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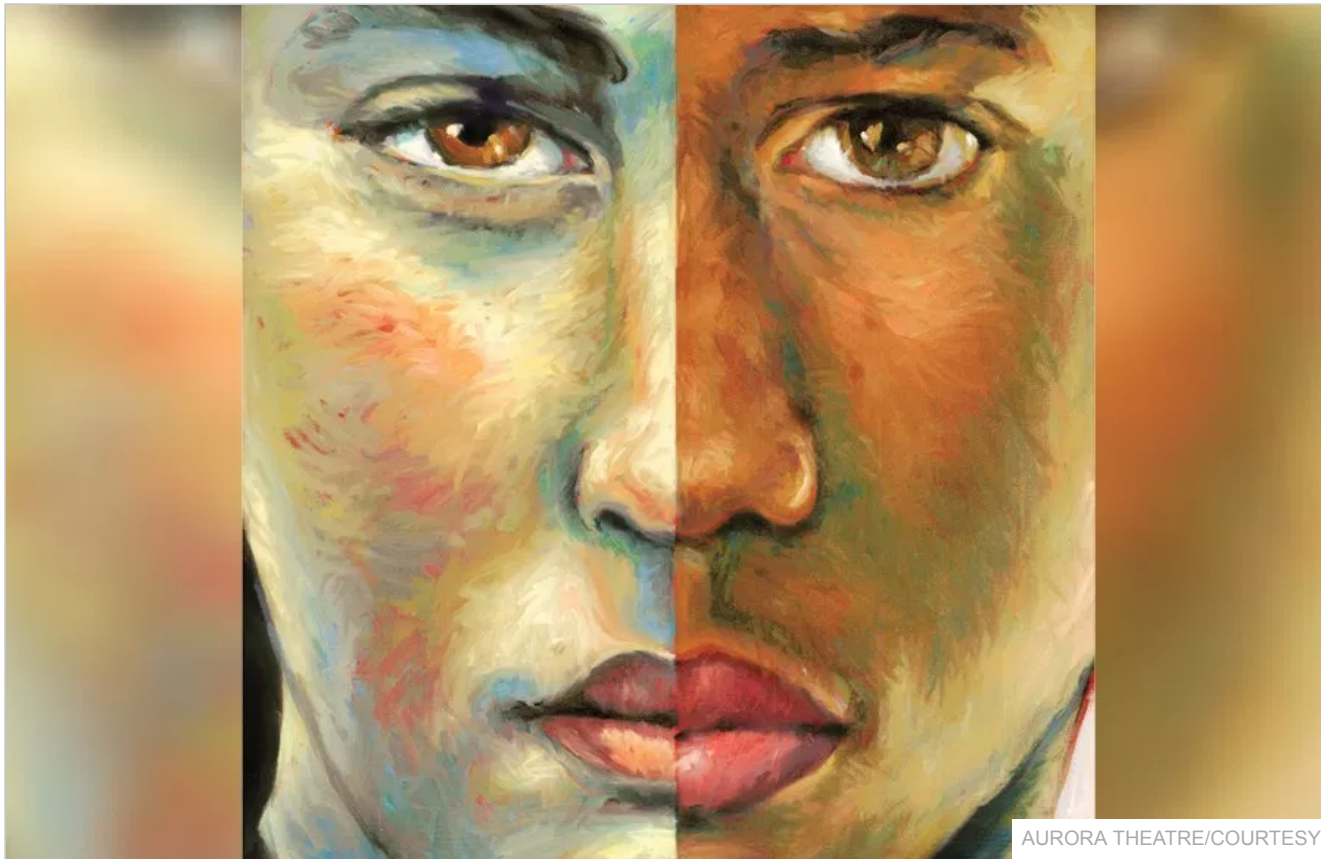
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CULTURE SHOT

THEATER

THURSDAY, MARCH 7, 2019

## Director, stars of Aurora Theatre's 'Actually' discuss significance of consent



AURORA THEATRE/COURTESY

BY [NIKKI MUNOZ](#) | STAFF

LAST UPDATED 1 MIN AGO

*Content warning: Sexual violence*

Anna Ziegler’s “Actually” tells the story of Amber and Tom, two freshmen at Princeton University who go home together after a party. In the morning, when the drunken haze is gone, Amber is no longer sure if what happened between them was consensual. The two characters then present their sides of the story to the school board – and the audience – at a hearing after the incident.

Having originally co-premiered in 2017 at the Geffen Playhouse in Los Angeles and the Williamstown Theatre Festival in Massachusetts, “Actually” has made its way to Berkeley and will

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make its Bay Area premiere at the Aurora Theatre Company on March 8. The production's director, Tracy Ward, is guiding the two young lead actors, Michael A. Curry and Ella Dershowitz, as the central pair, Tom and Amber.

With only two characters in the script, and with the nature of the show's discussion of consent, the plot takes on a he-said-she-said structure.

"The text is presented in what seems to be a presentational way," Curry said in an interview with The Daily Californian. "It's just two characters telling the audience about the incident that occurs within the show."

Despite taking on a literal depiction of a he-said-she-said occurrence, as the play is composed of dialogue between Amber and Tom and their statements to the audience, Dershowitz thinks there is more to the dynamic.

"It's a he said, she said but also a he said this because of the context that nobody else has. It shows you all of the different layers beneath the he said, she said. Personally, I am torn in two directions," Dershowitz said. "You want to believe both of them so badly."

Sexual violence and consent are complicated issues reflected upon college campuses across the country. In the early stages of the rehearsal process, the director and actors were visited by a Title IX caseworker — Title IX is part of the Education Amendments of 1972, and it holds colleges accountable for any sexual violence that occurs on their premises, requiring disciplinary hearings for the incidents. The visit strengthened their understanding of sexual violence on campuses and, thus, their understanding of the characters and the plot of "Actually."



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“I think it changed everything, in a way,” Ward said. “I didn’t reinterpret the play, but (the interaction) deepened my interpretation. I could better understand the world the writer wanted to bring about — the world of consent.”

A campus’s policy on sexual violence is just one of the external factors at play in the script’s plot. The characters also deal with societal expectations involving gender and race. Amber, a white woman, is accusing Tom, a Black man, of rape — this narrative isn’t new, and, upon hearing the racial and gender dynamics, one may jump to conclusions — consciously or not. The actors are aware of the historical weight surrounding this narrative, and their awareness shines through in their performances. They are also aware of the complex natures of their characters — a complex narrative will challenge any preconceived notions that audiences may bring to the table.

“You have a Black man and a white woman and, off the bat, when you see that combination, you have your judgment of what happened just because of the images of society,” Curry said. “I think it may shock some audience members, the crass way that Amber approaches race ... but I think it comes from a true naïveté.”

Dershowitz agrees with Curry on the character of Amber, who, given the racial politics of the court case, is still firmly aware that she found herself in a sexual situation that she wasn’t fully comfortable with.

“I think she’s the kind of person who likes to stand up for people who aren’t being treated fairly, and that applies to both Tom and herself here,” Dershowitz said. “It makes for a really difficult struggle for her, being pitted against someone who she would otherwise probably want to be defending.”

Despite all of the complexity on both sides, the hearing comes down to Amber’s and Tom’s accounts — which, in and of themselves, revolve heavily around one word: “actually.” This word, specifically Amber’s use of it during her encounter with Tom, sparks a much larger conversation about the characters’ differing definitions of consent. Beyond this, “actually” also acts as a revolving point for the play’s dialogue and action.

“It’s an interesting word, isn’t it?” Ward said. “It’s interesting because we’re defining it in a way — what does it mean to people? When it’s used, we use it as a delineation point — ‘actually, it’s not like this’ or ‘actually, this is what I think.’ It’s always the conversational turning point, in some way. I feel like (Ziegler) might be pointing at the fact.”

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“Actually” — the word — is already a foggy focal point for the characters’ stories, but all of the other details only make the situation foggier. Character backstories are juxtaposed alongside the details of their encounter. And the most impactful element of this story may be that it all comes down to opinions — of the hearing board and of the audience.

“The most important (aspect) is our examination of sexual dynamics, consent and the cost,” Ward said. “The audience has to decide who they believe, which is, I think, where (Ziegler) wants to leave it. It’s a really big issue right now and deserves a lot of thought and conversation, and the audience is left.”

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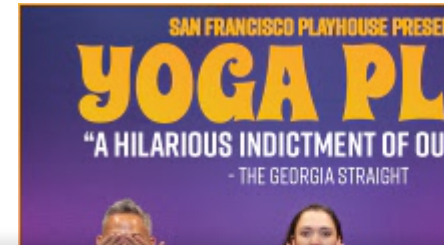
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