

# The Prince, The Play, and The Theater

I really didn't want to write this review.



Photo credit: Mark Turek

That's become a common phrase for me, and it might be because I find it daunting to approach a production with as much baggage as a *Hamilton* tour or restoration comedy or Trinity Rep's current offering, *The Prince of Providence*.

But before the play even began on press night, I was ready to commend Trinity for bringing about that rarely found feeling of an ... event. That mood every organization dreams of invoking, but so infrequently does.

These days, the only way you can pull it off is either with shock and awe or unbridled nostalgia. Luckily for Trinity, the tale of Providence's most notorious politician has plenty of both.

Based on the source material by Mike Stanton, adapted by George Brant and directed by Taibi Magar, *The Prince of Providence* is already the most successful, non-holiday show in Trinity's history. You get the feeling the story was just waiting to be adapted so Cianci could take his favorite city by storm one more time.

And right away, your notions of what you're going to see are reinforced and then swiftly dispensed with as Brant doesn't make the mistake of beginning with Baby Buddy, showing us his childhood and upbringing.

Instead, we dive right into the good stuff, so to speak.

The lights come up on an Italian restaurant. We meet Cianci first as an attorney battling Raymond Patriarca and crowing over his latest victory when it is suggested that he should run for mayor.

That sets off two acts — and more than two and a half hours — of political wheeling and dealing that covers decades of Rhode Island lore ranging from mistresses held at gunpoint to voter tampering to Tina Turner drag queens.

This show — for better or worse — has it all.

Magar and Brant prove to be a team more than capable of handling the ins and outs of Cianci's ups and downs, taking a repetitious life and finding ways to make the real theatrical and the theatrical something like a fever dream. They insert just the right amount of "Can you believe it?" that a theater event like this begs for, while not jumping the shark until right at the end, then pulling back to reveal — Nevermind. We'll get to that later.

Of course, while duality can create an interesting sense of conflict, I was struck by how well Brant balanced the personal with the political. Who would have thought that Cianci's scenes with his wife, Sheila, would stand out in an evening where crooks wear fake mustaches and pasta sauce gets handed out to people in the front row? The play opens with a parade of toupees and the entire cast singing "Rhode Island Is Famous for You." My date for the evening asked if that was a real song, and when I responded with, "It is, but it shouldn't be," I realized that statement could apply to most of what we just saw.

With the exception of Aaron Sorkin, very few dramatists can find a way to make even the dirtiest of politics interesting, but Brant does so with panache, and he does it — and let me scream this part from every rooftop I can find — *without a narrator*.

Then again, who needs a narrator when you have Buddy Cianci as your (anti)hero?

It's hard to review a show like this as only a show when it would seem irresponsible — especially in a Rhode Island paper — not to address the elephant in the comments section, namely:

Is the play nice to Buddy or not?

Trinity promised a fair portrayal of the now-deceased mayor, but at the end of the day, we're talking about a man who was accused of raping a woman at gunpoint, cheating on his wife only to then attack a man with a log because he believed the guy was sleeping with her, stealing from the city he claimed to love, and associating with a Dick Tracy-esque rogues gallery of thugs and hoodlums.

Even as I type all that, I can hear the Cianci fans trying to meet those criticisms with claims that "All politicians are like that," or "But...WaterFire!" and that's as much editorializing as I'm prepared to do — for now. I will say that Trinity's production does not shy away from presenting Cianci in all his smarmy glory.

But that doesn't mean his crimes are always given the gravity they deserve.

Much of the show is done as a comedy, something like a farce with keystone cops and over-the-top robbers. I mentioned the mustaches and toupees and pasta sauce, but there are also some real snappy one-liners from Brant that help turn characters who might otherwise seem one-dimensional into some truly indelible people. It's not easy to make characters sound smart without sounding theater-clever, but Brant writes nearly everyone who appears onstage with a great deal of respect and avoids (mostly) the easy name-dropping Rhode Island references just to have the audience laughing through sheer recognition.

(Cranston probably gets it the worst, but even I chuckled at that.)

It's the overall amount of laughter that started to unsettle me. While this doesn't really seem like a stylistic choice on the part of the creative team, it's disconcerting to see corruption and a brutal beating dealt with as if it's all happening in a Howard Hawks film. The facts are all there, but the presentation doesn't always seem to know what to do with them. Then again, I can forgive that; Rhode Island itself doesn't always know how to deal with the legacy of Vincent A. "Buddy" Cianci Jr.

As I glanced around the theater at various points during the show, I saw an audience split the same way the country is — everyone clinging to how they feel and refusing to budge simply because a play or a critic is telling them to. One woman in the second row was looking up at the stage as if Trinity had actually managed to bring her favorite mayor back from the dead, and I have no doubt that woman happily paid the high ticket price and has no regrets about it.

Comparing Cianci to the president is low-hanging fruit, but there's no doubt that the kind of appeal he had resides in a trick used by everybody from Reagan to Clinton (at whom he takes a jab) to, yes, the current Corrupter-in-Chief. The trick being, "You can do whatever you want so long as you make 'em proud and give 'em a good show." And what we can take away from *The Prince of Providence* is that people really, really like a good show.

Setting aside the content of the script, I want to make it clear that this is truly one of Trinity's best productions from every angle. The writing is smart, the direction is seamless and the actors are firing on all cylinders.

Scott Aiello does a commendable job as Buddy. He doesn't so much resemble him as he does channel his inexplicable charm and terrifying mania. The role is one of those marathon parts where Aiello barely gets to catch his breath as he careens through one confetti gun after another as Buddy wins re-election over and over again. His acting travels well between family life and backroom manipulation, having to deliver some truly acrobatic lines, and by the end of the play, whether you want to cheer for Cianci or not, there's no denying that Aiello has delivered a performance that you'll be thinking about all season long.

He's aided considerably by Rebecca Gibel as Buddy's wife, Sheila. Gibel has a remarkable versatility as an actress, and what could have been played as a supporting Scorsese girl instead became one of the highlights of the production. When Sheila shows up to a hotel where Cianci is holed up with his mistress and negotiates herself into a divorce and a half-million dollars using only her wits and the gun in her handbag, we cheer for her. She's a woman with a spine, and there's something cathartic about seeing Buddy — or "Fats" as she calls him — be put in his place. Gibel makes the most out of every line she's given and manages to paint Sheila as someone who you really would be devastated to lose, making her specter linger on throughout the play long after her character has left Cianci's life.

Erick Betancourt has the unenviable job of playing the token goon in the show — Mickey Corrente, Cianci's right-hand man. Betancourt adds an air of believability to the character that helps ground the show when things get a little too cartoonish. You believe that he knows exactly who Corrente is and why he's doing what he's doing, and he manages to elicit sympathy simply by making it clear that his overall objective is loyalty, not personal gain.

Overall, I had a blast watching the acting company tackle multiple roles within the show — especially

when they got to make big impressions with only a little bit of stage time. It is productions like these that make a good case for having an acting company in the first place. There's the chance to show off an ensemble working together and making endless costume changes (congratulations to costume designer Olivera Gajic and the crew backstage) while clearly communicating a very complicated story.

Stephen Berenson was a terrific foil for Aiello's Cianci as Robert Haxton. Janice Duclos was one of my favorites as Cianci's secretary Linda — and Brant's treatment of her was a good demonstration of how a character's human side can be shown without things becoming maudlin. I loved Brian McEleney as Larry McGarry, the shrieking, foul and foul-mouthed adversary who's like a cross between Mr. Potter from *It's a Wonderful Life* and Jabba the Hutt.

As Herb DeSimone, Cianci's barely listened-to conscience, Charlie Thurston continues to prove himself as someone who can both carry a show and slip into a supporting role with ease. His building horror as he realizes exactly who his boss is aids in creating a place for the audience onstage as the madness swirls around him.

Act One mainly deals with Cianci's life up until a fated meeting with Ray DeLeo, played with equal parts confusion and fear by Mauro Hantman, while the central point of Act Two is the Plunderdome scandal. It's a real thrill watching McEleney and Joe Wilson Jr. as Richard Rose square off against each other, while Magar has the house lights turned all the way up so we can see exactly where everybody stands.

The set design by Sara Brown is a perfect replica of Providence City Hall, and Magar's vision fits in perfectly with what's famously known as the Trinity style of suggestive storytelling with maximum energy. The runtime might seem a little on the long side in the new age of 90-minute theater, but this show moves — and I mean that in a good way. Even something as tedious as a courtroom scene — sometimes the death of momentum, let alone when it's for a corruption trial — is riveting.

But back to all that laughter.

It seems to me that by finally putting Cianci onstage after all these years, Trinity is in some way giving him exactly what he and his supporters would have wanted.

It's always been a statewide pipe dream of anyone born within a certain generation to have a *Goodfellas*-style movie made about one of the longest-serving mayors in the country. There are echoes of everything from *Raging Bull* to *Casino* to Mamet, and I have to believe that, for the most part, Cianci would be publicly outraged and privately thrilled. As I write this, I feel like I should be critiquing the audience as much as the play. Was it as funny as it seemed, or was that just my perception of it based on the reactions I experienced from the people sitting in the theater with me? Is it okay to laugh at a character like Cianci as long as, when the lights come up, you go back to understanding that he was more than just a product of his environment? That he actually helped sustain that environment and thrived in it as well? Isn't all politics farce whether we want it to be or not? And that's not to say that the production doesn't deal in the truth or in creating truthful moments between these characters who are people who were characters — it's just that most of this is (pardon the cliché) stranger than fiction.

I heard someone at intermission wondering why there hasn't been a Cianci play until now, and I thought to myself: There couldn't be a better time than right now. I'm not sure I'd have believed even half of what I saw on stage until this year when every day brings a new example of the dangers of wanting the government to look like a telenovela.

And then there's the ending.

Don't worry, I won't spoil it for you, but it suffices to say, Trinity does not let itself off the hook when it comes to their own involvement — not just with Buddy, but with the political system itself. It's a meta-turn that's bold and risky and, frankly, quite wonderful considering we're talking about an institution that existed before and after the Reign of Buddy. In 2019, a theater that's willing to be that self-aware about its particular shortcomings should be applauded. It's not often that institutions have a sense of humor about themselves and when you add that to the fact that the play makes a good case for Rhode Islanders being both in on the joke and the joke itself, it makes for a much more complex evening of theater than I think most people — including me — were expecting.

That being said, what are we, the audience, supposed to take from an admirable admission of guilt on the theater's part when it appears at the end of a play that seemingly suggests none of us really have the right to judge anybody because we all benefit from the broken eggs that make the omelet ... or do we?

*Prince of Providence* looks at what it takes to merely exist in a highly politicized world where you either play or get played, and I only wish it had asked what was happening to everyone else who couldn't get a favor or a job from Cianci while he and his cohorts were getting rich. Corruption is not a victimless crime, and even though it's not the job of a critic to talk about the play he would have liked to have seen, I found myself wondering about who Cianci's victims were — the ones who will never get to see themselves onstage.

*Trinity Rep presents the world premiere of The Prince of Providence, by George Brant, based on the book The Prince of Providence by Mike Stanton, Directed by Taibi Magar. Sarah and Joseph Dowling, Jr. Theater, 201 Washington St, Providence. Ticket lottery info (winners pay \$49/ticket) can be found at: [trinityrep.com/the-prince-of-providence-lottery](http://trinityrep.com/the-prince-of-providence-lottery) For ticket purchase and other info, visit: [trinityrep.com/show/the-prince-of-providence/](http://trinityrep.com/show/the-prince-of-providence/) or call 401-351-4242.*