, Kasper, and Georgina really enjoying doing all that torturing quite as much as it seemed?!), the whole Ensemble moved smoothly and worked together effectively to carry the story forward and offer support. The transitions were hugely impressive and their smoothness highly professional and slick, tables whizzing on and off stage like clockwork. There was a particularly lovely street scene achieved through fine movement by the wider Company – how cheering to see the simplicity of this approach to staging – no props, no set, just good use of movement conjuring the picture. I also very much enjoyed Zoë's lovely singing. All power to this particular Party.

I can confidently say - and without fear of accusation of thoughtcrime by the Thought Police - that Caterham School's *1984* was simply but beautifully enacted, clever in its use of technology, and impressive as a team effort that delivered a modern tragedy with real intensity and impact.

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