

A Machiavellian Mentality

New Central Works play brings to life "a handbook for tyrants."

By *Rachel Swan*

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Sixteenth century diplomat Niccolò Machiavelli was a consummate striver with a wobbly moral compass. His most famous accomplishment — a political treatise called *The Prince* — was oft-dubbed "a handbook for tyrants." He curried favor with diplomats by preying on their basic instincts; hence the phrase "Machiavellian mentality." He was evil, but he apparently didn't have an evil countenance, as playwright Gary Graves notes in his new Central Works play, *Machiavelli's The Prince*. The play imagines a meeting between Machiavelli (a clean, bespectacled, weasel-like Richard Frederick) and his former student Lorenzo de Medici II (Michael Navarra), during which Machiavelli gives the young nobleman a copy of his treatise, handwritten in a black Mead notebook. Graves took pains to contemporize his source material and make it resonate with modern audiences: Both Machiavelli and Prince Lorenzo wear business suits, and use modern language to discuss ancient political conflicts in Florence — it's easy to imagine them transplanted to the Oval Office. What results is a captivating drama about power and its effect on character.



Richard Frederick and Michael Navarra play Prince Lorenzo and Machiavelli.

Power, to Machiavelli, always amounted to a cost-benefit analysis. The goal is to expand and consolidate one's empire, which occasionally requires a prince to kill defectors, raise taxes, or retract promises. Such cruelty and perfidy did not easily appeal to Lorenzo, who liked to think of himself as morally upright. ("My word is my bond," as he says in the play). Navarra plays the character as a wide-eyed young commander-in-chief who's riddled with anxieties. He's in a bit of a pickle: His uncle abdicated the throne and moved to a monastery in St. Michael; meanwhile, Florence suffers from a broken water system and a huge budgetary crisis. Lorenzo has vague ideas about transforming the place into a metropolis, but he lacks a concrete plan. He harbors bad memories of the Siege of Mondolfo, during which Lorenzo razed an entire village and looked away as his soldiers butchered the men and raped the women. He says he wants to redeem himself, beat off enemies, and sustain a large principality without resorting to absolute despotism. According to Machiavelli, that's not possible.

The interweaving of history and fiction is largely what makes this *Prince* interesting. At the time that Machiavelli wrote his original treatise, two families — the Roveres and the Medicis — were contending for much of central Italy. The Medicis were in the ascendancy; the Rovere family was on the outs, but trying to get back in. Thus, Lorenzo II (a Medici, grandson of Lorenzo the Magnificent) spends much of the play fretting about how he's going to stave off Francesco de la Rovere, a prominent rival who is trying to overtake Tuscany with an army of mercenaries. Enter Machiavelli, a long-time diplomat who had served the Florentine government during an anti-Medici period (he was accused of conspiring to remove Lorenzo's father, and tortured). By time he meets up with Lorenzo II (to whom most published versions of *The Prince* are dedicated), he had spent several years exiled on the outskirts of Florence. Machiavelli's attempts to endear himself to the young prince are glaringly self-interested, since he's obviously looking for a job in the new court. (This probably wasn't far from the truth either, although the book was published five years after Machiavelli's death).

Machiavelli pretty much hews to the contents of his book, even to the point of lionizing his former superior Cesare Borgia, who was known for carnage. He tries to suck up to Lorenzo by teaching him how to be a good tyrant: Avoid mercenaries, instill fear in all subjects, keep your word only when it suits you; extend the olive branch to Francesco and then murder him. Richard Frederick is saddled with making the character Machiavelli utterly calculating and self-interested, but also somewhat of an underdog. For the most part he looks more diminutive than Lorenzo (partly because Frederick is smaller than Navarra, and wears geeky glasses), so Frederick has to reveal his inner-evil in small gestures — like furtively taking a glass of water while Lorenzo's back is turned, even though he's offered one at the beginning of the play.

Yet, Lorenzo isn't the great peace-maker he purports to be, either. He's much closer to the crafty, miserly, controlling, but thoroughly effective prince that Machiavelli envisions. It's not hard for Navarra to reveal that part of his character, since he manages to look like a bad guy. (Blame it on the smirking half-smile plastered on his long narrow face — it doesn't exactly bespeak goodwill). The set design reflects his moral quandary. Atop the fireplace hangs a Ruben's study of Leonardo da Vinci's painting *The Battle of Anghiari*, which shows a violent clash of soldiers on horseback, trying to slice each other's heads off. Opposite the painting is an illuminated cross, made from light projected on a dark wall. All the action of the play occurs between these two poles. At particularly dramatic moments, the characters gaze searchingly at the cross, then at the notebook, then at each other. By then end, it's clear that Lorenzo has shifted over to Machiavelli's side.