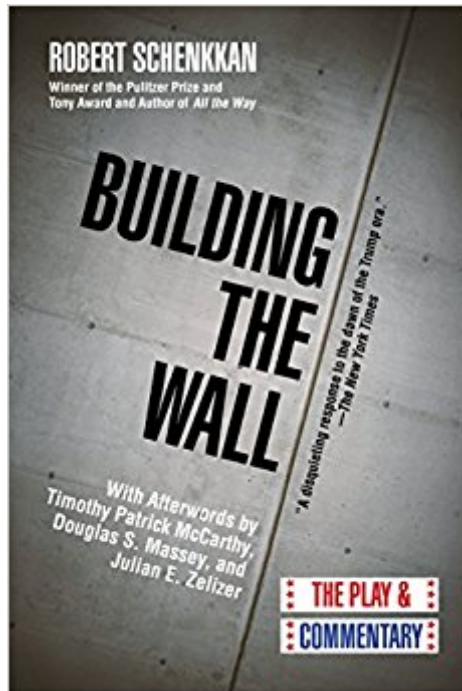




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# Building The Wall: The Play And Commentary



## Synopsis

In the tradition of *Hamilton* and *Angels in America*, a powerful, politically charged, dystopian drama that couldn't be more timely. Written in a "white-hot fury" on the eve of the 2016 election, the stunning new play by Pulitzer Prize- and Tony Award-winning dramatist Robert Schenkkan is creating a nationwide sensation. Bypassing the usual development path for plays, it has been signed up to open in five theaters across America in a National New Play Network Rolling World Premiere, starting in Los Angeles (March) and Denver (April) and continuing in the Washington, DC, area, Tucson, and Miami, with more productions to follow, including in Santa Fe and New York City. *Building the Wall* lays out in a harrowing drama the possible consequences of Donald Trump's anti-immigration campaign rhetoric turned into federal policy. Two years from now, that policy has resulted in the mass round-up of millions of illegal aliens, with their incarceration overflowing into private prisons and camps reminiscent of another century. The former warden for one facility is awaiting sentencing for what happened under his watch. In a riveting interview with a historian who has come seeking the truth, he gradually reveals how the unthinkable became the inevitable, and the faceless illegals under his charge became the face of tragedy. The play is accompanied by commentary from three prominent scholars: on the real purpose of the border wall, our dark nativist history of restricting immigration, and the tradition of political protest in art.

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## Customer Reviews

"A disquieting response to the dawn of the Trump era." *The New York Times* "Schenkkan has penned a dystopian peek into the troubled future of Trump's America. Many adjectives describe the play: taut, harrowing, unnervingly artful, and downright shocking. But the most disturbing word of all may simply be 'plausible.' In the current political landscape, Building the Wall is an urgent and necessary work." *Doug Wright, Pulitzer and Tony Award winning playwright of I Am My Own Wife* "This is an urgent cry of warning from a leading voice in the American theater. . . . This project is more than a play. It's already ignited a national firestorm with theaters across the country signing up to produce it." *Stephen Sachs, Artistic Director Fountain Theater* "This riveting, harrowing and illuminating drama delivers a powerful warning and puts a human face on the inhuman, revealing how when personal accountability is denied, what seems inconceivable becomes inevitable." *Playbill* "MAGNIFICENT! Building the Wall should be seen and shuddered over, if only to heighten our collective vigilance. The theater historically has provided a forum for citizens to contemplate the agonizing issues of the day, and it's heartening to see Schenkkan and the Fountain [Theatre] respond with such celerity to present dangers." *Los Angeles Times* "MESMERIZING! Simmers with of-the-moment urgency. A cautionary look at how fascism can come to define the land of the free in Trump's America." *Hollywood Reporter* "GRIPPING! Timely and relevant." *LA Splash* "ONE HELL OF A SCARY PLAY! Topical and theoretically accurate . . . a necessary wake-up call." *Edge Media Network* "A DYSTOPIAN VISION! Shenkkan executes his tale skillfully, Michael Michetti has cast and directed it well, and the two actors perform superbly." *Stage Raw*

Robert Schenkkan is a playwright and screenwriter. He won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama for *The Kentucky Cycle* and a Tony Award for Best Play for *All the Way*, which was also made into a multiple Emmy-nominated HBO movie starring Bryan Cranston. His most recent screenwriting credit is for *Hacksaw Ridge*, which was nominated for six Academy Awards. He lives in New York City. Douglas S. Massey is the Henry G. Bryant Professor of Sociology and Public Affairs at Princeton University and Director of its Office of Population Research. Julian E. Zelizer is a political historian at Princeton University and a fellow at New America. He is also a contributor to CNN, where he writes a weekly column and appears as a regular guest on television. His most recent book is *The Fierce Urgency of Now: Lyndon Johnson, Congress, and the Battle for the Great Society* (Penguin Press). Timothy Patrick McCarthy is an award-winning scholar, educator, and activist. He holds a joint faculty appointment at Harvard University, where he is Director of Culture Change & Social

Justice Initiatives at the Carr Center for Human Rights Policy at the John F. Kennedy School of Government. The author or editor of four books from the New Press, including *The Radical Reader* and *Prophets of Protest*, Dr. McCarthy is the host and director of *The A.R.T. of Human Rights*, an ongoing public conversation series on art and politics co-sponsored by the Carr Center and at the American Repertory Theater.

I bought this in advance of seeing the play on stage. It is a great piece of writing from the Pulitzer Prize and Tony-winning playwright, Robert Schenkkan.

There is a popular theory that all of human history is cyclical; we are destined to repeat the same cycles over and over again. This idea is explored, somewhat, in Pulitzer Prize and Tony Award-winning playwright Robert Schenkkan's new play *Building the Wall*. Part post-apocalyptic warning and part prison conversation, *Building the Wall* tells the story of one potential future of America based on the rhetoric of President Trump and the successful implementation of his anti-immigration policies. Following a devastating terror attack in Times Square, martial law is enacted, giving Trump essentially unlimited power to round up and detain immigrants as he sees fit. One man, Rick, works at one of these detention facilities and his actions echo the actions of Nazi Germany, leading to the eventual impeachment of the president and arrest of Rick. The play tells Rick's story through a conversation between Rick and historian Gloria. Note: this review is based solely on the script. I have not actually seen the play, and who knows if I ever will. This play is a bit of a challenge to review. If you take it as a piece of speculative fiction, it's pretty good. Nothing groundbreaking or anything, but enjoyable. It has echoes of 1984 and other dystopian/authoritarian futures, but it's also focused heavily on the life and actions of one man, Rick. The problem is that the play is so intricately tied with what might happen in the next two years or so in the Donald Trump presidency that it's hard to separate reality from the play. Which is part of the point, I agree. But, the likelihood of the events in this play unfolding don't seem all that likely (hopefully; I really hope it's unlikely), so once the next two years have come and passed, the play will seem irrelevant. That's the problem with writing a speculative fiction story about contemporaneous real people. When you make up characters (and only sort of loosely base them on real people, instead of having them actually be real people) for speculative fiction, you're able to keep the story somewhat timeless. It's not specifically tied to the actions of one government official. This story, if removed from the context of Donald Trump, would work a lot better. You can have a fictional president with the same rhetoric as the rhetoric Trump has been spouting, and the story will work every bit as well, and also won't be

liable to expire in two years' time. But, obviously, the story is explicitly about the actions of a Donald Trump presidency, and there's something about that that leaves a bad taste in my mouth. I am very much not a Donald Trump fan; I'm not gonna get into my politics here, but needless to say, I am a hardcore liberal, so there's no love lost between me and Trump. But something about having the awful actions that happen prior to the beginning of this play be set in a very real potential future just feels... wrong. It's hard to put into words why I feel so uncomfortable with the fact that this revolves around the potential future of a real, current president. Maybe because parts of this really are plausible, but also maybe because the fact that it's now permanently linked to Trump lessens the impact of the story. The people who really need to see/read this play are the ones who are diehard supporters of Trump, and they will immediately write this off as more bashing from the "Hollywood elite" (ignoring that theatre and Hollywood are extremely different). I mean, you'd still run the risk of doing that even if this was a fictional president, but it'd be just a little bit harder for that to happen. And they'd likely be a bit more receptive to the message were it about a fictional president, as is often the case with speculative fiction. It also feels somewhat exploitative. Or potentially so. Maybe it's because I'm reading the play four days after the Manchester bombing, but I just don't like that the story hinges so much on a terrorist attack in Times Square under the very real President Trump. It's like that degree of separation you usually experience with speculative fiction has been removed and we're just left with this odd prediction of the future. And it's bleak. There's no real hope present in the play. I mean, Trump has been impeached and the Nazi-style killing of immigrants (more on that in a sec) have stopped, but the ending is just kind of dark. And I get that it's sort of a call to arms, like "we can prevent this future from happening" kind of things, but still. That's not to say that I didn't like this play. On the contrary, I liked it quite a bit. A big central idea is that history repeats itself with normal people failing to take a stand. Hitler and the Nazi leadership were terrible, disgusting people, but their plans wouldn't have worked without Germans who were willing to go along with it, or who didn't realize the impact of what their actions did. Normal people were taken in by Hitler's rhetoric and went along with what he said and ordered, which led to the death of 6+ million Jews and other Europeans. The same happens in *Building the Wall*. Rich isn't a terribly good guy, but he's not a monster either. He's prejudiced, but not murderous. But, in the heat of things, confronted with impossible choices and pressure from the powers-that-be, he elects to mass murder immigrants so as to free up prison space to imprison more immigrants. He's given opportunity after opportunity to speak up, but he doesn't, and he becomes not only complicit in what happens but a driving force. And that's really what the play is trying to get across: these things don't happen without the aid of citizens who don't do anything to prevent them. If we don't learn from the past, and

actively resist corrupt and evil politicians, we are destined to repeat our mistakes. We cannot just blindly follow orders and expect to not be held accountable for our actions, which is what Rick does. He offers excuse after excuse as to why what he did isn't as terrible as people make it out to be, but you can't rationalize it. You can't rationalize Trump and the GOP's hateful rhetoric. If you rationalize it, you run the risk of normalizing it, and when it inevitably results in the deaths of people (in this case, immigrants), those who led to its normalization are every bit as complicit in those murders as those who actually committed them. This idea is presented through a conversation between Gloria, a historian interviewing Rick for his side of the story, and Rick, a former prison official who began the practice of murdering untold numbers of "illegal immigrants" in order to ease the overpopulation in prisons after Trump and Congress passed various laws that led to the mass incarceration and deportation of illegal immigrants. Through their conversation, we see how Rick arrived at the decisions he made, and we see Gloria force him to contextualize what he'd done and reflect on it all. In the end, it doesn't seem like Rick has learned all that much, but there's been an impact. The bigger impact, of course, is on the audience. The point of the story is not for Rick to learn from his mistakes, it's for us to learn from his mistakes. We're supposed to see how his attitude of compliance or ambivalence toward the suffering of others directly led to his actions that led to the murdering of people. We're supposed to see how he mirrors regular German citizens from World War II, how he mirrors their actions of inaction and normalization of the reprehensible. The play is a call to action for us to not fall into the trap of complacency; for us to take a stand in defense of those who need defending. The play mostly succeeds in delivering that idea. Like I said earlier, it would be more successful if it hadn't tied itself so directly to the Trump presidency. The way it's written, it comes across as a paranoid fever dream of what could happen, but it's a long shot. Had Schenkken gone with a purely fictional president - one merely based on Trump's ideas and actions -, he'd have avoided this problem of comparing the reality of the Trump administration with that of this highly fictionalized speculation of it. Had Schenkken spent more time developing his characters and less time trying so hard to tie this with Trump, the characters would have felt more dynamic. Instead, we're left with the stereotypical characters you get in this kind of story: the criminal defending his actions and the somewhat condescending reporter claiming to offer the criminal the chance to tell his side, but shaming him every step of the way. I'm not saying Gloria's actions in the play are wrong or uncalled for, I'm just saying that they fit the trope. There's nothing all that original about the play. It's a pretty standard idea, just with the added sensationalism of being about the Trump presidency and its potential future. On its own merits, removing the influence of anti-Trump media from the play, *Building the Wall* is fine. It's not revolutionary, but it's not bad, either. It's a serviceable

play about a potential future with a compelling narrative and decently written characters. The pacing is well done and the narrative itself builds to a nice, dramatic, earned conclusion. But there's nothing really special about it, aside from the Trump connection. The play only gets attention because it's about the Trump presidency, but the play also suffers for being about it. It should have gone the route of creating its own president for this story, and only basing his actions on Trump rather than making him Trump. Schenkken should have spent more time developing and fleshing out his characters, making them more than just the archetypal characters in plays like this. The play had a lot of potential, but it failed to deliver much of it. I give Building the Wall three out of five stars. Like I said, it's not bad, but it's not all that good, either. Presuming the actions of the play don't come to pass, it will largely be forgettable due to its insistence of rooting itself in a very specific time period to very specific people. If those people don't do the things the play suggests they'll do, the play becomes irrelevant. And, as nobody wants the actions of the play to actually come true, that's likely going to happen. Perhaps the play will succeed in encouraging people to stand up against the current rhetoric. But aside from the activism aspect of the play, as a play itself, it's not gonna make a big impact and will largely be forgotten.

Chilling but not too far out of the possible given the "leader" we now are infected with. Worse than cholera.

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