

A World-Premiere Play Based on a Harrowing True Story

by Makayla Hoppe

In 1945, Lt. Colonel Douglas Kelley was assigned a daunting task: examine the last remaining high-ranking Nazis to see if they were mentally fit for trial. Kelley came face-to-face with Reichsmarschall Hermann Göring and explored what made a mind so evil. This story is told in depth in “The Nazi and The Psychiatrist,” written by Jack El-Hai. The book has intrigued so many readers that it has led to a movie adaptation, as well as a play adaptation set to premiere at North Coast Repertory Theatre this April.

Jack stumbled upon the story of Kelly and Göring while working on another book and was dumbfounded by it. He began researching Kelly’s work but didn’t find much, so he contacted Kelly’s son for more information.

“I was expecting maybe he had some file folders or photo albums, something like that,” Jack said, “but instead, he had 15 bankers boxes full of papers and artifacts. The papers included the medical records of the German leaders who were held for trial, interview notes, psychological testing results, and then some artifacts, including vials full of the drug that Hermann Göring was addicted to when he was captured, photographs

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L-R: Lucy Davenport, Brendan Ford and Frank Corrado. PHOTO BY AARON RUMLEY.



Above: Dr. Douglas Kelley.
At right: (L-R) Jack El-Hai,
David Ellenstein and
Jake Broder at work.

and just an astonishingly breathtaking assortment of materials. I knew I had to write a book about this."

"The Nazi and the Psychiatrist" began as a short story where it was optioned for film and then later published into a full-length book.

According to Jack, the movie and play adaptations tell the same story in somewhat different ways. "The movie takes about a year-long period of time from the book and explores it in detail, and the play draws more from the full range of the psychiatrist, Dr. Kelly's life while exploring very specifically his relationship with Hermann Goering," he said.

The movie adaptation, "Nuremberg," stars Oscar-winners Russell Crowe and Rami Malek and Oscar-nominee Michael Shannon. The film is currently filming in Budapest.

"I'll be going out there next month to watch a couple of days of shooting, and I don't know a release date... perhaps by the end of the year, and it has a great cast. Russell Crowe is playing Hermann Göring," Jack said.



PHOTO BY AARON RUMLEY

The play, titled "Sense of Decency" by playwright Jake Broder, has been specifically commissioned by North Coast Rep Artistic Director David Ellenstein. Jack and David have been friends since junior high school, and David reached out after reading the book.

"[David] thought this would make a great stage play, and he had worked with Jake in the past," Jack said. "So he passed along the book to Jake. Jake agreed, and we were connected. I talked with Jake about it some, and then he did all the heavy lifting of making it into a play."

Jack feels that the play is a good interpretation of the story and his works and feels that it will translate well to the stage.

"A big challenge for a playwright in adapting a sprawling nonfiction book is what to focus on," he said. "There's

so many different things that can be focused on in a dramatic treatment. [Jake] chose to focus on the relationship between Göring and Kelly. I've learned some things about it, and I think he did a wonderful job of expanding, distilling and drawing forth character and humanity from the figures in the book. So, I'm very happy with the adaptation."

Hopefully, this story can continue on the stage for many years, whether in San Diego or beyond.

"I hope that after its run at North Coast Rep, other theaters take it up," Jack said. "I think it's a great piece for theaters of that size and for a variety of different kinds of audiences. There are a lot of lessons in the play that have to do with American politics. So I hope it has a long life and many runs in lots of theaters." ◊