

Freed Fiddles, Nero Burns

BY JOHN GLORE

Scribonius, the protagonist of *You, Nero*, is an aging playwright whose best days are clearly behind him when he receives a summons from the emperor. An old actor friend urges Scribonius to ignore the summons and head for the hills rather than risk having his head separated from his shoulders by the mercurial Nero. But Scribonius has reached a point at this late stage of his life and career when he feels he has little to lose. After all, the theatre, which was once his passion and his life, has lost its cachet as the public has turned its fickle attention to the gladiatorial games and spectacular battle re-enactments now filling the Hippodrome on a daily basis. So Scribonius submits himself to Nero's will and whims. It's a decision he'll live to regret.

Scribonius's creator, Amy Freed, is a mid-career playwright who has experienced considerable success with such plays as *Freedomland*, *The Beard of Avon* and *Safe in Hell* (all of which, like *You, Nero*, were commissioned and premiered by South Coast Repertory); she has every reason to feel optimistic that her best days lie ahead of her. Yet in *You, Nero* Freed has written a wickedly funny satire that gives vent to her worries about her chosen profession. If Roman culture rotted from the inside out during the decline of that august empire, Freed implies there may be reason for concern closer to home, too.

Nero, it turns out, has long been a big fan of Scribonius's work — at least the early stuff — and he has a special assignment in mind for the bemused playwright. Well aware that the people of Rome don't care for him, Nero has decided his reputation needs a make-over. He has no intention of changing his ways, mind you, but instead will rely on a major PR blitz, which he'll launch by commissioning Scribonius to write a play about his life. The only stipulation is that the play must make him look really good.

And thus, spin-doctoring is born.

The problem is, Scribonius doesn't have the first clue about how to polish up the image of a man who has systematically eliminated both enemies and friends — even family — and destroyed the fabric of public life in his own city. The playwright's task is further complicated by the fact that Nero's

mother, Agrippina (sister of Caligula) wants to horn in on the action and use Scribonius's play to further her own agenda. So does Nero's mistress, Poppaea, who'd like to legitimize her place in the political structure by getting rid of Nero's wife and taking her place. Poppaea and Agrippina engage in a ruthless tug-of-war — with Scribonius as the rope — to attain power over Nero. Each will use any means at her disposal — *any* means — to charm the playwright into adopting her cause, and not even the sober Scribonius can resist the onslaught of feminine wiles.

In spite of repeated distractions and false starts, Scribonius makes every effort to give Nero the play he wants, but his determination is finally undermined by the emperor's own artistic ambitions. When Nero decides that he needs to become the star of his own life-story, no one will get in his way; and Scribonius can only look on in horrified astonishment as the emperor re-invents the art of theatre and popular entertainment in a climactic extravaganza that is both strange and — to us contemporary witnesses — eerily familiar.

Earlier this year *You, Nero* had its first public airing in a Pacific Playwrights Festival reading directed by Sharon Ott (*Ridiculous Fraud*), who returns to stage this world premiere production. Theatre-goers at the reading took delight in the screamingly funny interpretation of the title role by frequent Freed collaborator, Danny Scheie. Scheie is set to reprise the role for the production, with Lori Larsen once again playing his mother-from-hell, Agrippina. Broadway veteran and SCR stalwart John Vickery will play Scribonius, while Caralyn Kozlowski will pleasurably torment him as the vixen Poppaea. SCR founding company members Hal Landon Jr. and Richard Doyle, a pair of memorable eunuchs in the reading, will return to those

roles as well as others, and Kasey Mahaffy, a recent audience favorite in *Taking Steps* and *An Italian Straw Hat: A Vaudeville* (he's the redhead with a knack for playing hapless neurotics) will meet the unkindest cut of all as the actor, Fabiolo. The cast is rounded out by ensemble members Marissa Hampton, Angelle Buffett and Christopher Crawford.

The roles of Agrippina's two pet leopards have not yet been cast.



Danny Scheie who plays Nero with playwright Amy Freed