

NEW MEXICO NEWS

God's Man in Texas preaches at the Shuler

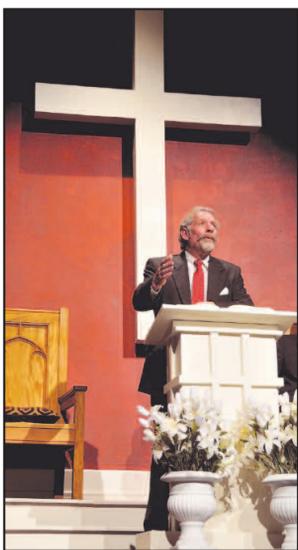
By **TIM KELLER**
The Chronicle-News

Raton's Shuler Theater presents an embarrassment of riches in its 7th summer season of professional repertory theater, producing four acclaimed plays in 26 performances spanning June and July. Drawing professional actors and directors from across the United States, Bill Fegan's Kaleidoscope Players produce plays – drama, comedy, even a musical – as fine as anything found in the distant cities.

Opening last weekend and playing through July 22, David Rambo's drama *God's Man in Texas* plumbs the inner depths of the evangelical mega-church business. Leonine 81-year-old Dr. Phillip Gottschall is only the 3rd pastor in Rock Baptist Church's storied 110-year history; Dr. Jeremiah Mears, half Gottschall's age, has come to Houston to audition for the role of a lifetime, replacing the legendary Gottschall.

Rambo presents the pastors as world-class salesmen at the top of their trade. "It's all in the numbers," Gottschall says – how many parishioners, how many come down the aisle to accept Jesus, how much they leave in donations. He has built RBC into a virtual theme park with a restaurant, 4 cafeterias, a dinner theater, bowling alleys, a gymnasium, an 8-screen Cineplex showing family movies, and 2 swimming pools: "You get 'em in a pool on Saturday, they'll be in a pew on Sunday."

Gottschall is bitter that a church committee has begun a search to replace him as he approaches his inevitable decline;



Photos by Tim Keller

J. Michael Craig is pastor Dr. Phillip Gottschall, *God's Man in Texas*.

he wants to anoint his own successor. If Mears can jump through the right hoops, the job will be his. Indiana actor Ian McCabe wears stress and strain like his business suit: the only joy Mears exhibits is on stage at the RBC pulpit, where he's a consummate actor. His audition makes *TIME Magazine*: it's do or die from here.

South Carolina's J. Michael Craig perfectly balances Gottschall on the brink between Billy Graham-like mastery and

the tottering old man he knows he'll soon become. Fiercely protective of his legacy and the empire he's built, he fights to manage his succession on his own terms.

Adding some levity to all this is the church soundman, Hugo Taney, saved from the wreckage of misspent youth. "Before I turned my life over to the Christ, I did so much drugs and alcohol it left me with only a little over half a working brain," he remarks to Mears in the opening scene. Now living in Omaha, Raton's own Dreyson Solano came home to play Taney, to great effect. The obsequious assistant is deeply grateful for his position and aims to please, though he's out of his depth around the pastors.

Veteran stage director Tom Evans brings to the Shuler a deep understanding of the play: this is the 4th time he's directed Rambo's 1998 script. Entering the theater, waiting for the house lights to dim, the audience is subtly surrounded by sacred choral music: we're in church. But the play immediately makes its point that pastors are salesmen. Gottschall and Mears wear business suits; the older man proclaims, "Big numbers make big deeds possible." When Mears says his San Antonio congregation numbers 6000, Taney remarks, "Oh, we got that many in our singles ministry alone." Mears' father was a sales trainer; Billy Graham began his career as a Fuller Brush man.

Rambo revised his play in 2001, presumably to incorporate George W. Bush's presidency: he and his father, the two most prominent Texans of all, are repeatedly cited to great comic

effect. Though *God's Man in Texas* is a drama, there are generous helpings of humor served up not only by Solano, but more subtly by Craig and McCabe as well.

The play's climactic turn pivots on soundman Hugo Taney and throws young Dr. Mears into a crisis, shifting from a desperate



Ian McCabe is up-and-coming pastor Dr. Jeremiah Mears.

search for Success to a desperate search for God. Despite its cynical view of commercial religion, the closing moment of *God's Man in Texas* suggests that the playwright may well be a Godly man, after all.

Evans' set design shows both his mastery of the play and a bold artistic sense. The men's make-up

effectively conveys their respective ages and statures, while Ursula Garcia's costuming is appropriately simple. Young Raton technical crew Mariah Fleming and Jeff Redlick work behind the scenes to keep the action flowing smoothly and lit well. As usual at the Shuler, local audiences can count their lucky stars to have such quality entertainment right here at home.

The Shuler Theater will present *God's Man in Texas* at 7:30 p.m. July 8, 17, and 22, plus a 2:30 matinee Sunday, July 18. Tickets are \$15 for adults, \$13 seniors, and \$5 students. Additional information is available at 575-445-4746 and www.shulertheater.com.



Raton's own Dreyson Solano is *God's* soundman in the 3-character play.

Rodeo Scenes

Photos by Marty Mayfield



Atop almost 2000 pounds of raw energy Dalton Votaw wraps the rigging around his hand and prepares to hold on for a bone jarring ride.

All it takes is eight seconds but that eight seconds can seem like an eternity for some. However, Votaw makes it look easy at the 32nd Annual Raton rodeo Friday night in the Jim Young Arena.



Jennifer Singleton rounds the barrel during the Saturday night performance of the 32nd Annual Raton Rodeo at the Jim Young Arena



Dustin Merritt shows the determination it takes to during the Steer Wrestling Saturday night in the arena at the 32nd Annual Raton Rodeo



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