

Theatre Review: 'Middletown' at NextStop Theatre

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By Brian Bochicchio



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

It's really the pace of it all—the unplanned meandering stroll through the nondescript town, in the play—aptly named *Middletown*, that gets you. Playwright Will Eno's word wise play is a celebration of language and thought.

Herndon's NextStop Theatre gives a show that can be described as an experience. Eno's play, seen on Broadway in 2010 to fine reviews, is daring adventure. But it is a challenge. His quirky and quickly paced dialogue, mixed with unexpected life topics popping out of nowhere forces us to open up our consciousness.

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Stephanie Tomiko, one of the unnamed cast members, starts with a dialogue of thoughts and things scattershot to the audience.

Then we meet our policeman walking the town. Bruce Rauscher gives a nuanced, slightly offbeat take as he ambles around and interacts with the residents of Middletown—as if he is poking around, turning over stones in search of meaning. His description of the town continues the interestingly otherworldly feel of the piece.

"Middletown. Population is stable," he says with a righteous pride... "Elevation stays the same. The side streets are named after trees. Things are fairly predictable. People come, people go. Average as average can be. There's the Main Street. Named Main Street. Runs right through the town." Then the zinger.... "Crying goes in both directions."

Embodying the consciousness expanding nature of the show is the mechanic, Allen McRae; really a down on his luck itinerant drug user, accepted by the community. His Kramer-esque performance—full of interrupted speech and a generally glazed condition, was engrossing to watch, especially in its consistency. His later scene with Tomiko offhandedly discussing happiness and the meaning of life was rewarding. "If you don't know the end, how do you

know you are in the middle?” he intones.

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Separate scenes flow in and out, but one connection carries throughout the show. Mary (Tamiaka Chavis) a newcomer to town, pokes around the library and meets John (John Dodge). Chavis is the lonely newlywed getting to know the place and in John she meets someone also looking to connect and understand him. Dodge’s interrupted vocal patterns and work well as a slightly off-kilter part-time handyman searching to please someone and fill his life with things to do.

Near the end of the show the life-and-death duality is exemplified by John and Mary in the hospital together –one about to give birth and another suffering depression and a failed suicide.

People are living their lives, but a burning anguish to share—their ideas, emotions, any connection. One gateway is the library, the symbolic gateway to knowledge, cheerily guarded by our librarian, Rosemary Regan, whose delightfully daffy love of books leads us nowhere but to be enjoyed.

The rest of the cast is also in fine form. William Aitken and Laura Russell are tourists to the town with persistent existential questions popping up, and later Aitken gives us a decidedly nontraditional bedside manner playing the kindly doctor helping Mary in her delivery. Chris Stinson is smooth and likeable is a kind townsman with insights, and also a fully suited astronaut, looking down at the earth. See what I mean. Handled well, it was out of this world but strangely not out of place.

The open set consists of a dozen cotton balls of chandelier size, celestial puffs of light that place us just on the edge of our day to day reality and, in an imaginative twist, are lowered in the spacewalk scene, as the astronaut is looking down on earth. A nod to Production Stage Manager Natalie Nichols and Scenic Design of JD Madsen.

Not every scene is a home run—the intermission scene with the cast acting as audience was a been there done that conceit. And the dialogue, filled with deeper meanings, is not easily received in casual settings. But as a change of pace offering for the winter, it was quite mesmerizing.

“I think that the whole world has questions. And the world is the answer.” I don’t recall who said that onstage—it could have been anyone.

Middletown. It certainly isn’t middling.

Running Time: 2 hours 10 minutes with an intermission.

Middletown is presented by the NextStop Theatre, 269 Sunset Park Drive, Herndon VA, from January 14 to February 7, 2016. For tickets to this or other performances in the 2016 season, call 866-811-4111 or by purchasing [online](#).