

## Will Eno's *Middletown* at NextStop Theatre (review)

[dctheatrescene.com/2016/01/18/will-enos-middletown-nextstop-theatre-review/](http://dctheatrescene.com/2016/01/18/will-enos-middletown-nextstop-theatre-review/)

Tim Treanor

Will Eno's *Middletown*, now at Herndon's NextStop Theatre, is what *Our Town* would have been if Thornton Wilder had made his characters hopeless, heartbreakingly lonely and a little psycho.



Rosemary Regan in *Middletown* at NextStop Theatre. (Photo: Traci J. Brooks Studios)

*Middletown*, in the middle of nowhere, is more nowhere than town, and as much as we want the anticipated birth of a child — the story's central event — to fill us with optimism, there is no optimism to be gleaned from the text.

What *Middletown* has going for it, aside from NextStop's good, earnest production, is Eno's provocative wit, which is given broad application here as it is in his acclaimed earlier plays, such as *The Realistic Jones* and *Thom Paine (based on nothing)*. Funny in an Eno play is like finding a nugget of sweetness in your healthy cereal, and the result is more likely to be a surprised bark of laughter rather than sustained chuckling.

In this play, it is based on the surprise revelation of the obvious things — whether obviously true ("Our families," a woman (Laura Russell), gesturing to herself and her husband (William Aitken), explains to a tour guide (Lily Kerrigan), "have a long history of death.") or obviously untrue, ("I'm very sorry for what I'm doing right now," a cop (Bruce Alan Rauscher) says to a marginal character (Allan McRae) as he chokes him with his billy club.)



Bruce Alan Rauscher in *Middletown* at NextStop Theatre. (Photo: by Traci J. Brooks Studios)

While Eno's wit surprises, provokes and frequently delights, the story itself is pretty pedestrian. Mary Swanson (Tamiaka Chavis) has just moved to Middletown and tries to find her way into her new community. (She goes to the library to get a book on the Town, but all the Librarian (Rosemary Regan) can come up is a ridiculous pamphlet from the Chamber of Commerce.) She meets, and takes up with, John Dodge (John Stange), an out-of-work handyman with — no, ambitions is too strong a word, and so is fantasies, so let's try *randomly felt impulses* — to become a lawyer.

Mary is married — her husband, who is in sales, is never around — and trying to have a child, so a romantic connection is out of the question. Instead, they talk about their loneliness, and Dodge talks about the banal particulars of his failed life. Periodically, other characters describe their own unfortunate histories.

Eno juxtaposes the tedious lives of his characters to the immense and glorious potential of the human experience. Greg (Chris Stinson), a town resident who has become an astronaut, marvels from the Space Station at the warmth Earth projects into the coldness of space, and hospital landscaper (Stinson again) tells the cop about a man who, in the ambulance on the way to the hospital, props himself on his elbow for one last look.



Chris Stinson in *Middletown* at NextStop Theatre. (Photo: Traci J. Brooks Studios)

The production, and director Michael Chamberlin's cast, give a good account of themselves. Chamberlin keeps things busy; there are periodically several things going on at once, but never to the detriment of the story. Scenic designer JD Madsen floats puffy little illuminated clouds, like kernels of popcorn, through the stage; the clouds go up and down and the light within the clouds waxes and wanes as the occasion demands.

## MIDDLETOWN



January 14 – February 7, 2016

NextStop Theatre

269 Sunset Business Park

Herndon, VA 20170

2 hours, 15 minutes with 1 intermission

Tickets: \$35

[Details](#)

[Website](#)

[Check for discount](#)



—————As for the performances, Eno gives his actors some special challenges. It is as though the characters all have attention deficit disorder; they may have one or two exchanges before someone changes the subject. It is less dialogue than serial monologues, some of the monologues being ten words or less. It is, I think, meant to be a symptom of the social dysfunction afflicting Middletown, although it might very well be the *cause* of it.



Nonetheless, Chavis manages to breathe life into a rather bland character, and Stange manages to make John Dodge engaging, despite the slender material. The characters played by McRae and Rauscher both go through

changes during the play, and the actors manage them smoothly. Aitken, playing a maternity-ward doctor, delivers a beautiful speech beautifully, and Stephanie Tomiko, doing a speech at the top of the play in which she spends three minutes trying to find a word which describes all of the audience (you won't disagree with the one she finally selects) is funny and sympathetic, in several roles.

*Our Town* showed a community sustained by love through deep tragedy. In *Middletown*, the characters aspire to love but lack the capacity for it. *Our Town* gives us our best hope, but, in *Middletown*, we can only hope for the best.

---

**Middletown** by Will Eno . Directed by Michael Chamberlin . Featuring William Aitken, Tamioka Chavis, Lily Kerrigan, Allen McRae, Bruce Alan Rauscher, Rosemary Regan, Laura Russell, John Stange, Chris Stinson and Stephanie Tomiko . Scenic design: JD Madsen . Costume design: Kristina Martin . Lighting design: Brittany Shemuga . Sound design: Reid May . Properties design: Deb Cerie and Katy Rzasa . Fight choreography: Kristen Pilgrim . Stage manager: Natalie Nichols, assisted by Max Frost . Produced by NextStop Theatre Company . Reviewed by Tim Treanor.