

## Review

# Tennessee Repertory Theatre makes the most of the conspiracy-fuelled rollercoaster ride that is Steven Dietz' *Yankee Tavern*

By: Evans Donnell, *The Tennessean*

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The play starts like Mamet and ends like Hitchcock. And from its testosterone-fueled rants to its riddle-filled mystery, this show grips you because director René D. Copeland's cast is hitting on all acting cylinders.

It's 2006 in New York City and the place (via Gary C. Hoff's marvelous set) is a run-down bar in an old hotel awaiting demolition. Behind the bar is Adam (Patrick Waller), a grad student who took over the establishment his late father once operated. His fiancée Janet (Cori Laemmel) is there to discuss their wedding, but the room is dominated by the rants of Ray (Henry Haggard), whose mind contains an encyclopedia of conspiracy theories about 9/11 and other historical incidents.

Into this conversational cauldron steps Palmer (Maurice Ralston), who orders two beers while only drinking one and keeps quiet while Ray rambles on. He opens up later, though, and the talk turns to something else – you'll have to see the show to find out more.

This play has been produced from coast-to-coast since it premiered at Florida Stage in 2009, and it's easy to see why: The script has something for just about everyone. There's comic wit and personal drama, musings about the role conspiracy theories play in our society and even ghost stories.

For some, the play might seem too stuffed with story lines to focus on any one item. I don't think so. I've seen several shows where playwrights underestimated what audiences could take; it's obvious Dietz has more faith in patrons' abilities to handle multiple strands in a two-hour tale.

Of course, *Yankee Tavern's* engaging script wouldn't matter if the actors weren't up to it. This cast is. Haggard attacks his sometimes bombastic, sometimes tender character with the virtuoso playing of a veteran. If one only went to *Yankee Tavern* to see him, it would be a good decision.

Haggard's castmates are his equals in this endeavor. It's not easy playing the straight man or woman to a colorful character, particularly when Ray seizes the stage in Act I, but we get strong performances from Laemmel, Ralston and Waller throughout the show.

Laemmel is no stranger to local stages: She's graced Street Theatre Company productions, appeared in Nashville Children's Theatre's *Seussical the Musical* revival and started a youth troupe called The Theatre Bug. But this is her debut at Tennessee Rep, and it's impressive.

We have to accept a wide range of emotions from Janet, and as the story moves from conspiracy talk to thriller, we have to buy her mounting terror and anguish. Laemmel handles that transaction clearly and forcefully.

Ralston has an impressive list of credits highlighted by work on acclaimed stages in Atlanta like Actor's Express, Atlanta Shakespeare Company and the Tony Award-winning Alliance Theatre Company. His unnervingly cool delivery of Palmer's lines is pitch-perfect; his presence and focus make us believe we're seeing eminent danger emerge from the shadows.

And Waller, who has charmed audiences with his musical talents in such shows as Tennessee Rep's productions of *Big River* and *Sweeney Todd*, reminds us his acting is every bit as good as his singing. Waller's work doesn't telegraph anything; our discoveries about Adam are made through the naturalistic revelations in Waller's nuanced characterization.