

Review

Theories Thrive in *YANKEE TAVERN*

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In our society, conspiracy theories have existed among major historical happenings for decades, but perhaps none more prevalent than the events surrounding September 11, 2001. Tennessee Repertory Theatre's production of Steven Dietz's *Yankee Tavern* puts front and center an entire barrage of these theories and sets the wheel in motion to make the audience ponder what's real versus what might be something the proverbial "they" want one to think.

Kudos to the Rep for including this show in its current season. Dietz's gripping script—set in 2006 in a bar in New York City—is sheer genius in that it succeeds in presenting the abounding conspiracy theories about 9/11 in a manner that forces the audience to take it all into consideration and draw its own conclusion... or perhaps further questions. What's brilliant about the way Dietz sets up his play's unfolding drama is how he alludes to previous conspiracy theories in our nation's history, including JFK's assassination, man landing on the moon and Nixon's Watergate scandal.

Gary Hoff's elaborate set design provides the appropriate backdrop for the drama on stage containing only four characters, portrayed by two Rep vets (Henry Haggard and Patrick Waller) and two newcomers (Maurice Ralston and Cori Laemmel).

The role of Ray, the eccentric older gent who is awash in said conspiracy theories and passionate about his beliefs, is one truly meant for Haggard. In fact, it's one of his finest performances on the Rep's stage. Haggard delivers his character with much conviction, and is the only one in the cast who at least tries to infuse his dialogue with a New Yorker's accent (his is one of at least two characters who should deliver it), which at times sounds a little more Bostonian.

Likewise, Waller gives emotional oomph to his character, Adam. This, too, is one of his better dramatic performances. He shines in his stage presence as a soon-to-be-married young man working on his thesis while trapped as a bartender in the tavern he inherited from his dead father... and he has some secrets of his own come to find out.

Ralston's delivery as the mysterious Palmer is sufficient in Act 1, as he does little more than sit at the bar ordering two Rolling Rocks, one for him and one for an unseen friend. His character's big reveal happens in Act II, and while adequate, I would prefer to see a little more depth and sinister quality from him, given the heavy load of information he eventually sheds light on.

Although all four characters in this play are pivotal, Laemmel's role as Janet is especially important, but unfortunately, she's the weak link in this production, which isn't her fault, I suppose; she's simply miscast in this show. A stronger, well-seasoned actress is needed to play this part. Laemmel is the only non-equity actor in the show, and in this case, it's evident. Her performance tends to go all over the place, ranging from overacting to underacting to melodrama in between. Most of her physical mannerisms on stage are stilted and held back, and the emotional moments her character should possess are sadly not believable. Laemmel's delivery of this character might suffice if this was a community theater show, but it does not

merit a professional, equity production. It would bode well for René Copeland to work more closely in her direction here, because what Laemmel lacks on stage is the difference in this show being deemed a good offering versus one that could have been amazing across the board.

Overall, the Rep's rendition of *Yankee Tavern* IS a good one. Dietz's well-penned script is ultimately the true star of the show, and it will make you think and initiate a lot of your own dialogue. Bottom line, that's what an engaging theatrical experience should deliver.