

Review

BWW Reviews: Tennessee Repertory Theatre's *YANKEE TAVERN*

By: Jeffrey Ellis, *Broadway World*

February 6, 2011

In *Yankee Tavern*, playwright Steven Dietz has created the perfect onstage mystery for the times in which we live, challenging us to consider our most closely held beliefs while reiterating our most pervasive fears. Now onstage in a richly compelling production directed by Tennessee Repertory Theatre's René Dunshee Copeland, *Yankee Tavern* transforms TPAC's Andrew Johnson Theatre into a petri dish filled with conspiracy theories and ghost stories.

It's a provocative thriller, as Dietz delves into the aftermath of 9/11, specifically focusing on the lives of four people found in the tavern of the Yankee Hotel, a dilapidated New York City hostelry that's slated for an imminent date with the wrecking ball. The bar's denizens include Adam, a rather idealistic graduate student who's finishing up his thesis and hoping for future employment with the CIA, but for now is running the bar he inherited when his father committed suicide on 9/12; Janet, Adam's fiancée, who is finalizing wedding plans while questioning if there will ever really be a wedding and the reality of Adam's relationship with a former professor at Columbia; and Ray, a conspiracy-spouting barfly who lives in the decaying hotel above the tavern and spends his days telling everyone within earshot of his unique take on everything from the Kennedy assassination, the moon landing, the 2000 presidential election and, of course, 9/11 and what the government wants/doesn't want the public to know—and his nights socializing with the ghosts who populate the hotel's vacant rooms.

Added to this intriguing mix is the enigmatic Palmer, a man whose entrance in Act One portends trouble to follow in Act Two, when he is more forthcoming about his own take on events transpiring on that fateful date in 2001 and, perhaps more startlingly, the events taking place onstage and his intimate knowledge about the other characters.

Dietz has set the play's action in 2006—which in some ways makes the play seem a bit dated; perhaps if the action had been set earlier (say in 2002 or 2003), the events taking place would seem more immediate and more disquieting and, thus, the play would have a more sharply felt impact. That does not, however, make the play any less provocative or compelling.

Dietz's script is fast-paced and well-plotted—clearly, the playwright has done his homework in constructing this tightly-coiled thriller—and while its subject matter, at the core, is very serious, he tempers the proceedings with a healthy dose of humor and skepticism in the play's early going, which helps to mitigate the heavier elements of its later scenes.

Copeland's directorial hand is evident throughout the play as she moves her four characters around the stage to prevent the one-set play from becoming too static—and the action from becoming too sinister and off-putting for the audience. Copeland very intelligently takes the audience right to the line, to heighten the sense of unease that's prevalent throughout the play's darker moments, but she never goes

too far. As a result, the premise of *Yankee Tavern* seems far more plausible and its impact far more palpable.

As expected, *Yankee Tavern*'s design aesthetic is exemplary: Gary Hoff's set and properties design is unparalleled; the man is an artist of the highest order and the set he has created for *Yankee Tavern* is one of the best, if not the very best, in a long line of artistic triumphs. You enter the Johnson Theatre and feel as if you are in that bar so realistic is Hoff's extraordinary set, which is made even moodier and more atmospheric by Michael Barnett's evocative lighting design. And, finally, Trish Clark's costume design for the four characters is impeccable.

Chief among those four characters is Ray, a potentially one-dimensional role brought vividly to life by Nashville theater stalwart Henry Haggard. When presented with the opportunity to take on such a polarizing character, Haggard is more than ready for the task, delivering a tour de force performance that sets the tone for the entire production. His is an energetic, imaginative take on Ray that makes the fictional man seem so real that by play's end you think of him as an old friend—or, at the very least, someone you try to avoid on a daily basis.

Patrick Waller gives a contained, well-measured, performance as Adam. Waller is such a likable actor—there's just something about him onstage that makes you want to believe every word that comes out of his mouth—that it helps underscore the doubts you're riddled with as the story, however convoluted it might actually be, is told onstage. It's a credit to Waller that you feel so conflicted (continuing to question what you've just witnessed) about his character after the play is over.

As Janet, Cori Laemmel is well-cast in her Tennessee Rep debut, and she's every bit as likable as Waller, which makes their onstage pairing feel genuine and altogether believable. She has good timing and her scenes in Act Two are particularly well-acted, although she sounds a bit shrill in her more tearful, dramatic moments. In fact, her final scene would have a greater impact if her emotions were more controlled.

Completing the cast as the enigmatic Palmer is Maurice Ralston, also making his Tennessee Rep debut, whose pitch-perfect reading of the role adds a ghostly sense of foreboding to his every scene.