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YEARS

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## SHOWCASE

## REVIEWS

## 'Dead of Night: The Execution of Fred Hampton'

Pegasus Players

Through April 5

At O'Rourke Center for the Performing Arts,  
1145 W. Wilson

Tickets, \$19-\$21. (773) 878-9761

## Recommended



A barrage of police bullets fired on Dec. 4, 1969, changed the history of Chicago—and perhaps of national efforts for black empowerment—in indelible ways.

A special police force commanded by Cook County State's Attorney Edward Hanrahan burst into a West Side apartment and killed activist Fred Hampton, the 21-year-old chairman of the Illinois Black Panther Party, and his colleague Mark Clark as they slept. Hanrahan was a political protege of Mayor Richard J. Daley and, it was later learned, a key player in the FBI's nationwide campaign to wipe out black leadership.

A young white playwright, Robert Myers, has brought the story of that infamous police raid to the stage in a chilling, fact-based work titled "Dead of Night: The Execution of Fred Hampton," now receiving a strong, world premiere production at Pegasus Players.

Myers steeped himself in the history of Chicago's black power movement at the behest of Pegasus executive director Arlene Crewdson. Under Jonathan Wilson's shrewd direction, "Night" is a powerful piece that, with some fine-tuning and more context, could go a long way in addressing a sad chapter of Chicago's history.

The Maywood-born Hampton was a charismatic wunderkind who organized a chapter of the NAACP at Proviso East High School when he was 15 and was Midwest leader of the Panthers before he was 20. As Hampton, Anthony Fleming III, a sophomore at Columbia College, captures the leader's mix of Marxist intellectualism and personal magnetism. Portraying his colleagues, Mignon McPherson, Nambi E. Kelley and Charles Glenn help to re-create a time when black nationalists put fear into the heart of the white establishment.

Myers focuses on William O'Neal, the FBI informer who infiltrated the Panthers and whose reports to his white supervising agent (played by the engaging Robert Nowak) enabled Hanrahan's men to enact their deadly plan. Myers paints O'Neal as a complex figure who seeks



William O'Neal (David Barr) kneels over the body of Fred Hampton (Anthony Fleming III).

the respect of both Hampton and the FBI.

It's a tricky concept, but actor David Barr, who's also a gifted playwright, invests O'Neal with both humanity and inner torment. The cynical manipulations of the FBI's counterintelligence program were designed not only to rid the country of J. Edgar Hoover's dreaded "Black Messiahs," but also to put doubt into the hearts of black Americans, and Barr helps us see that.

Hanrahan's career was destroyed by the raid and Daley's subsequent abandonment of him. A former Panther, Bobby Rush, is now a U.S. congressman. But the growth of local black leadership was stalled until the rise of Harold Washington, and the West Side grew increasingly isolated. "Dead of Night" takes us back to a complicated time when "All power to the people!" was a slogan with tragic consequences.

Andrew Patner