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Karimi-Hakak Speaks about Caligula

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"Caligula," by French existentialist Albert Camus and directed by Mahmood Karimi-Hakak was presented at the Philip J. Levin theatre, September 30, October 1 and 2.

Life, death conflicts

"Caligula," is about the conflicts between life and death that one man must fight within himself. The point is that Caligula, the hero, continues to fight for what he believes is right, although he knows that he is doomed to die.

Caligula sees death as a transference to another place. He refuses to compromise his feelings. This is Camus' existentialist theory. Life, and fulfilling the meaning that life has for a person is the most important part of existence.

Added twist

Karimi's direction of *"Caligula"* gives it an additional twist. Karimi is not only the director of the show, but he has a personal connection with it. He is as much a part of *"Caligula"* as it is a part of him. His deep feelings for the play expresses what he is all about, to the point that his different moods are what make the play. It's an inner personal satisfaction that he gets from the play, that calls for the extremist views.

Thrice rewritten

Albert Camus rewrote this play three times to get the desired effect from it. It was first written in 1938, then rewritten in 1945 and in 1958. The writing that Camus preferred was the 1945 version, and that is the one that Mahmood has chosen to interpret. In that version, the stress was on logical extremism, not just murder as was stressed in the others.

Also unlike the others, Caligula is considered a hero for doing what he knows is right. He is shown as being very strong.

Karimi says that the play is a

mixture of *"Hamlet," "Macbeth" and "King Lear,"* because of the macabre murders, the excitement, and the craziness that it displays. It may be a little hard to explain or understand, but it should be something quite interesting to watch and become involved in.

Two-part character

Karimi has also done something that's not very well known to modern theatre. He splits up the character of Caligula into two parts. A Black and a white are both playing the part of Caligula, depicting the inner conflicts the character had and the white vs. Black conflicts in this country.

The Black Caligula is Lee Richardson, and the white one is played by Tom Kjellberg. Mahmood thought that it would be more effective if two actors played the same part. The rest of the cast consists of about eighteen more people.

I-stage

To add to the uniqueness of the play, the set also plays a very important part. The stage, designed by Roger Paradisio, is in the shape of an "I." This is important because it symbolizes Caligula getting into himself. In the top center, there is something very similar to a coffin, which Caligula enters, that

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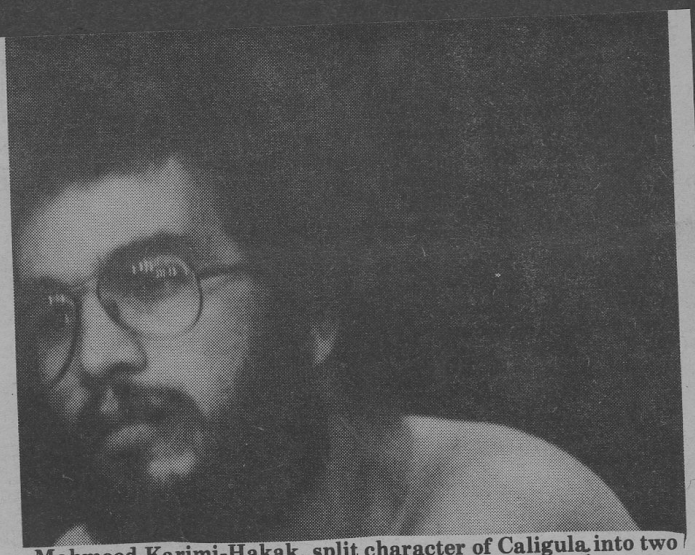

Mahmood Karimi-Hakak, split character of Caligula into two identities

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is. He is going into himself.

The play is quite symbolic. Besides the stage being in the shape of an "I," it is also an arena stage, which means that the audience looks at it from all sides. The seating surrounds the stage. Then, there is a bare stage without any furniture. All of this helps to give expression to Mahmood's moods.

Personal facts

Karimi is a 29 year old Persian who has been in theatre for eight years. *"Caligula"* is his first full length production in English. He had done other things in America which were not in English.

Mahmood has also done television, radio, and some movies while in Iran, but he says that none of them compare to what he is doing in *"Caligula."*

Karimi attended two years of college at the University of Tehran (Iran) and also a year as an undergrad of Tarkio University (Missouri). In January of 1978, he will enroll into the graduate program at the School of Creative and Performing Arts (S.C.P.A.) at Rutgers.

Philosophical sharing

Mahmood is an especially philosophical person who always appears to be deep in thought. But, this doesn't keep him from being a very cheerful person full of wit and charm.

Karimi is the kind of person that one likes immediately. That's because he has charisma. What he always expresses is sharing and trust. He wants to give to everyone. He likes the feeling of being able to share what he has with someone else. He believes that if someone has an idea or a feeling such as what he has with *"Caligula,"* why should he keep it to himself. That's the reason why *"Caligula"* is free.

Karimi says, *"Caligula"* should be a learning experience. I want everyone to see it. I don't want to take the Rutgers students' money!" There's a unique warmness about this man.

Notes Black arts

Being as in tune as he is with himself and the world around him, Karimi says that he is fascinated by the Black man's culture. He realizes that there is so much in the people, going back thousands of years, and, that's why Black arts are so much more indept than white entertainment.

Karimi also notes why much of the Black theatre here in America is not really appreciated by the whites because of the fact that they (the whites) don't really understand what's going on. There's so much behind what's happening, it can't really be fully apprehended by a person with a completely different background. He notes that he would-thus, rather be associated with Black theatre. Still in all, he loves all people and appears to be loved by everyone in return.