

Barrington Stage Company, Pittsfield, MA
Eisenhower: This Piece of Ground by Richard Hellesten. Directed by Peter Ellenstein.
Reviewed by J. Peter Bergman.

"If we expected the world to give freedom to all, we couldn't just give freedom to some."

We sometimes forget what a word or phrase means. Tour de force is defined in the Cambridge Dictionary as "an achievement or performance that shows great skill and attracts admiration; a technical/musical/political tour de force." We take for granted that a solo performer is bound to deliver such a performance. It doesn't always happen, but this week the ultimate living reality of it is on display at the Boyd-Quinson Theatre in Pittsfield, Massachusetts as John Rubinstein plays Dwight David (Ike) Eisenhower, a retired General and former President of the United States. It is a few years post-presidency and the man and his wife are living on their farm in Gettysburg. He is dictating his memoir and has just been trashed by 75 scholars as the twenty-second most important US President, out of a total of thirty-nine. The man is outraged - in a gentle, yet manic way.

This is a man who knows exactly who he is and what he expects. If he doesn't get what is his by right, he goes and gets it anyway. He is a force, not a man and Rubinstein, in his very gentle way, manages to show us the man as he was. Not that he looks like Ike, or sounds like Ike, he just becomes Ike as we imagine him to have been. For two hours, alone on the stage, he brings the President, the General, the Man to life and we can believe he is who he says he is. This is a unique talent and we are fortunate to have this opportunity to witness long dead history come to life on our hometown stage. I could go on, enraptured, for pages on this single subject but if you haven't gotten the picture by now, there's nothing more I can say about it that will change things.



John Rubinstein; Photo: Maria Baranova

This original play was written by Richard Hellesten, who has written more than two dozen other plays including a much produced version of Charles Dickens' novella *A Christmas Carol*. The play premiered in New York City in 2013 starring John Rubinstein who has stayed with it ever since. Director Peter Ellenstein has taken the very real material Hellesten wrote and given it the smack of real life. We are in Eisenhower's home among his possessions and enduring his reminiscences in real time. It has a dynamic that makes the intermission feel like a mistake for we don't want to leave the man and his very youthful, fertile mind for second.

The fascinating set by Michael Deegan which is often awash with images, projections

designed by Joe Huppert, keep Eisenhower's mind and his memories special. Instead of seeming intrusive they take on their own reality as we are allowed to see into Ike's memory. Rubinstein's costume, designed by Sarah G. Conly is simple and ideal for the man. This is a one-man show that I actually like (my readers know I am not in favor of solo plays) and recommend it on every level. It provides a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to spend time with two men we rarely ever see and to learn what each one can bring to our lives. There are even a few comments that hit home politically in the very sketchy era we live in now. This play is special. That's all.

+ 06/03/2025 +

Eisenhower: This Piece of Ground plays at the Barrington Stage Company Boyd-Quinson Theater, 30 Union Street, Pittsfield, MA through June 8. For information and tickets go to Barringtonstageco.org or call 413-236-8888.