A new play by Stephen Sewell is always an event. And more often than not, his plays are heralded by marvellous titles. There is a cadence to them - *The Blind Giant is Dancing, Dreams in an Empty City, The Father We Loved on a Beach by the Sea*. These plays sound like operas, or modernist paintings with their cascading names, unfurling like great gallant flags. They also have proven to be large ungainly milestones in our national theatre. *Blind Giant* and *Empty City* both premiered in Adelaide and rate among the most ambitious new Australian works State Theatre - and its earlier incarnation, Lighthouse - has ever initiated.

Now we have *Myth, Propaganda and Disaster in Nazi Germany and Contemporary America*, a title not so much poetic as startling in its directness, with its blunt yoking of two countries and two - many would insist - very different periods in history.

If the title also sounds academic that’s because it is. Talbot is an Australian historian working in a New York university. He is married to Eve, an American screen writer, and is hoping to get tenure in his department. He has just written a book about what he sees as a deteriorating state of civil liberties and moral acuity in American policy, both domestic and foreign, since the September 11 attacks. It is called *Myth Propaganda and Disaster in Nazi Germany and Contemporary America*.

Despite its provocative name Talbot is bemused when his old university chum Max warns that the times are a-changin’ and is blandly forthright in his views on social occasions even when it raises the hackles of his Head of Department, Jack and his waspish wife Amy, and Stan the department’s attorney and his wife Jill. Talbot is confident and insulated in the confines of his lecture room and buoyed somewhat by the genuine interest shown in his topic by Marguite, an idealistic young Singaporean student. It is only when he is confronted in his office by a gunman, in a gaberdine coat,
quoting the opening lines of Franz Kafka’s *The Trial* that he begins to realise that things are unravelling in front of his eyes.

Stephen Sewell has written a paranoid thriller which, as the genre suggests, intertwines the improbable with the highly credible. When Talbot’s vanity is touched by Marguïte’s attention he finds himself under suspicion of sexual impropriety. The more innocuously ambiguous the nuances, the more they are amplified and worsened by a litigious, self-serving and panicky university management. When Talbot insists that he has been pistol whipped in his office no-one believes him - they find nothing on the closed circuit security tapes and imply his injuries are self-inflicted. In the best *film noir* tradition Talbot can trust no-one and every turn is for the worse. And when Max identifies the Kafka reference Talbot fears, as we do, that like Joseph K, he is in the process of being interrogated, tried and executed for unnamed crimes by unnamed people.

Director Aubrey Mellor has achieved a fluency to the production which this text, heavy on plot and full of wordy speeches, greatly needs. The various settings - university office, New York high rise apartments and so on - are provided for in Shaun Gurton’s high walled set which brings a corporate, cathedral-like effect with tall windows providing panoramas of the American City as well as doubling as screens for powerpoint lectures and images of books lining the shelves of an academic library. Both Mark Shelton’s lighting design and David Franzke’s sound are astutely understated - a good thing since Sewell productions in the past have often been too heavily punctuated with stage effects.

The production is also well-cast. Nicholas Eadie again distinguishes the Adelaide stage with a strong performance as Talbot, earnest in his research, gormless about its implication, devoted to his wife Eve but emotionally adrift from her needs. His bewilderment at unfolding events is well-managed and he keeps a lid on the incipient melodrama of Sewell’s text. Alison Whyte, as his wife Eve who scores success with a screenplay just as her husband disappears into a subplot from *The Manchurian Candidate*, is also excellent.

Michael Habib is impressive as Jack, the faculty professor whose pursuit of historical truth soon evaporates into expediency and bigotry. In this character we sense how easy the slippery slide into McCarthyism must
really have been. Also memorable are Jacqy Phillips, a long-time performer in Sewell plays, as Amy, Robert McPherson as the ever-vigilant legal eagle Stan and Tom Considine as Max the Quiet Australian. Greg Stone is sinister and vehement as The Man - the emissary from some shadowy branch of government? an ideological vigilante? We don't know. But we shiver when he shows physical contempt for Talbot's books and when, interrogating him, he screams - who was smarter Socrates or Plato? We certainly know who was eventually condemned by the state for free thought.

Stephen Sewell has shown much courage and insight with this play and Playbox and State Theatre have given us a work of theatre to reflect upon. These are not easy times to ask difficult questions, especially when questions of patriotism and the national interest are on a hair trigger. As many have discovered, from security service whistleblowers to internees in Cuba, the times have been defined as desperate in order to justify desperate remedies. The rules of evidence, the impartial examination of facts and actions and other rational procedures have, in the fog of war and the anxiety of peace, been short-circuited.

Sewell’s play fantasises the secret malice of fascist agencies and while it is a sometimes clunky mix of TV thriller and literate theatre, he makes some telling observations. His depiction of American urban manners is at times crudely stereotyped - the scene between Eve and Amy, for instance, could be straight out of Dallas - but that is beside the point. It is the Australians we need to watch here. Talbot, who says of a thesis that takes its argument right up to the pugnacious noses of the New Order, “but it’s only a book ..” - thus reinforcing the notion that the intelligentsia has no place or meaning in the real world, and Max, his old cobber with the easy manner, who quietly aligns himself with the dominant forces and, for a sinecure, gives them intellectual respectability.