

Review: 'Middletown' at NextStop Theatre Company

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Chuck Leonard

Middletown, written by Will Eno, is a play with heft. It is not an easy play that you can relax and let wash over you. Timid souls who are out for an evening of light entertainment may struggle with it. The play engages and pushes, forcing the audience to question ourselves, and it is well worth the effort. Under the strong hand of Director Michael Chamberlin, the excellent cast presents intriguing portrayals of Middletown's residents.



Tamieka Chavis and John Stange. Photo by Traci J. Brooks Studios.

The welcome to the audience is an indicator of what the show is about. By being seemingly inclusive to everyone, we are welcomed as members of a list of categorizations, labels, groups, titles, abilities. With all of our differences, the play deals with issues we all share. Middletown, USA feels like a middle-class, suburban town anywhere in the iconic center of the country.

The play reminds me of *Our Town* and newer plays like *Almost Maine*. By speaking truths to small personal interactions, it refers to bigger complications in the simple act of living. *Middletown* does not go deeply into issues of war, poverty, racism, or injustice, but refers to life in a generic, standardized example of middle-class Americana. Even without those weighty issues burdening the lives of these characters, there is still plenty of angst to go around.

In a 2013 interview with Christopher Wallenberg in the Boston Globe, Eno says, "It's hard to be a human being. It's complicated — and complicated in ways we'll probably never fully be able to see. I wrote this play and mean it to be a kind of testament to the difficulty of consciousness, or a picture of the complications of the simplest life."

At the center of the story is the budding relationship of newcomer, Mary Swanson (Tamieka Chavis) and life-long resident, John Dodge (John Stange). Both of these actors adroitly embody human strengths and foibles. But overall, the play felt like an ensemble piece, and the ensemble is uniformly terrific. Every one of the ten actors offered insightful gems at some point during the show. None of the characters lie and within the small and larger truths shared, there are revelations of both pain and bliss.

I loved the loopy lovability of the town librarian (Rosemary Regan) and the kind/bully cop (Bruce Alan Rauscher),

both of whom provided the setting, Middletown's history, and current state. An alcoholic pill-popper mechanic (Allen McRae) sympathetically shakes through his attempt to make it through another day.

The other 5 actors played multiple characters, but each had one that stood out for me. Stephanie Tomiko kicks off the show welcoming the audience and sets the tone and style of the play from the get-go. William Aitken plays an incredibly considerate doctor helping an expectant mother prepare for birthing a child. Lily Kerrigan portrays Sweetheart, who I surmised is autistic, but whose throw-away lines are profound and who places her playbill at a moment that ups the meta-theatricality of the play exponentially. Laura Russell's character work is hilarious, but I loved best her voice as the aunt. Chris Stinson played the local astronaut, Greg, with a profound sense of wonder at the miracle of our world.



The cast of 'Middletown': L to R: Rosemary Regan, Laura Russell, John Stange, Lily Kerrigan, Allen McRae, Stephanie Tomiko, Chris Stinson, Tamiaka Chavis, Bill Aitken and Bruce Alan Rauscher in 'Middletown' at NextStop Theatre. Photo by Traci J. Brooks Studios.

The moment that resonated the most for me showed 3 simultaneous scenes; a character dying, a baby's birth and the oddly beautiful dance of a seemingly crazy man. As much as we puzzle the mysteries of birth and of death, we also struggle on a daily basis with the complexities and contradictions of everyday life in-between those two events.



"The set of Middletown with Scenic design by JD Madsen. Lighting design is by Brittany Shemuga. Photo by Traci J. Brooks Studios.

JD Madsen's wonderful set depicts three yards; green swaths of grass in front of three houses. The stage is surrounded by tiny duplicate houses reflecting Main Street, anywhere, USA. Lighting included evocative clouds which were hand-lowered or raised by the ensemble, as needed. The cast shifted scenery themselves and shined flashlights against a disco ball to produce a star effect. Simple uses of tech mixed with excellent lighting by Brittany Shemuga and sound design by Reid May, work well for the play.

NextStop Theatre Company started with a warehouse space, but successfully transports the audience into thoughtful dramatic realms. The cast and production team are doing great work and deserve the full house they saw on opening night, for the whole run.

Running Time: The production runs 2 hours and 20 minutes, with one 15 minute intermission.

WWW.NEXTSTOPTHEATRE.ORG

MIDDLETOWN
JANUARY 14 - FEBRUARY 7, 2016

Middletown plays through February 7, 2016 at NextStop Theatre Company – 269 Sunset Park Drive, in Herndon, VA For tickets, call the box office at (703) or purchase them [online](#).

RATING: ★★★★★

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