

Review

Conspiracy theories and paranoia abound in Rep's staging of Steven Dietz's intriguing psychological thriller.

By: **Martin Brady**, *Nashville Scene*

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Steven Dietz's *Yankee Tavern* is certainly a play for our time. Thoughtful, history-minded theatergoers should be intrigued by the playwright's sullen though neatly constructed thriller, which creatively lays out a tantalizing deconstruction of events leading up to 9/11.

The primary vessel for Dietz's multilayered message is a character named Ray, portrayed brilliantly by Henry Haggard in the new Tennessee Rep production. Ray enters a New York City bar in 2006 and proceeds to lay out a breathless rap about conspiracy theories in general — JFK, hanging chads and, in particular, 9/11, replete with a reverent regard for all the niggling coincidences surrounding that still-startling event.

With his further playful attacks on America's seeming obsession with things like designer coffee and same-sex marriage, Ray is one of those talk radio nut jobs — complete with a working knowledge of waterboarding and, lucky for us, endless energy in his delivery.

Ray is the lead-in to a story that concerns the bar owner, Adam, a grad student in international studies who is soon to be married to Janet, whom we see addressing wedding invitations. Also in the tavern is a monosyllabic beer-drinker named Palmer, who eventually sets into motion suspicions between the young lovers involving extracurricular affairs of various kinds. Then Adam disappears and conspiracy takes center stage again.

Yankee Tavern is a psychological puzzle based on the struggle average citizens have in "trusting our eyes and ears." Not unlike Oliver Stone's film JFK, the play effectively assaults its audience with intriguing circumstantial evidence that may or may not add up, yet makes for compelling theater.

René Copeland's direction is literate and well-paced, and she positions Haggard's concentrated performance as the central building block.

That proves essential, because while the other three actors are in sync with the production's vision, their work is uneven. As Adam, Patrick Waller doesn't always convince. Maurice Ralston, an Atlanta actor making his Rep debut, uses a mysterious staccato delivery when he finally voices the weirdo Palmer. It's a serviceable turn, yet ultimately indistinctive.

Of particular interest is the performance of Cori Laemmel as Janet. Laemmel, also making her Rep debut, is an appealing ingenue who has distinguished herself locally in musicals. In striving to sustain this role — granted, no easy task, as it grows increasingly complex as the evening moves along — she might've relied more on well-modulated understatement than on the pained whimpers that sometimes gratingly convey her rising emotional state. That said, her paranoia is at least poised.

Regardless, Dietz's strong, rewarding script assures that everyone involved arrives safely at theatrical ground zero.

