

LITTLE BROTHER



**based on the novel by Cory Doctorow
adapted and directed by Josh Costello
Custom Made Theatre Company, San Francisco, CA**

“Well worth watching. The story and actors generate a momentum that’s hard to resist. Costello succeeds best in interweaving the story’s thriller plot and its comically touching romance with its outspoken politics.”

– Robert Hurwitt, San Francisco Chronicle

“It’s a tense, power-packed play with some hilarious lines and stirring speeches, eloquent, touching and infuriating in all the right places. The show’s not just a pleasure to watch; it’s also a bit of due diligence that just may help preserve your democracy.”

– Sam Hurwitt, Marin Independent-Journal

“This is the best kind of political theatre. Thought provoking, suspenseful, emotionally real, uncomfortably close to the hard truth.”

– Charles Kruger, examiner.com

“Probably the most exciting thing on stage right now.”

-Robert Avila, SF Bay Guardian

San Francisco Chronicle

'Little Brother' review: Big Brother's spawn

Reviewed by Robert Hurwitt

January 28, 2012

"As you read this, drones are flying overhead," warns a program note for Custom Made Theatre's world premiere of "Little Brother." Point well taken. Sure it's science fiction, but **the most sobering aspect of Josh Costello's bracing adaption of Cory Doctorow's best-selling young-adult novel may be how rapidly events have caught up with the 2008 book.**

Not that the Bay Bridge has been destroyed in a terrorist attack, as in the story. Nor has Homeland Security set up a secret detention center on Treasure Island - Gitmo-by-the-bay - and begun "disappearing" thousands of local citizens.

But other developments in the near-future world of "Brother" - the continued erosion of civil liberties, the growth of public and private surveillance, the emergence of "leaderless" online resistance and the sudden eruption of youth-led mass movements from Cairo to Wall Street - had materialized before Costello's dramatization opened last week at the Gough Street Playhouse. **That's one reason the show has generated enough well-deserved buzz to extend its run another two weeks.**

Briskly staged by Costello, "Brother" is a fast-paced techie-political adventure upholstered in clever live and animated video projections and energized by Chris Houston's score and Daunielle Rasmussen's freewheeling choreography. It's also, Doctorow fans be warned, a radically cut and altered version of the book, but one that retains its attitude and rabble-rousing message.

Performed with youthful conviction by three actors, "Brother" is not the story of 17-year-old Mission hacker Marcus (a magnetic Daniel Petzold) - as his companions keep reminding him - but of cataclysmic events as witnessed (and influenced) by him.

Those include some high-tech hacking, being secretly and brutally interrogated by Homeland Security, sparking a groundswell of cyber-grassroots resistance to the burgeoning security-police state and falling back into its hands. Marissa Keltie is compelling as his super-smart, very direct hacker rival turned dedicated partner and girlfriend.

Keltie and Cory Censoprano play all the other roles - teens, teachers, parents, cops, interrogators (chillingly), reporters and more. Some aren't filled out or differentiated as well as they could be, and there are holes and lapses in the script. "Brother" takes a little while to pull you in, but once it does, **the story and actors generate a momentum that's hard to resist.**

Costello succeeds best in interweaving the story's thriller plot and its comically touching romance with its outspoken politics. By the perhaps too-wishful-thinking end, we're all fired up to embrace the Bill of Rights - as radical as that document now seems.



Daniel Petzold stars in the world premiere of Cory Doctorow and Josh Costello's *Little Brother* at Custom Made Theatre Company.

photo courtesy of Jay Yamada



Theater review: Custom Made's 'Little Brother' requires watching
Reviewed by Sam Hurwitt
February 2, 2012

IN THE WAKE of a terrorist attack on a major urban structure, the Department of Homeland Security has suspended many civil liberties. Large gatherings are restricted, security cameras are everywhere, and all credit cards, transit passes and online communications are monitored for suspicious activity. American citizens can even be rounded up, tortured and detained indefinitely without charges or access to a lawyer.

Much of this may sound uncomfortably familiar in post-9/11 America, but things are pushed just a step further in the Custom Made Theatre Co. world premiere of "Little Brother." The Bay Bridge has been blown up and the DHS has set up a "Gitmo by the Bay" on Treasure Island. San Francisco high school student Marcus Yallow gets dragged there along with his injured friend Darryl and Ange, a girl they'd just met, after breaking free of the panicking crowd in the immediate wake of the explosion.

A budding computer hacker raised to take his civil rights seriously, Marcus is subjected to brutal interrogation for refusing to cooperate without a lawyer. Released but still being watched, with Darryl still missing, Marcus goes on a covert crusade to sabotage the new security measures with the help of an underground resistance of fellow teens linked through a secret Xbox network. If Big Brother is always watching, Little Brother's doing whatever he can to jam the surveillance. We never learn anything about who actually blew up the bridge, but that's beside the point.

"Little Brother" is based on the 2008 best-selling novel of the same name by Cory Doctorow, editor of the blog "Boing Boing." The stage version is adapted and directed by Josh Costello, the artistic director of expanded programs at Marin Theatre Company. The story is pared down and rearranged from the novel, but it's **skillfully done and works remarkably well.**

The play is structured as our protagonist Marcus and his friends Ange and Darryl reenact what happened to them and what they did about it, although the story never leaves Marcus's point of

view to recount the others' experience. (His friends have to keep reminding him that it's "not about you.") Ange and Darryl play all the other characters, jumping seamlessly from one role to another.

Daniel Petzold is full of youthful energy and zeal as Marcus, often hyperventilating with breathless enthusiasm. Marissa Keltie exudes teen tempestuousness as Ange, even as her fierce standoffishness gives way to rocking from one foot to another in adolescent flirtation. She's hard as nails as the sadistic head interrogator and nicely poised as Marcus's mom, although hampered by a shaky, initially unidentifiable British accent.

Along with several soldiers, cops and a comically hostile vice principal, Cory Censoprano gives subtle, sympathetic turns as Darryl, as Marcus's stooped and complacent ex-radical dad and as low-key coconspirator Jolu, who gives a quietly powerful speech about how the experience of being presumed guilty is different for brown people than for white people in this country. Having Darryl as one of the people telling the story removes a key piece of suspense about his fate, but it adds to the close-knit camaraderie of the telling.

The play is performed in Custom Made's Gough Street Playhouse, an intimate thrust stage nestled inside the grounds of San Francisco's Trinity Episcopal Church. Sarah Phykitt's set is a wall of windows papered over with leaflets on the other side, so that we can't quite make out what they say, with a door that's conspicuously never used.

Costello's briskly paced staging makes skillful use of video backgrounds designed by Pauline Luppert, managing to make texting and typing look dynamic.

It's a tense, power-packed play with some hilarious lines and stirring speeches, eloquent, touching and infuriating in all the right places. The show's not just a pleasure to watch; it's also a bit of due diligence that just may help preserve your democracy.



Custom Made Premieres Exciting Political Drama, "Little Brother"

Reviewed by Charles Kruger

January 20, 2012

Who is Cory Doctorow? If you do not know, ask the brightest teenager of your acquaintance and you'll likely get an earful. **Doctorow is the hippest hipster, a science fiction and young adult novelist, who writes like an amalgam of William Gibson and Judy Blume.** As a futurist, his anticipations are as uncanny as H. G. Wells, except where Wells's predictions took generations, Doctorow's come to pass in a matter of months.

His novel *Little Brother* (adapted for the stage by Josh Costello) was published in 2008. It is an indictment of the dangers of Homeland Security that uncannily anticipates today's conversations. It describes the world from the perspective of high school students caught up in the net of anti-terrorism efforts after a terrorist attack in San Francisco.

These students inhabit a world where schools are like prisons with a video camera in every classroom and a guard in every hallway, public transportation is in the hands of rogue cops, peacefully assembling young people are subject to chemical weapons attacks and, as they eventually conclude, nobody over 25 can be trusted. Wait minute! Doesn't this sound familiar?

Marcus (Daniel Petzold), his friend Daryl (Cory Censoprano) and love interest Ange (Marissa Keltie) are caught truant on the day of a terrorist attack in downtown San Francisco and find themselves taken into custody as possible enemy combatants.

They experience torture and abuse. Marcus and Ange return to their lives as high school students, but Daryl disappears.

Afraid to speak of their experience even to their parents for fear of retribution, Marcus and Ange use the Internet to organize an underground protest movement to take down Homeland Security.

It is a credit to Doctorow's (and playwright/director Josh Costello's) story-telling sophistication and careful marshaling of facts that this story is almost completely convincing as it plays out on stage.

Costello has wisely tightened Doctorow's book to three main characters. On a nearly empty stage, Costello utilizes video and sound effects superbly, creating multiple San Francisco locations, mass demonstrations, press conferences, online experiences and coaching his actors to create multiple characterizations as necessary.

This is the best kind of political theatre. Thought provoking, suspenseful, emotionally real, uncomfortably close to the hard truth.

For this extraordinary production, CustomMade Theatre has assembled some of the most distinguished talent in the Bay area. The excellence of the three actors can be seen in their exceptional resumes: between them, they have performed with the San Francisco Mime Troupe, the Marin Theatre Company, SF Playhouse, Marin Shakespeare and the Shotgun Players among others. These folk are the cream of the theatrical crop.

Adapter and Director Josh Costello is the Artistic Director of Expanded Programs at Marin Theatre Company and a founder of Impact Theatre.

The design staff is equally remarkable. Miyuki Bierlein's costumes are exactly right as is Chris Houston's sound design. Pauline Luppert's video design is as polished as one could imagine. Krista Smith's lighting does an amazing job of capturing the look of San Francisco with light alone, from the early morning sun in the Mission to the ocean reflected light of the Sutro Baths.

This is an important production that is not to be missed. It is likely, I think, to remain a highlight of the 2012-2013 season. Very highly recommended!



(L to R) Daniel Petzold, Marissa Keltie, and Cory Censoprano star in the world premiere of Cory Doctorow and Josh Costello's *Little Brother* at Custom Made Theatre Company.

photo courtesy of Jay Yamada



Cory Doctorow's "Little Brother" becomes a must-see stage play
Reviewed by Charlie Jane Anderson
January 17, 2012

I was lucky enough to catch a preview performance of the Custom Made Theatre Co.'s new stage adaptation of Cory Doctorow's award-winning novel *Little Brother* the other day — and it was a **total marvel. Somehow, writer/director Josh Costello managed to condense the novel down to a two-hour play, without losing any of the impact. If anything, the staged version hits a bit harder than the book, because of the intense, but not overstated, performances.**

I've heard it's poor form to review a preview night show, because that's not the final version of the play and it's like a rehearsal with a live audience. So I'll just say that **the version I saw was powerful and brilliant, and the cast was note-perfect**, especially Daniel Petzold as Marcus Yallow. (The other two castmembers, Marissa Keltie and Cory Censoprano, have a harder task in some ways, since they play a variety of roles throughout the show. And they're both great as well.) The stage play uses a lot of pre-recorded video and some very clever sets to create a lot of different settings, as well as giving a primer in topics like the futility of using data-mining to catch terrorists.

Given that President Obama just signed the defense bill that actually does allow indefinite detention of American citizens who are suspected of terrorism, **this stage play couldn't be more timely.** According to the Custom Made website, tonight's opening night is already sold out, but you can still get tickets for Thursday and most of the weekend. If you're in the Bay Area, this is **worth going out of your way for.**

Right about now

Custom Made Theatre's *Little Brother* adapts Cory Doctorow's SF-based teen terrorism tale -- and it's probably the most exciting thing on stage right now

Reviewed by Robert Avila

February 8, 2012

It's a rare thing, really too rare, to find an audience eagerly erupting into political discussions between acts of a play. But that's what *Little Brother* inspires, and in an unaffected way, without pretension or unwelcome goading. It's too cool, confident, and contemporary for that. After all, the night I saw the play — adapted by director Josh Costello from the 2008 teen novel by Canadian sci-fi author and activist (and co-editor of [Boing Boing](#)) Cory Doctorow — was just one night after Occupy Oakland tried to convert a vacant building into a much-needed community center for the needier of the 99 percent. That didn't go too well. The street clashes with shock-trooping Oakland police forces led to something like 400 arrests before the night was over.

That latest incident, in an ongoing resistance to systemic and overweening injustice, resonated effortlessly with the proceedings onstage at Custom Made Theatre. There, on an intimate thrust stage, three sharp young actors (Daniel Petzold, Marissa Keltie, and Cory Censoprano) smoothly embodied a fleet series of characters in a story pitting a group of Mission District high school teens against the Department of Homeland Security. The battle takes place in the aftermath of a terrorist attack that levels the Bay Bridge and unleashes an all-out totalitarian crackdown by the federal government. **It's a dramatic, humorous, irreverent, and urgent story all at once.** While far from a perfect play (dramatic consistency and verisimilitude are stretched a bit thin by the end), ***Little Brother* is probably the most exciting thing on stage just now, alive like few other productions in its response to the present moment.**

Behind the dynamic trio onstage stands a patchwork wall-projection screen (courtesy of set designer Sarah Phykitt, video designer Pauline Luppert, and video engineer Darl Andrew Packard) papered over with pages seemingly torn from radical histories and revolutionary tracts (it was easy enough to make out Emma Goldman's visage among the repeated black-and-white pages), and periodically set aglow with live video feed, scene-setting photo montage, text messages, and hacker scrawl across computer and videogame screens.

While DHS is synonymous with Big Brother throughout, and for good reason — the agency is at the forefront of a total invasion of American private life and the Gitmo'ing of American teens — it can also be understood at times as a synonym for the state at large, from high school vice principals on up. As main character Marcus Yallow (a bright, engaging Petzold) explains in an early address to the audience, he's a senior at a San Francisco public high school. Even before the Bay Bridge attack, "that makes me one of the most surveilled people in the world."

Before being transformed into an all-out revolutionary by his violent, extra-constitutional encounter with DHS, Marcus and buddy Darryl (a sharp and versatile Censoprano) are fun-loving

rebel hackers and gamers often on the receiving end of unwanted attention by the usual authorities. In an early scene, an inept school administrator interrogates Marcus, believing him, correctly, to be the hacker menace “w1n5t0n” (though, hilariously, pronouncing the handle literally instead of the intended “Winston”). Marcus outwits him, and the administrator loses his grip on the free-roaming online hooligan who, among other things, has handily derailed the “snitch tags” the school plants in library books to track the students.

At this point, *Little Brother* bears a striking similarity to *The North Pool*, Rajiv Joseph’s psychological two-hander set in a vice principal’s office after school, which had its premiere last year at Palo Alto’s TheatreWorks. But Joseph’s battle, while resonating with a larger political and historical context, ultimately remains more personal than political. ***Little Brother* moves via the next terrorist attack into the realm of all-out political crisis, as short a distance from here as that may seem, and in this way resists reducing its themes to merely personal terms, highlights a tension with the personal throughout — even as it cleaves to a familiar coming-of-age narrative involving Marcus and girlfriend-coconspirator Ange (played compellingly by Keltie).**

Costello shrewdly emphasizes this tension in his staging, which begins with the three principal characters recreating the story for a video cam so that it can be posted online. As Marcus begins a first-person account, his cohorts interrupt him almost immediately. “Dude, you can’t make it all about you,” says Darryl, with good-humored conviction. “It’s too big.”



(L to R) Daniel Petzold and Cory Censoprano in the world premiere of Cory Doctorow and Josh Costello’s *Little Brother* at Custom Made Theatre Company.

photo courtesy of Jay Yamada