

British Theatre Guide

News, reviews, features and podcast on theatre across the UK

Slaves

Rex Obano
Theatre503
(2010)

Politicians running our country fiddle expenses and senior Metropolitan Police officer Ali Dizaei frames an innocent man; both are recent examples of how those in positions of authority sometimes do the wrong thing. With these episodes still extremely fresh in the public's mind, Rex Obano's *Slaves* dives into a world where those in positions of power don't always play by the rules.

Slave's protagonist is Chris Jackson, a bright young black man who has been fast tracked through the prison system and is learning the ropes as he embarks on a journey towards becoming governor. For Jackson, things don't run smoothly, clashing with the aptly named old school Officer White, experiencing institutional racism and getting flak from the inmates as they argue that 'no self respecting black man would become a prison officer.'

A blast from the past in the form of prisoner Jenks tests Jackson to the extreme. Now in a position of power, does he succumb to the threats of his prisoner who demands drugs? If Jackson does not provide them, he can be sure that his wife will get a nasty visit from one of Jenk's boys on the outside. Worried for her safety, Jackson foolishly agrees and so begins a series of unfortunate events which leads to the death of an inmate; the very one Jackson agreed to 'help'.

Foreshadowed as the climax to act one, Jenks dies by opening the wounds from his previous suicide attempt. With Jenks now dead, Jackson must live with the fact that he provided a suicidal inmate with the very thing that could have pushed him over the edge and indeed the prisoners enjoy the rumour mill that Jenks died from an overdose provided by their Prison Officer.

This incident raises many questions: What does it mean to be guilty? Can crime sometimes help others? Does it always lead to tragedy? Can prisoners be reformed? Does heavy handedness or a friendly approach help? Who's really in charge? Who's corrupt? Who is the real criminal here? But above all, Obano demonstrates how difficult it is to do the right thing.

There are additional subplots to the narrative and a myriad of other issues, but these only complicate the already long play and take the focus off of the interesting relationship between Jenks and Jackson as roles are subverted and the oppressor becomes the oppressed.

Slaves is a powerful drama because its characters are realistic, not caricatures. It also helps that the team of eight actors deliver their roles perfectly under the direction of Nadia Latif. We believe Jackson's torment as he questions what he has done. We feel his pain as he struggles to find out who he is, coming to terms with his actions, plagued by the thought that he only wanted to help.

A simple set, courtesy of Lorna Ritchie, consisting of chairs, tables and two movable metal screens becomes a cell, a wing, an office and scene changes are smooth and well choreographed. The bleak setting matches the prisoners' future, with inmate Mohammed, who 'did the bomb', seeing death as the only way out of such torture.

Indeed it is Mohammed who links the title of the play to the piece. He reminds the inmates, and audience, that in today's society we are all slaves. We even have 'slaves to hand out the Evening Standard', he preaches. His musings bring a whole new meaning to the very British 'Rule Britannia'.

Playing until 20th February 2010

Reviewer: [Simon Sladen](#)