

Lindbergh Baby Trial Revisited
 Playhouse Presents 'Hauptmann'
[Brad Hathaway](#)
 October 13, 2005

The guilt or innocence of Bruno Richard Hauptmann, who was executed in 1936 for the kidnapping and murder of the son of famed aviator Charles Lindbergh, is the subject of a taut drama being mounted at the Lee Center by Port City Playhouse through this weekend.

"The Trial of the Century" type of drama has been a staple of theater from the famous "monkey trial" drama pitting evolution against an early version of intelligent design so entertainingly transformed into "Inherit the Wind," to the horrors of the Civil War revisited in "The Andersonville Trial" or the more contemporary look at wartime, "The Caine Mutiny Court-Martial."

Playwright John Logan has made something of a specialty of the genre. His "Never the Sinner" based on the Leopold and Loeb murder trial of the 1920s was produced at Arlington's Signature Theatre and then transferred to an Off-Broadway theater in New York.

Now his "Hauptmann" is being presented under the always reliable direction of Gloria DuGan on another impressively simple set designed by G. Kevin Lane, whose apparently seemingly uncomplicated structure of wooden doweling for "Betrayal" won awards two years ago. This time he uses a trio of jail bars to set the tone.

THAT TONE IS DARK and drab — fitting for the subject matter and the time. It was during the depression, on a dark and rainy night, that a kidnapper climbed to the window of the nursery of the Lindbergh's home and took their 22-month-old son.

What followed then is chronicled in Logan's play with a focus on the accused — a German-born carpenter who had fought against the Americans in World War II, served time for criminal activity in post-war Germany and then illegally entered the U.S. to live in the Bronx.

His trial was hyped in the press of the time as even more than "the trial of the century." Given the celebrity of Lindbergh and the nature of the crime as "every parent's worst nightmare." Baltimore journalist H. L. Mencken called it "the greatest story since the Resurrection!"

The play has over three dozen characters, but is designed to have actors and actresses playing double, triple or even quadruple roles.

Michael Kharfen creates a very human "Hauptmann" alternately confused and appalled by the situation he finds himself in as he staunchly maintains his innocence and rails against what he sees as weaknesses in the case against him. He, Kharfen, also portrays the kidnapper (whether that is Hauptmann or someone else) in the re-creations of events, as well as the character of the defense attorney.

Arrayed against Kharfen's Hauptmann and defense attorney is Donald Neal, as among others, the prosecuting attorney. While Neal's five characters are nearly indistinguishable from each other, Bruce Follmer's eight, or at least the principal ones, are distinct individuals. He makes the judge a bit autocratic, the handwriting expert just a tad arrogant and an elderly eye-witness quite befuddled.

An affecting moment in the trial is the appearance on the stand of the mother of the murdered child, played with clear emotions by Lorraine Magee. Nano Gowland is somewhat less successful finding the

Where & When:

"Hauptmann" plays this Friday and Saturday at 8 p.m. at the Lee Center for the Performing Arts, 1108 Jefferson Street. Tickets are \$12 - \$14. Call 703-838-2880 or log on to www.portcityplayhouse.com.



Photo by Doug Olmsted
 Michael Kharfen and Mari Pappas as Bruno and Anna Hauptmann.

emotional essence in the role of the father, the famous "Colonel" Lindbergh, but that may be his own effort to reflect the famous reticence of the shy "Lucky Lindy."

LOGAN'S SCRIPT introduces most of the major points developed during the trial and also raises some of the questions of procedure which trouble some historians. He tries to avoid applying modern standards of jurisprudence to the events of some 70 years ago. For instance, he doesn't raise modern questions about the defense being denied access to potentially helpful evidence the government may have had in what today would be required under the discovery doctrine, but he does raise some unanswered questions about both the accuracy of some expert testimony and the adequacy of Hauptmann's defense.

Researchers can debate the facts of the case, and given its notoriety, probably always will. As drama, however, the play is both intriguing and satisfying.

Brad Hathaway has covered theater in Virginia, Washington and Maryland as well as Broadway and edits Potomac Stages, a Web site covering theater in the region (www.PotomacStages.com). He can be reached at Brad@PotomacStages.com