

Review: Naples Players debate morals in search for some "Good People"

CHRIS SILK

11:02 AM, Feb 6, 2014



Life is hard. You gotta play. But good is different than nice. The characters in David Lindsay-Abaire play "Good People" learn that - if slowly. South Boston never looked so ... unappetizing as the Naples Players use a professional director and a cast of veteran performers to bring the drama to life.

The play examines choices and consequences in the same hardscrabble blocks made famous in "Good Will Hunting." Out of

a job and desperate for rent, Margie swallows her pride and visits high-school boyfriend Mike, now a successful fertility doctor with a young wife and child. How far will Margie go in a grab for cash? "Good People" asks whether we really have choices. Can folks plot a success story, however improbable, and "win" the game? The play's key scene - when a terrifying wave of emotion breaks over Bonnie Knapp's broken Margie's face - suggests otherwise. Might life really be just a path pre-destined from birth to pauper's death on the sidewalk, lying dead for two days with folks walking by, unaware?

Director Christopher Goutman gets the rhythms of the piece but not its many subtleties. Goutman works primarily in the soap opera field; much of the show feels designed as if for television, not the stage. Characters stand facing each other or crowded around tables; they're ready for multiple camera angles but not an audience fixed into place.

Goutman's tight-focus approach works - to a degree - in the intimate Tobye Studio. Close confines mask issues with inert blocking, but the "life is in shades-of-gray" message gets lost along with any real sense of movement. I also wish the show hadn't so openly telegraphed the identity of Mike's wife, an interesting, if not necessarily important twist. The identity of Sonya McCarter's ice princess Kate - and her entrance after intermission - could offer a nice surprise to audiences.

Margie and her bingo crowd stare into empty refrigerators and scrape by one paycheck away from the street; the show never quite generates that atmosphere of wretched urgency. "Good People" needs its verbal sparring matches to unfurl like titanic scorched-earth battles, but with searing, brutal emotional honesty.

Veteran actress Bonnie Knapp anchors the ensemble cast as the down-on-her-luck Margie. Knapp projects toughness and makes for a believable portrait of a woman who's a few dollars away from the street. Paul Graffy's Mikey Dillon (the playwright gave the doctor the initials M.D.) combines perfect out-of-touch privilege with buried anger. McCarter plays Mike's pretty princess wife with just the right amount of polite venom.

Victoria Diebler steals the show as "the mouthie from Southie" Jean. Her crass, loud, louche street rat offers one of the play's most honest takes on humanity - and Diebler plays Jean to her coarse finest, tossing off barbs and slinging curses. Veteran Janina Birtolo brings a looniness to landlady Dottie, while Juan Alejandro plays Dollar Store manager Stevie.

Jason Sherwood's accordion set folds and unfolds in one of the night's most thought-provoking surprises. He crafts a rectangular brick wall with a blank segment that slides forward and back toward the audience. Slip in a screen or add furniture - the stage becomes alleyway, apartment, bingo hall or suburban palace. In cleverly squeezing the playing space during certain scenes, Sherwood emulates the play's own commentary on moral quandaries. Do those who have more to give offer the most? Or the least?

Look to Dot Auchmoody's costumes for additional clues, all in primary colors, like royal purple, spotty yellow or solid blue (collar). I love the vibrant black-and-white print on Margie's "party dress," an indication of her mixed emotions, twisted motives and uncertain future.

Kudos on the perfect symbolism of the black overcoat; Margie creeps into the monochrome suburban checkerboard as a flawed Black Queen bent on advancing to her goal - whatever it may be.

The fashion piece offers acres of snide commentary on Mike's crumbling marriage and keeps viewers guessing as to Margie's ultimate intentions.

Play the guessing game. One character alone on the stage might, in fact, be "good people." The show presents a tangle of morals, emotions, motivations and plenty of sticky wickets with nary a cricket player in sight. Look for scenes with Knapp, Diebler and Birtolo gossiping around a bingo table - jokes drop faster than the bingo balls!

"GOOD: of somewhat high but not excellent quality;" email me, csilk@naplesnews.com, find me on Twitter at [@napleschris](https://twitter.com/napleschris) or read my [Stage Door theater blog](#). You can also sign up to receive the [Stage Door blog](#) via email.