

[The Slave: Inflammatory Language Muddies the Message](#)

Ed note - This review has generated some controversy and some very aggressive criticism online. It bears reminding folks that all reviews include an element of subjectivity. Our reviewers all make a commitment to give you their most honest impressions - whether popular or not. And because theater is subjective, other reviewers may vary dramatically in their impressions. We love it when a piece is controversial or complex enough to produce contrasting reactions. Great theater entertains but also incites, makes you think, and ideally generates passionate (but not nasty) conversation afterward. We've linked to contrasting takes on *The Slave* by other Motif writers, and recognize the dedication of the folks at Mixed Magic for choosing material that inspires conversations like these, even the painful ones.

Artistic Director for Mixed Magic Jonathan Pitts-Wiley told us, "Graduate level theses have been written about this playwright's work - people should be offended ... this is difficult art. One of the reasons I chose to do this play is because it is hard and does not give people places to hide. It holds up a mirror in a way that is completely uncomfortable and, I would offer, really compelling. If you step into the discomfort, not to excuse what is being said, but to consider it in a dynamic way, it will make an impression; that does not mean it is laying out the politics of the theater where it is happening." Questions abound when certain language or ideas are intended to shock. When does that language harm? When does the language in a play represent the thoughts of a character; when does it represent the thoughts, opinions or ideas of the playwright; and when does it represent the thoughts, opinions or politics of the theater hosting it? These are great questions - discuss amongst yourselves. Or better yet, see the play and tell us what you thought in the comments below.

Read another critic's take on this topic here: motifri.com/slave2017letter

According to Pew Research, African-Americans still fall behind whites in homeownership and income levels. Police stop young black men at twice the rate of white men. Black men are more likely to face harsher sentences when accused of crimes, compared to white men. Racism is built into our educational and criminal systems in a way that ensures what is called the "school to prison pipeline." Once a person is convicted of a felony, they lose their right to vote. One out of every 13 black voters has lost their right to vote, meaning they've lost their access to make change through the government that is supposed to represent all of its people. It doesn't seem like justice, and we have seen the anger boil over in Ferguson, New York, Baltimore, Charlotte, Charlottesville and St. Louis. Now, imagine that anger exploding on a national level, igniting a deadly civil war. That's where we begin with Amiri Baraka's *The Slave*, now in an extended run at Mixed Magic Theatre. Walker Vessels impassioned says he "was crying out against 300 years of oppression; not against individuals." The white man, Brad Easley, responds that Walker is wrong about everything. Sound familiar?

Artistic director, Jonathan Pitts-Wiley, addressed the audience at the start of the show by quoting his father, director Ricardo Pitts-Wiley, saying "time caught up with this script." If, by that, he means we can no longer ignore the justifiable anger of black men and continue telling African-Americans that they are mistaken by their own experiences, then I agree that this script is timely. But if time caught up to this script, then we should be even more concerned about the times in which we live. This script uses racist language toward Native-Americans and the Japanese. It is degrading to women, and I lost count of the number of times a homophobic slur was used.

Why Mixed Magic would want to illustrate messages of thoughtless hate while exploring such a relevant topic is uncertain. This play is not an exploration or a challenge to the audience; at least not in the way

this production has been handled. There is no director's note in the program to explain why they would choose to talk about racism through such a misogynist and homophobic character. Talkbacks were instituted after the first two shows, and only with artistic staff — not community experts or a dramaturg with research and facts to help understand the work. In short, there is no way for an audience to engage in a meaningful way with what they see on the stage. It's a poor move on the part of Mixed Magic to align the plight of black men in America with hate of women and the LGBTQ community.

As an audience member enters the theater, they are confronted by the interior of an apartment. The apartment was at one time well appointed with a piano and a martini bar. Now everything is covered in dust, presumably from the walls crumbling down around the occupants. The blinds are semi-shut, dirty and broken. Prominently placed at center stage is a stairway leading nowhere. The stairway is the most interesting feature of this production. Characters are positioned on it for monologues, not moving. Violence is choreographed on the stairs. Characters make an attempt to get up to the second floor, but solid walls are built where we would expect a doorway. No movement can happen on these stairs.

No movement happens with the characters either. At the start of the play, Brad and Grace (Terry Shea and Melanie Stone) enter their apartment wearing helmets and dodging the sounds of gunfire. They find Walker (Frederick Douglas), Grace's ex-husband, already in their apartment. What continues is a violent discussion of poetry, their pasts and the current state of war. There is a lot of emotion built into the script, predominantly anger. The actors in this production seem to play only the anger, starting at such a high level of emotion there is nowhere for them to go with it. The play quickly becomes static as a result.

Ricardo Pitts-Wiley directs this production, and could have helped with creating more emotional levels. Instead, it feels like he spent a lot of time working with Douglas on his powerful opening monologue, and leaving the rest of the play to run its own devices. Shea and Stone are often left looking like they are unsure where they should be on stage, and moments of physicality are lost. There are several times during the short play that Brad (Shea) is subjected to violence at the hands of Walker (Douglas) while Stone stands where she is, missing opportunities for intense conflict by physically interacting with the men on stage. Douglas spends the play expressing his anger in a monotone yell, while Shea and Stone make a lot of angry faces. By the end of the play, the audience is so bored by the stagnant anger it is difficult to feel surprise or be upset at the resolution of the action.

Overall, there are better ways to engage in a conversation about the justifiable anger of African-American men than to see this play. It is unfair to associate the injustice of continued racism in America with the levels of hate portrayed in this script. Unfortunately, while the set gives a momentary pause for reflection, the rest of the production feels like it needs more rehearsal time.

Read another critic's take on this topic here: motifri.com/slave2017letter

Amiri Baraka's [The Slave](#) has been extended through January 7 at Mixed Magic Theatre, 560 Mineral Spring Ave, Pawtucket. Call 401-305-7333, email TixMMT@gmail.com, or go to brownpapertickets.com.

“Phenomenal” Incognito Cast Takes the Stage



Incognito: an assumed or false identity. The Gamm’s latest offering sounds like it could be a fun who-dunnit; however, while there are aspects of tabloidesque drama, such as questions of paternity, this play focuses solidly on the lies our brain tells us. No, not the lies we tell ourselves. The lies our brains tell us. As one character notes, “Our brains are working constantly, exhaustively overtime to give us the illusion that we’re in control, but we’re not.” Memory and identity are collectively examined through individual interconnections of the heart in *Incognito*.

Playwright Nick Payne has crafted a brilliant and moving script that weaves together three stories. A pathologist steals the brain of Albert Einstein. A divorced neuropsychologist begins a romance with a younger woman. A seizure patient forgets everything but the woman he loves. The script is full of both head and heart. Theories of neuroscience are intertwined with touching moments of human feeling, all asking the question, “Who am I?”

The three stories contain a total of 21 characters, played by four actors. The actors are dressed from head to toe in shades of gray against a stark white set. The script gives the actors no time for costume changes. Jessica Hill’s set design incorporates a series of light strips that are illuminated with different colors depending on which of the three stories is being played out at the time. Since the audience gets very little context from costume changes or props, the subtle lighting shifts are the only clue to changes in storyline.

That is, the only clues outside of the actors themselves. The cast of *Incognito* is phenomenal. The four actors often have to switch characters with seconds (or fewer) between scenes. Tony Estrella has brilliant moments of turning from one scene and immediately beginning another storyline. With instantaneous changes in facial expression, posture, dialect and pacing, he manages to keep each character cleanly individual. Casey Seymour Kim and Michael Liebhauser both have strokes of genius in their own character choices. Kim is especially good at clarifying the age of her characters. While Karen Carpenter is strong in each of her roles, she has a harder time maintaining the crisp accents or individualizing her character choices. To show affection, she often drapes herself over the person receiving her attention, and causes momentary confusion about which character she is playing at the time.

This is more a problem with Tyler Dobrowsky’s direction than it is a fault in Carpenter’s acting choices. Dobrowsky’s direction is uninspired. Payne is specific about having a bare, unpretentious set on which to construct the 21 identities in the world of *Incognito*, giving the director room for creative choices.

Dobrowsky has a strong script and a cast of first-rate actors. Instead of putting his stamp on the material, he falls into the easy trap of allowing the script and the actors to do all of the work. There is something to be said for allowing the script to do its work; however, given the complexities of this script, the audience is relying on the director to keep the characters and storylines clear. Given the simplicity of the set, the audience is relying on the director to keep the actors moving in a way that keeps us visually interested. We don't get these things in this production.

Overall, *Incognito* is beautifully heartbreaking. The set and lighting are beautiful. The acting ensemble of Carpenter, Estrella, Kim and Liebhauser is one of the strongest seen on a Rhode Island stage. The script is smart, funny and poignant. Hearing the script spoken out loud is enough to keep an audience member thinking about it for days. I know I did, and that alone is well worth the ticket price.

Nick Payne's Incognito runs through Dec 10 at The Gamm Theatre, 172 Exchange St, Pawtucket. For tickets, call 401-723-4266 or order online at gammtheatre.org.

[2nd Story's Boys Highlights Characters' Humanity](#)

Rhode Island has the highest population of persons living with disabilities in New England according to U.S. Census data. It makes sense that Tom Griffin's 1988 play, *The Boys Next Door*, which is about four adults with various diagnoses living in a shared apartment, resonates with Rhode Island audiences. The script in turns humanizes the "boys" and those who care for them and gives us problematic lines that otherize those living with disabilities. 2nd Story Theatre provides a solid production that is not without its issues.

The audience is seated around the apartment. Low partial walls designate the boundaries of the interior of the communal living area shared by the "boys." To the left and right are doorways that mirror each other, as seen in many apartment buildings. There are archways that serve as a door to the outside world, the bathroom and bedrooms that we never see. The set only contains two chairs and an entryway bench, all used to keep the actors moving in a way that never gets boring for the audience. In some scenes, the apartment is transformed into the dance floor at a community center. The lighting is so good, the furniture seems to disappear and we can focus solely on the characters' dance drama.

The cast of *The Boys Next Door* is phenomenal. Christian O'Brien, as Jack Palmer, talks about the burnout of the job, how he changes but the "boys" do not. O'Brien gives us a Jack who is trying to be engaged with a job about which he obviously cares deeply, but mostly succeeds in listlessly flopping into a chair to have conversations that have clearly happened many times before. Marlon Carey as Lucien, Frank Iaquina as Barry, Joe Henderson as Norman, and Ashley Hunter Kenner as Sheila are all sweet, funny and human. They do not play up the disability, they all play the human living with a disability.

Luis Astudillo is the stand-out performer of this cast. He plays Arnold Wiggins, a self-described "nervous

individual” who is always concerned about something. He is easily taken advantage of by a store manager and a co-worker, giving us some of the most heartbreaking lines of the play. At the same time, Astudillo brings out the humor and humanity of Arnold in such a way that keeps the audience laughing out loud throughout the two hours the audience is visiting the communal residence.

While all of the actors take care to play each character as a full human being, not a single actor in this cast is living with a disability. It would be nice to see 2nd Story making an effort to give actors with disabilities the respect of being able to work alongside their abled counterparts.

However, not all of the characters are written in a way that would allow the theater to fully cast the show with differently-abled actors. In one very problematic monologue, Lucien (Marlon Carey) has been called to testify on his own behalf in a State Senate hearing. Lucien is being asked to talk about his life, and if he could fully integrate into the community. The character drops his disability in what can be seen as a “dream state.” Lucien speaks clearly and articulately on his thoughts and feelings as a man living with mental retardation. Unfortunately, this monologue calls for the character to describe himself as “damaged” and “shattered.” “I am here,” says Lucien, “to remind the species of the species... without me, without my shattered crippled brain, you will never again be frightened by what you might have become. Or indeed, by what your future might make you.” At this moment, the playwright sets up the characters as being here for the benefit of abled people, and forgets that the characters have their own individual humanity just like the rest of us.

The script is problematic, sometimes painful, for those of us in the audience who are close to people who live with disabilities. There are also moments of true humanity, sweetness and humor to soothe the painful moments. The ensemble does each character justice in a way that emphasizes their humanity, rather than to focus and stereotype the disabilities. This play is worth taking a chance on.

The Boys Next Door runs through October 29 at 2nd Story Theatre in Warren. You can purchase tickets at 2ndstorytheatre.com or by calling the box office at 401-247-4200

[Arsenic and Old Lace Lacks Energy](#)

Arsenic and Old Lace is one of the most popularly produced plays in the United States. Since its premiere in 1939, it continues to be revived on stages from Broadway to Main Street. The play revolves around the Brewster family of Brooklyn. Mortimer Brewster is the hero of this farcical black comedy. He has to deal with not only his murderous family, but the local police, his wanted brother and his new fiancée. You can currently see the old faithful at The Granite Theatre in Westerly. But beware: The normally charming and engaging actors of the Granite Theatre seem bored with this script.

A black comedy needs a sense of urgency, which is completely lacking from Granite Theatre’s production. The actors speak so slowly, it’s difficult for an audience member to buy into the scripted dialog being a real conversation. The characters meander across the stage, which should only be acceptable from the two shuffling spinster aunts. Mortimer, played by John Cillino, shows very little surprise or shock at the discovery that those aunts are murderers.

Each of the characters in *Arsenic and Old Lace* have some sort of eccentricity. Mortimer is a marriage-opposing theater critic who hates theater. Abby and Martha Brewster (Beth Jepson and Christine Reynolds) are do-gooders who see their murders as charity work. Teddy (Fergus Milton) thinks he's President Theodore Roosevelt. Jonathan (Jude Pescatello) is a murderer who has undergone plastic surgery to change his face. Pescatello plays into the "Boris Karloff" look of his character by contorting his face for the entirety of his time on stage, and holding his body in an uncomfortably clenched stance. He is the only actor making an attempt to showcase the craziness of his character; however, the effort it took to hold his body in that way slowed down his pace and made him a decidedly un-scary presence on stage.

While it works for Aunts Abby and Martha to be calm since they see their killings as a charity, Jepson and Reynolds seem to barely react to anything around them. If there is no surprise for the actors on stage, there is no surprise for the audience.

The most humorous character, by far, is Teddy Brewster as he assigns everyone in the house roles based on Roosevelt's biography. Milton, however, doesn't fully commit to his character. He is not quite as commanding or as loud as he should be. He often yells, "Charge!" before storming up the set stairs, but I kept wishing he'd really throw his body into it, get red-faced while yelling. For the pace of this production, he is high energy. For the pace the production needs to work, however, Milton needs twice the energy.

The actors also show no real connection between each other. Mortimer and Elaine (John Cillino and Ann Westendorf) are in love and get engaged early in the play. The interactions between the two convey no love, not even good old-fashioned lust. Their interactions are stiff. When the two do touch, it seems like they'd rather be doing anything else. They become awkward and hard to watch.

Unfortunately, this production needs an injection of caffeine. As Mortimer would say, this production of *Arsenic and Old Lace* is "tedious and uninspired."

Arsenic and Old Lace runs through Oct 8 at the Granite Theatre in Westerly. You can purchase tickets by calling the box office at 401-596-2341.

[Wilbury's Caretaker Is Astounding](#)

Communication is complicated. These days, we try to fit everything into 140-character statements rather than engaging each other in dialogue. We choose to post on social media rather than sitting down to catch up in person. The number of choices we have to communicate prevents us from really getting to know each other. Instead, we can carefully curate an online persona and pass it off as an authentic personality. Our daily relationships suffer breakdowns under the weight of constant misinterpretation or distrust of others' stories due to our own misrepresentation of ourselves. Harold Pinter wrote *The Caretaker* nearly 60 years ago, exploring the same theme of distrust and loss of communication. The Wilbury Theatre Group opens their new space with an outstanding production of *The Caretaker* that explores all of these themes with an undertone of this morning's headlines. The

misogyny, racism and classism that are prevalent in the language recall our current political climate, making this the type of edgy conversation-starter Wilbury is known for.

The team that created this production deserves the standing ovation given by the audience the night I attended. Steve Kidd's direction was phenomenal. Kidd moves his actors around the stage in a way that never gets boring, which is a feat considering it's only three men on stage telling stories. There isn't much new action that happens as the audience watches, but the audience remains riveted.

Kidd's job is eased by the talent on stage. All three actors are incredibly strong in their craft. Richard Donnelly is perfectly disagreeable and shifty as Davies, a homeless man who is never satisfied with anything and changes his alliances several times during the action of the play. Real life brothers Joe Short and Josh Short play the brothers Aston and Mick. Aston saves Davies from a bar fight and shows kindness throughout the play by giving Davies a place to stay and finding him new shoes. Joe Short brings us one of the most poignant moments of the play at the close of Act 1. He quietly tells the story of talking too much to people and being sent away for electroshock therapy. There were audible gasps from the audience as he described how his thoughts slowed down after that. Mick is presumably consumed by work and aspirations of having a beautifully decorated flat. At times, Josh Short is so high energy, he could be unhinged. He keeps the audience on their toes.

Each of these three actors are individually strong presences on stage, but together they create one of the most solid ensembles seen on a Providence stage. They've clearly worked hard on maintaining believable accents. They vary the level of emotion and volume in ways that keep the audience surprised and engaged in the storytelling. The fight choreography is so natural, it's hard to believe someone isn't actually being hurt. The simple physical comedy during an argument over whose bag Aston brought in is hilariously absurd. The energy created by this magical combination of actors is palpable and engaging, never faltering.

The one drawback to this production is the acoustics of the space. The Wilbury Theatre Group's new home is in an open cinderblock warehouse space. During times of high emotion, the echoes sometimes get in the way of understanding the words. However, even this one minor drawback adds to the sound effect of occasional drips into a bucket. The leak falling into a metal bucket becomes a minor character, coming in at just the right moment to change the energy. In this space, the effect is never missed. In fact, it is enhanced by the slight echo caused by the open room.

The set design by Josh Christofferson incorporates existing elements of the building, such as an old ventilation fan and the concrete floor. He adds a lot of set dressing to a minimal design, which is reminiscent of the way the characters create their personas. Each man is wearing a different waistline height in their costume, which becomes a distraction for those of us in the audience who are sticklers for establishing a specific time period through dress. Nevertheless, quick changes are made easy through the careful planning of Erin Meghan Donnelly. With simple additions and removals of a sweater or tie, time changes are clearly established.

The design most likely to be overlooked, but most important to this show, is the lighting. The lighting design for this production is incredible. Andy Russ has created such subtle lighting shifts that audience members might not notice. However, the lighting directs the eye to the storytelling, focusing in on the important points and adding to the poignancy in Aston's monologue.

The Wilbury Theatre Group has once again brought audiences an astounding production. They are doing everything right in *The Caretaker*.

The Caretaker by Harold Pinter is running through October 7 at The Wilbury Theatre Group's new space at 40 Sonoma Court in Providence. To purchase tickets, visit thewilburygroup.org.

PRONK! Celebrates a Decade of Social Change

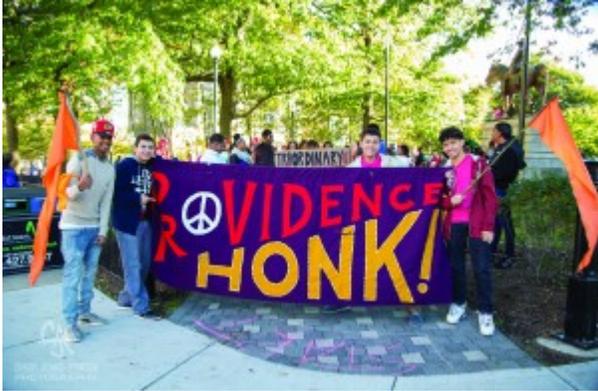
PRONK! is heading into its 10th year! Providence knows this festival as one heck of a fun street festival. But PRONK! is more than just a parade and a party; it is specifically organized to amplify voices of social change. PRONK!'s manifesto states many points, including encouraging interaction with music to promote social change, reclaiming public space, building relationships and sparking meaningful dialogue.



It's often easy for artists involved to understand exactly how they mean to promote social change, but it's not always easy for a potential audience to make the connection. The intent behind actions doesn't always equal the impact. The organizing committee behind PRONK! has worked hard to figure out how to put their mission into action. What began as a parade alternating marching bands with social justice organizations has developed into the purposeful development of formal relationships between community organizations and artists to collaborate and create art, lead workshops and teach-ins, and more. The goal is to use music and art to amplify the voices of both those who have been historically silenced and those who work tirelessly for justice, peace, education and a safer city. Avi David, one of PRONK!'s organizers, described it as a "pep rally for people doing the important work."

The organizing committee has made a commitment to listen to the voices of Providence in planning the event. David explained that it's a continual process of diversifying. The volunteer organizers actively seek out community input for which causes they should represent and how those causes should be represented. The goal of the committee is to listen to voices that demonstrate a broader representation of the makeup of Providence regarding race, culture, ethnicity, age, gender, orientation and physical ableness so they can collectively envision and create a more relevant and accessible festival. Over the last few years, the diversification has included the involvement of high school students, which has brought a different energy and feel to PRONK!. Students bring a different idea of what is "cool," and questions about what it means to create a safe space for younger people.

Questions of safety are important to ask for an event that seeks to reclaim public space. PRONK! happens every year on Indigenous People's Day for a specific reason. According to David, "There should not be a holiday celebrating Columbus. People have the power to create change. If we ignore our history and are silent about injustice, white supremacy, corporate greed, systemic racism, etc., people with power and money will make decisions that continue to oppress the most vulnerable members of our society. We strive to create somewhat of an alternate reality." To that end, the



committee has made the event completely non-commercial. PRONK! is held in the streets of Providence, and is free to all. There is no entry fee. There is nothing for sale. None of the bands use electricity. Everyone involved is a volunteer. It's created to be an ephemeral event with no footprint.

This year, PRONK! is doing things a little different. They are moving out of Burnside Park to set up along the Providence River, from South Water Street to Point Street. They will have four to five "stages" (which are really just marked areas so that audience members can be more involved with the music), and live active art-making stations (many of which will be youth-led). After the afternoon programming, PRONK! will parade down to the Hurricane Barrier and will continue with nighttime performances at Hot Club and around the barrier. The organizers are still working out details of scheduling, so keep your eyes peeled for more information. Visit providencehonkfest.org for updates.

[Colonial Theatre's Joyful Twelfth Night](#)

I don't know about you, but as the national news has become scarier and more depressing by the minute, I look for moments of joy and pure amusement. This past weekend, I sat on a picnic blanket enjoying snacks with my kids in the middle of Westerly's gorgeous Wilcox Park, and I watched one of those lovely moments play out in the Colonial Theatre production of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*. It seems every town has their own version of Shakespeare in the Park, and each one wants to make its own mark. The Colonial Theatre does something almost unheard of these days — it trusts the playwright to tell a fun story without adding a gimmick. *Twelfth Night* is one of Shakespeare's most delightful comedies. The script is full of double entendre, mistaken identity, drunkenness, foolery and song. There's something for everyone.

Viola is shipwrecked on the coast of Illyria. She believes her brother Sebastian to be drowned, so she dresses as a man in order to enter the service of the Duke Orsino. Orsino is in love with Olivia, and sends the disguised Viola as an emissary to express his love. Olivia falls in love with Viola, thinking

Viola is a man. Meanwhile, Viola has fallen in love with the Duke. There's a fun comic subplot, and Viola's brother shows up alive. Madness ensues until a peaceful resolution with marriages for everyone. Well, almost.

Something modern audiences do not often get is a director who trusts their audience to understand The Bard. Director Harland Meltzer walks a fine line between trusting his audience and helping people understand some of the more dense language. One of the most interesting aspects of this particular production is Meltzer doesn't feel the need to give his own opinion of gender roles or sexuality. Shakespeare has already loaded the script with questions, philosophy and suggestions of homoeroticism. Meltzer very simply allows the script to lay out questions, inviting the audience to form their own opinions. On the other hand, he cleverly blocks and choreographs actors' movements in a way that illustrates what the actor is saying without insulting anyone's intelligence. Meltzer and his actors are more successful in this than any Shakespeare production I've seen in several years.

The acting in this production is phenomenal. Lee Fitzpatrick (Olivia) is so natural with the poetry she speaks, you almost forget it isn't everyday conversation. She is a regal presence on stage, and is excellent at flipping between privately lovestruck to publicly annoyed at her object of affection. Henry Gardner (Sebastian) and Chris Perrotti (Antonio) are both natural with the language and each other, playing with the sexual ambiguity of the characters without comment. There are some fabulous physical comedians in this cast, including Jon Peacock as Sir Andrew Aguecheek. Peacock doesn't force the jokes out of his character. He let's the ignorance of the character speak for itself. Peter Tedeschi (Malvolio) is so puritanical, it almost gets boring — that is, until the infamous letter scene. Tedeschi then unleashes his comic side, leaving the audience laughing out loud. Richard Herron, as Feste, was by far the stand-out performer of the evening. Not only was as natural with the language as Lee Fitzpatrick, he was more physically engaged with the language than any of the other actors. He danced around the stage, using his entire body to get meaning across. Herron also has a superb singing voice, showcased throughout the production.

The only dud in this cast sadly comes from the leading lady. Katrina Michaels (Viola) does not have the same command of the language that her castmates possess. Because the rest of the cast is so good, she stands out from the opening moment. She overdoes her dramatic pauses, slowing down the pace of her scenes. The other actors have to work hard to continue to respond to her as she draws out her vowels until it's painful. She whines over her brother's supposed death, and her unrequited love, and her brother showing up alive and well, and finally over her love being returned. There's so much whining, it's hard to track what emotion she's actually trying to portray — they all sound the same. Thankfully, the rest of the cast is strong, and as soon as Feste takes the stage, we forget all about Viola.

The Colonial Theatre has been presenting outdoor Shakespeare in Wilcox Park for 26 years. With productions like this year's *Twelfth Night*, it's easy to see why. They have an excellent formula: standard set, great lighting, all of the actors are mic'd, beautiful costumes and some of the best Shakespearean actors around. Not only do you get an excellent production, you get to see it in the beautiful Wilcox Park.

Twelfth Night ran through Sunday, August 13.

Baggage at Newport Playhouse

We are all seeking that special someone, that perfect person who will complete us. Dating has never been easier, with websites and apps allowing us to choose from a variety of potential mates within minutes. It should be easy to find The One, right? Wrong. As the characters in *Baggage* show us, sometimes it's not about finding the perfect one, but the one who is perfectly wrong for us.

It's the perfect plot for a romantic comedy. Two highly annoying New Yorkers meet when they accidentally take each other's baggage at the airport. The two decide to start dating in order to get over previous bad relationships. The audience is taken through arguments, bad dates, reconciliation and self-discovery. We know how this will end, as the often self-referencing script points out on several occasions.

If you've ever tried online dating, the routine of reading through too similar profiles can get really monotonous really fast. Unfortunately, that's exactly how it feels to watch Newport Playhouse's production of Sam Bobrick's *Baggage*. Daniel Lee White's direction misses the mark in this production. The script gives several opportunities for comedy, and with such a thin script to work with, he needed to milk the material. Instead, he goes for cheap laughs, and the characters are completely static with so little variation that it becomes hard to watch.

The play begins with Bradley (Michael Gregory) loudly banging on the door of Phyllis' (Olivia Sahlin) apartment. Gregory makes a hilariously over-the-top entrance, but has nowhere to take that energy. Phyllis is referred to as strong and controlling, but what the audience gets is a robot. Neither her tone or movements vary throughout much of the play's two acts. Since we know from the beginning how the play will end, it would have been nice to get some surprises from the characters. At the very least, some vocal variety would have helped.

Rounding out the cast are Rick Bagley playing Dr. Jonathan Alexander and Kristina Horan playing Mitzi Cartwright. Both characters are written as plot devices, but provide us with breaks in the monotony of Bradley and Phyllis, giving the audience some of the funniest moments of the evenings. Mitzi is full of bohemian energy as she struts around in her stilettos, moving furniture around and talking about her three ex-husbands. Dr. Jonathan Alexander's character is used to fight against the romcom tropes, but ends up being one himself when he falls for Mitzi. Dr. Alexander provides one of the funniest scenes in the play when he breaks the fourth wall to issue a personality test to Bradley and Phyllis to show them just how wrong they are for each other. Like with most of the play, the timing in this scene needs to speed up to really deliver laughs, but it was a welcome change of pace.

The set for *Baggage* is as interesting as the lead characters. We are told that we are seeing Phyllis' apartment, and indeed it is treated as such. Mitzi describes it as "perfect," with furniture being exactly where you would expect it to go. She says it has no personality, which reflects the interpretation of Phyllis's character in this production. The set we see has the look and feel of a worn waiting room. The walls are painted the gold of a doctor's office. The worn green leather couch at the center of the stage blends with the worn green industrial carpet used to cover the floors. There are matching frayed wingback chairs to each side of the couch, with dark wood end tables. On one table, there is an unexplained trophy. There is also a bookshelf that is never used by any of the characters, but contains romantic novels alongside books about accounting and gardening. The novels make sense given that

we're told Phyllis is an editor, mostly for romance novels, but gardening? In New York City?

Baggage tries hard not to be a romantic comedy cliché. However, this production would have done well to give in to some of the elements of a romantic comedy. The annoying characters could also be lovable, and have other personality traits. The audience wants to see why these two would fall for each other, but the flatness of the portrayals here gives us nothing to like. We're told how the story will play out, and it does exactly what it says it will. Things happen because the playwright says so, with no explicable motivation. While a romantic comedy is often unsurprising, the characters usually make up for it. We don't get that salvation in this production.

Baggage by Sam Bobrick is playing through September 2 at the Newport Playhouse. Purchase tickets by calling 401-848-7529 or by visiting newportplayhouse.com. Come early for the buffet dinner, and stay after for the cabaret!

Calendar Girls Is a Show Full of Fun

Sex sells. The folks at the Granite Theatre in Westerly know that, choosing Tim Firth's *Calendar Girls* as their current production. The audience had a great time, and for good reason. The script is touching, witty and at times, laugh-out-loud funny. This production had several challenges that worked against the script, but in the end this is a fun play.

Calendar Girls is based on the movie of the same name. When Annie's husband, John, dies of cancer, the proper ladies of the Knapeley Village Women's Institute decide to raise money for a new couch to go in the waiting room of the hospital where John was treated. They make international waves by creating a nude calendar to sell at the WI fair.

That's Knapeley Village in Yorkshire, England. The entire cast tried hard to keep up English accents to varying degrees of success. Some cast members have clearly been working on accents for a long time, while others sounded like stilted New Englanders. Everyone's accent suggested a different region or class, when the ladies made several references to how most of them were from the town. Fergus Milton, playing Rod, had a leg up since he's actually from England, but this only emphasized the struggles in the rest of the cast. The accents were sometimes so distracting, it was difficult to understand lines of dialogue, which is a shame since this script does so much of the work for the cast and crew. With beautiful monologues like Jessie's (Maureen Noel), talking about "the danger, girls, of age, is what you think age expects of you," audience members don't want to miss a syllable.

While the script is fantastic in terms of the dialogue, it did pose issues in the number of set and costume changes required of the actors. It made for a lot of dead time on the stage, and dragged out the timing for the show in ways that were unfortunately necessary. At times, it seemed like the set changes could have been better planned to be handled by actors rather than dimming the lights to have a crew member come out for a change so minor I didn't see what actually happened. Other times, director David Jepson used the downtime to brilliant effect, such as when he had new clips in different languages playing to emphasize the national attention the calendar girls were getting. The actresses

were clearly moving as fast as they could to accomplish all of their costume changes, but it would have been nice for them and the waiting audience if a designer had planned ahead. The production would have moved along at a better pace if base pieces had been used and minor costume changes made, rather than full changes every time.

Another issue working against the Granite Theatre production is that David Jepson is not only the director, but he plays John Clarke, the dying husband who is the catalyst for the calendar. Many of the scenes could have used a second set of eyes to help organize the blocking. In the first act, the actors end up lined up across the stage in uninteresting combinations, rather than really interacting with each other. When personal interactions do happen, they don't feel natural or comfortable. We don't see the years of friendship and care the dialogue describes. Jepson was able to spend more time directing the other actors in the second act, especially during the photography scene.

The scene when the calendar is photographed is the highlight of the play. The pacing is great in this scene. The ladies are full of nervous energy, and are clearly having a ton of fun. The actresses are having so much fun, it would be impossible for the audience not to. It also helps that Jepson was not in this scene, and could set the blocking so that the actresses could move quickly. There is no dead time here. There is partial nudity, but the folks at Granite handle it with grace and humor.

Calendar Girls is a flawed production with a lovely script. The actresses all work hard and manage to make the audience howl with laughter. Don't go see this show if you expect the movie, but do go if you want a show full of soul and a lot of humor.

Calendar Girls is playing at The Granite Theatre in Westerly through July 30. You can purchase tickets by calling the box office at 401-596-2341 or by going to granitetheatre.com.

[The Clean House Charms Audiences](#)



Seth Jacobson Photography

It's a bold move for a play to begin with a joke told in Portuguese and offer no translation to the audience. But that's just what *The Clean House*, currently playing at Contemporary Theatre Company, does. The play is a whimsical journey through fantasy and reality, love and loss, class and gender. The audience begins slightly confused by a joke, and rides that off-kilter feeling through the rest of this charming production.

Matilde is a Brazilian immigrant who has been hired to clean Lane's house. The problem is that Matilde loves to tell jokes, but hates cleaning. Cleaning has made her sad, and she can no longer come up with jokes. She declares that she was the third funniest person in Brazil, but it's hard to see the laughter in Emily Rodriguez's version of the character. Her Matilde is quiet and unassuming. Her movements are graceful and fluid, almost birdlike. We often see her playing with the dirt beds along the edges of the stage, but expect her to fly away at any moment.

She is an excellent foil to Lane, the perfect doctor. She knows she is the perfect doctor, wearing a white pantsuit to emphasize her perfection. Lane is fast-paced and solidly grounded. She is sure of herself. She speaks firmly and directly. Stephanie Traversa is nowhere near the 50-something woman described in the script, but she is superb in scenes where she can play up Lane's strength. However, in scenes where Lane needs to be more emotionally vulnerable, Traversa falls a little flat. Of all the characters in *The Clean House*, Lane has a considerable emotional journey, but Traversa does not always succeed in showing us the connections and turns and changes. When she finds out her husband (also a doctor) has run off with one of his patients, she sits on the couch and cries herself into laughter. Traversa plays this scene with understated emotion when the scene feels like it needs more and bigger and louder. Traversa is the best in her delivery of one-liners, often drawing the biggest laughs from the audience with her timing and delivery. She's excellent with the comedy.

The only character who actually cleans the house is Virginia, Lane's sister. Paula Faber is an adorably neurotic housewife whose purpose in life is to clean. Terry Shea plays Charles, Lane's husband who leaves her for Ana. He is child-like and naïve, and we wonder how he ever managed to have an affair behind Lane's back. Ana is the charismatic mastectomy patient who steals Charles' heart. She is played by Nancy Winokoor to perfection. Shea and Winokoor are hilarious together, bringing us one of the most delightful moments of the play when they act out the story of how they fell in love over Ana's cancer diagnosis. The entire cast is enchanting.

Contemporary Theatre Company has chosen to run *The Clean House* and *Dirt* on alternating weekends,

using the same set. The actors work on a small square of brilliant white floor, surrounded on all four sides by beds of dirt. The same paint-splattered stairs ascend to a balcony, overlooking the playing area below. It's a brilliant idea to have two very different shows use the same set, and it made for some very creative choices for this production of *The Clean House*. For instance, Matilde is often found playing in the dirt, emphasizing her playfulness and joyful exploration of the world. When Virginia has a breakdown and makes a giant mess in the living room, the dirt is used to great advantage.

The set also cramps the actors in a way that prohibits connection. A pivotal emotional moment between the women centers around sharing ice cream on the couch. The set is too small to accommodate a full-length couch so two women are seated on the short loveseat, one is on the floor, and one hovers awkwardly to the side. Thanks to the set, a cozy moment of sisterhood becomes slightly awkward and disconnected. Virginia's messy breakdown is stunted because there is no room for extra things on the set. Virginia grabs a magazine and throws it to the ground, when we want to see breaking glass. The fistfuls of dirt that are thrown are carefully choreographed to comical effect, but leave us wanting the real mess of a lived-in house.

Tammy Brown has directed an engaging show, paying careful attention to the language in the script. She allows the words to do the heavy lifting, providing the audience with a lovely story about love and loss and sisterhood. It is a simple production that allows the audience to fall in love with every character on the stage.

The Clean House by Sarah Ruhl runs in rep with *Dirt* by Bryony Lavery through May 19 at Contemporary Theater Company at 327 Main Street in Wakefield. You can purchase tickets at contemporarytheatercompany.com or by calling the box office at 401-218-0282.