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'45 Seconds From Broadway'

Character, quips propel Camelot production

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Left to right: Jade Chavis Watt, Jack Seybold and David King-Gabriel appear in Camelot Theatre's production of "45 Seconds From Broadway."

Photo courtesy of Steve Sutfin

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By Roberta Kent

Tidings reviewer

Posted: 2:00 AM May 22, 2013

There's a pattern to the patter. "45 Seconds From Broadway" by Neil Simon is a play about how nice — yes, really nice! — New York is, told in Simon's trademark rat-a-tat style of comedic zingers.

Simon's dialogue is straight out of the Jewish comedians of the Borscht Belt. It is a volley of quips and counter-quips, so familiar that you know the punch line from the very beginning. But, buried under their sting is generosity and compassion.

Director Paul R. Jones gives this production at Talent's Camelot Theatre Company the brashness and breathless timing that Neil Simon's work requires.

The play is set in The Polish Tea Room, a cozy coffee shop steps away from Broadway. (The name is a play on the elegant Russian Tea Room on New York's 57th Street that caters to Broadway's rich and famous.) Here, the owners, Bernie (Jack Seybold) and Zelda (Susan DuMond), offer Jewish comfort food and a warm welcome to both the aspiring and the not-so-successful.

"45 Seconds From Broadway" is less about plot than character as it tracks the restaurant's regulars over the course of a year through a series of vignettes. The action revolves around Mickey Fox (David King-Gabriel), a caustic stand-up comedian, famous enough to be recognizable but not really a star. We first see him courted by a fawning British producer, Andrew Duncan (Roy Von Rains, Jr.), hoping to get a London production of a show, any show, mounted through Mickey's name-value alone.

Megan Woods (Sarah Gore), a wide-eyed ingénue just arrived from Ohio, and Solomon Mantutu (Steven Dominguez), an aspiring and earnest playwright from South Africa, get nurturing from Bernie and Zelda and some hard-headed advice from Mickey. Gore and, especially, Dominguez breathe life into Simon's stereotypes of Broadway hopefuls. Simon makes these two characters almost saccharine and it is to Jones' credit as a director and Gore and Dominguez' skill at nuance that they emerge as more than foils for Mickey's wisdom.

But the real show-stealers here are Brandy Carson as the eccentric and very genteel madwoman, Rayleen, who periodically wanders into the place, thinking it's a fancy restaurant on the East Side, and Grant Shepard as her mysterious, mute escort Charles.

Carson's Rayleen seems just-this-close to being sane. We can believe she led a pampered life in the capitals and spas of Europe; we just aren't quite sure whether its fact or her inspired fantasy. And nothing about her devoted Charles serves to give the charade away. Shepard conveys Charles' resigned exasperation so convincingly with posture and facial expression that it is almost a disappointment when he actually speaks.

Special mention should go to costume designer Donna Boehm for Rayleen's spectacular piece-work fur coat, the subject of many of the play's best jokes. Boehm made the coat sufficiently odd but not unbecoming, so we are never quite sure whether it is an aberration or a misguided fashion statement.

Linda Otto and Pam Ward as two veteran matinee ladies from the suburbs act as a sort of wry Greek chorus on the contemporary state of Broadway theater, as does Jade Chavis Watt as Bessie, a badly paid but reliably working African-American actress.

In the second act, Simon seems to be working on his own festering sibling rivalry by introducing Harry Fox (Rob Hirschboeck), Mickey's very ordinary brother from Philadelphia. Harry both resents and idolizes Mickey for the comedian's talent and glamorous life. As Harry begs Mickey to mentor his son, a would-be

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performer, we see facets of Mickey's psyche that hide behind his constant patter.

Hirschboeck as Harry manages to nearly steal this scene from Mickey, no small feat in Simon's barrage of one-liners.

Technical credits, as usual, are excellent. Set design is by Don Zastoupil, sound design by Brian O'Connor and lighting design by Tatiana Watkins and director Jones.

"45 Seconds From Broadway" plays at Camelot through June 9, with performances Thursday through Saturday at 8 p.m. and matinees on Sunday at 2 p.m. Tickets are \$24 general admission, \$22 for seniors and students, with reserved seating available for an additional \$2. For more information, call 541-535-5250 or log on to www.CamelotTheatre.org.

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