

NextStop Theatre's 'Middletown' ponders the potentially monumental

By Celia Wren January 19

Partway through dramatist Will Eno's quirky, philosophical and nearly plot-free "Middletown," an eccentric couple who have opted to tour a run-of-the-mill small American community explain their choice. "I guess we like things that are potentially monumental, but that aren't necessarily monumentalized yet," the woman says.

That statement seems to sum up the impulse behind "Middletown," which is on view in a mostly laudable NextStop Theatre Company production. In gently whimsical scenes that contemplate life in the eponymous hamlet — populated by an ebullient librarian, an oddball handyman, an anxious first-time mother, and others yearning for fulfillment and meaning — Eno's play directs our attention toward the monumental in the ordinary and the marvelous in the everyday.

It can be a very moving work as well as a slyly funny one. But without a hard-charging dramatic story line, and with a number of characters who appear only once, "Middletown" feels quite loose. (The play nods to "Our Town," but the writing is more capricious and less focused.) Director Michael Chamberlin hasn't solved the slackness problem in his NextStop production.

But the production boasts a number of adept performances. Especially notable are Tamieka Chavis as Mary Swanson, the first-time mother; Chris Stinson, in roles including a bright-eyed Middletown-raised astronaut; Bruce Alan Rauscher as a moody cop; and Stephanie Tomiko, in roles including a public speaker who kicks off the play with an exhilarating prose poem of a prologue. In addition, John Stange brings out the woebegone kookiness in John Dodge, the handyman, who — when he’s not reading books about gravity — forms a touching friendship with Mary. Laura Russell channels a female tourist, and Allen McRae looks suitably haggard as a mechanic with a substance-abuse problem. Some of the performers in smaller roles are less artful than the cast’s standouts, and one or two overact.

Suitably, for a play that seeks the wonderful in the mundane, scenic designer J.D. Madsen and lighting designer Brittany Shemuga have created a stylized suburbia that’s handsome and even luminous. Dangling over rectangles of grass in front of cookie-cutter-house silhouettes are gorgeous fluffy clouds that rise and descend, glowing with various degrees of brightness. The landscape’s neat shapes and picture-book colors have a deliberate artifice that matches the meta-theatrical touches in “Middletown,” which includes one scene populated by theatergoer characters discussing “Middletown.” (Kristina Martin designed the apt costumes. Reid May designed the sound, which includes frequent nighttime-cricket noises.)

As the play approaches its conclusion and more single-mindedly ponders the

mysteries of birth and death, the burg of Middletown begins to seem like a metaphor for human existence. “Why worry — come on, it’s life,” a male doctor (William Aitken) says consolingly to Mary as she frets about motherhood. “It’s just good old life, been going on for years.”

“Middletown,” by Will Eno. Directed by Michael Chamberlin; properties design, Deb Crierie and Kay Rzasa; fight choreographer, Kristen Pilgrim. With Lily Kerrigan and Rosemary Regan. About two hours and 15 minutes. Through Feb. 7 at NextStop Theatre, 269 Sunset Park Drive, Herndon, Va. Tickets: \$35. Call 703-481-5930 or 866-811-4111 or visit www.nextstoptheatre.org.

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