

## Teacher, Student, Despot

by RL Nesvet

Amahlia reviewed January 11, 2007

In an unnamed South American country, apparently modeled on Pinochet's Chile, the new military dictator, Colonel Medina, promises the new American ambassador that there will be a presidential election. An election Medina hopes to win, but, still, a free and fair election. An election that will be "as fair as is necessary." The American, of course, agrees. This is the kind of dreadful non sequitur that permeates modern geopolitics as well as Joel Shatzky's thoughtful yet heartfelt new work, *Amahlia*, at Brooklyn's Impact Theater.

In this three-character morality play, Ambassador John Whitman (Joe Lampe) finds that his actions may determine the fate of the title character, the Anna Polituskaya-style dissident journalist Amahlia Marti (Andrea Suarez), whose dangerously truthful research into Medina's crimes threaten his reign, even if the election is only "as fair as is necessary."

Some years earlier, at an unnamed American university, Whitman was a young lecturer and Amahlia was his student, and lover. He was a passionate parlor radical, bristling with rage against the hypocritical, conservative International Relations department. He taught her political consciousness.

When Amahlia takes her lover's radicalism home from the parlor, are the consequences his responsibility? As well as a morality drama, this is a tragedy. It is a redolently Faustian one: to gain power for himself and the United States, whose interests he represents, Whitman risks losing Amahlia—the soul of the ethical rhetorician he once was.

As Amahlia, Suarez is skittish or combative, depending on the moment. She is a great rhetorician with an oratorical flair that makes her a convincing adversary of Medina's. Lampe's Whitman is opportunistic but tortured—a great creature of opposites. Philippe Blanchard's Medina is imposing, cruel, suave, and decidedly theatrical.

### AMAHLIA

The Impact Theatre

**Category:** Drama  
**Written by:** Joel Shatzky  
**Directed by:** Esther Neff  
**Produced by:** The Impact Theatre  
**Opens:** January 11  
**Closes:** December 31  
**Running Time:** 150 minutes

**Theater:** The Impact Theatre  
**Address:** 190 Underhill Avenue  
 New York, NY 11238

### BOX OFFICE

**Tickets:** \$15.00  
 \$12 student, senior. TDF vouchers accepted.  
 No Box Office Number

### CREDITS

**Creative Team**  
**Written by:** Joel Shatzky  
**Directed by:** Esther Neff  
**Produced by:** Impact Theater  
**Sound Designer:** Ben Tyree and Jeffrey Santana  
 Music Composed by Ben Tyree  
**Costume Designer:**

Samantha Jane Polay's costume design is simple but very evocative of character. Medina's ivory-handled walking stick betrays the aristocratic pretensions of the populist leader, and Amahlia's costume changes from red to white to gray as she moves from inamorata to crusader to prisoner. At the American university, Whitman festoons his white Oxford shirt with leftist political buttons, then covers them up with his ambassador's jacket; finally, when he seals his destiny, he removes the buttons. The acting is uniformly strong.

Samantha Jane Polay

**Cast**

Andrea Suarez as  
Amahlia  
Joe Lampe as John  
Whitman  
Philippe Blanchard as  
Colonel Medina

The story of *Amahlia* is ambitious, with two linked worlds—Whitman's and Amahlia's—clearly delineated in the dialogue of the three characters. It is told in nonlinear order, a strong decision that heightens the suspense of what is really a very simple plot. Director Esther Neff keeps the transitions clear by spatially isolating Whitman's university digs from his ambassadorial office within the ground plan.

Medina is a horrible man, a criminal against humanity, but he is also disarmingly charming. His doctrinal Nietzschean self-justification is not very different from the rhetoric of Nietzsche's postmodern inheritors and the Enlightenment authors of America's policy, and myth, of manifest destiny. Whitman, meanwhile, is a horrible man, but he is tortured by his guilt, even if he does begin and end the play by loudly protesting his innocence.

I understood why Whitman is attracted to Amahlia. She is beautiful, brilliant, and, ultimately daring. Besides, he is a closet megalomaniac, and what sexual relationship better fulfills that fantasy than a teacher-student one? But I had trouble seeing what Amahlia, and especially the post-enlightenment Amahlia, saw in a man who pressures her for sex when she's trying to write an important term paper and calls her "my Patagonian petunia."

The script also could have been strengthened by some merciless editing. At two and a half hours, including the 15-minute intermission, the play felt at least half an hour too long. Characters sometimes repeat exposition or describe their feelings, even feelings they have already evocatively shown. "Somehow, this was always just a game for me," Whitman confesses, superfluously, about his youthful radicalism.

*Amahlia* is a good play, but if streamlined, it could be a great one. It's an enjoyable and thought-provoking inquest into the American political conscience, and I hope to see it developed further.