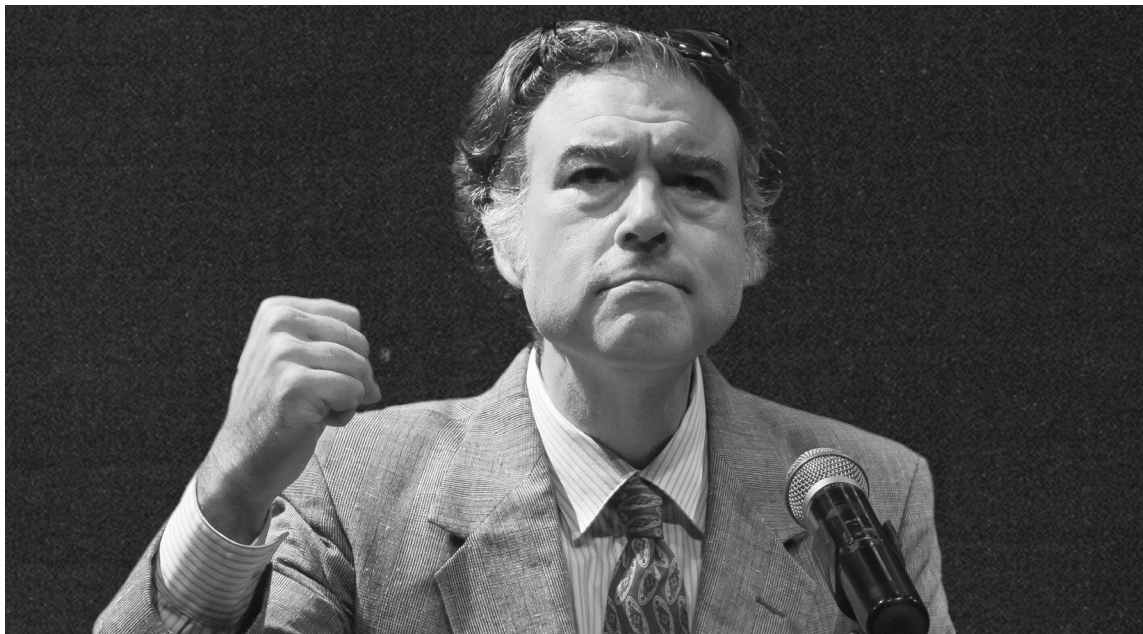


# STAGE DIRECTIONS

*KUNSTLER* | *STAGE III*



*Sam Mossler in Künstler. Photo by Matthew Holler.*

# IN DEFENSE OF DEFENSE

BY BENEDICT BURGESS

His aggressive, radical approach to law made him an icon - both loved and loathed in equal measure. This season at FST, famous lawyer William Moses Kunstler stands trial, himself, for a forty-plus year legal career spent defending some of the twentieth century's most contentious court cases.

"I have long been fascinated by public figures who undermine the reputations they built when they

were young by choices in their final years," says playwright Jeffrey Sweet. "The chance to explore someone who appeared to outlive his time appealed to me."

Sweet begins his exploration at an unnamed university in 1995. Kunstler, our main character, has arrived ostensibly to share his wisdom. But before long, the university's lecture hall transforms into a time-traveling courtroom

as his lecture morphs into a cross-examination of his own legal career. It even has its own judge: a bold, young graduate student named Kerry, determined to confront the school's chosen quest speaker.

"I was not interested in following the pattern of other plays about notable figures and writing a solo show," Sweet explains, "I felt there had to be someone to challenge him, just as in real life."

Kunstler rocketed to national notoriety in 1969 as a defense attorney for the Chicago Seven (formerly the Chicago Eight), a group of African-American anti-war protestors accused of inciting violence at the 1968 Democratic National Convention. In addition to acquitting all seven defendants, Kunstler's spirited defense exposed the government's unscrupulous actions in attempts to vilify the

protestors. That revelation had a profound impact on Kunstler, transforming him into a “radical lawyer” and, to some, a “hero.”

That heroism, however, seemed to disappear as he took on ever more controversial clients in the final years of his career, including mob boss John Gotti and terrorist mastermind Omar Abdel-Rahman. Even Kunstler's own daughters publically conflicted with their father over his decision to defend the Central Park Five.

"It's easy, with the distance of time, to forget just how revered and then vilified he was," said Director Jason Cannon. "I can only imagine what Kunstler would have become in this day of cellphones and social media. Whatever you think of his beliefs, there's no doubting his mastery of the media and his complete grasp of the law as a living thing."

"The play gives plenty of reasons you might consider him heroic and wise," says Actor Sam Mossler, who plays Kunstler in FST's production. "But it doesn't gloss over his maddening narcissism, impulsivity and recklessness."

*Kunstler* paints a complete portrait of its fascinating subject. It presents the fiery trial lawyer in full, living color — as a bulldozer of person who fought tooth and nail to break down binary notions of guilt and innocence... even if it meant falling from grace to defend the seemingly indefensible.

"Künstler always viewed himself as a 'David,' defending other 'Davids,' against the various 'Goliaths' out there," concluded Cannon. "It's in the moment of stepping *towards* Goliath that we actually define who we are."

## Performance Checklist

- ☐ **You are attending this performance in Bowne's Lab Theatre.**
- ☐ **Have you checked your show time?**
- ☐ **Are you joining us for pre-show 60 minutes prior to your show?**
- ☐ **Do you have your tickets or will you be picking them up from will call?**