

'Home of the Brave' fun capper to stellar MRT season

By KATHLEEN PALMER

Staff Writer

In politics, as in so many other arenas, the devil is in the details. In "Home of the Brave," the season-ender for Merrimack Repertory Theatre, that seems to literally be the case.

The story by playwright Lila Rose Kaplan centers around Senator Bernadette Spence (played by Karen MacDonald, who's trod the boards for MRT several times), slightly frazzled and discouraged as she tries to rush home to her family for Christmas. Her exit from D.C. is held up by the sudden, mysterious appearance of Adrian – a slick Brit in a tidy suit who pitches to her the idea of taking the next step in her political career: running for president.

Adrian is portrayed with slimy-Limey perfection by John Gregorio, whose every move is as smooth as silk. Adrian knows exactly what to say to everyone – from Bernadette, to her lovable everyman veterinarian husband

IF YOU GO

Merrimack Repertory Theatre presents 'Home of the Brave'

WHEN: Through May 15. See website for dates and times.

WHERE: Nancy L. Donahue Theatre, 50 E. Merrimack St., Lowell, Mass.

TICKETS: \$20-\$60. Senior, group, Lowell resident discounts.

INFORMATION: 1-978-654-4678, box_office@mrt.org or mrt.org.

Owen (Joel Van Liew), to their housekeeper- with-a-secret Dora (Cheryl McMahon), to their slightly

histrionic daughter Marianne (Veronika Duerr), home from college

for "a perfect Christmas" with her ... friend? ... Val (Jordan Brodess).

For the first half of the no-intermission show, I was left to ponder exactly who

– or, perhaps, what – Adrian was. There are constant hilarious bits where he produces items magically out of thin air, from teapots to sandwiches to "catching" ninja throwing stars. His entrances and exits are equally mystifying. His ability to sway each person to his way of thinking seems supernatural. Is his urging of Bernadette to run for president actually a Faustian bargain of some kind? What's his Anglo angle?

Worth mentioning is the brilliant way each scene change is handled. Bravo to whomever orchestrated those cleverly choreographed moments (director Sean Daniels, I assume). Funny, smooth and effective; I was moved to applaud the final change into the family barn. And the sets by Randal Parsons are just beautiful.

Gregorio stole the show for this audience member. The actor's ice-skater fluidity of movement, impeccable delivery, and even-

tual character arc – from in-control puppetmaster to frantically exposed fraud – were a delight. Also big on laughs was Brodess' portrayal of gender-fluid Val, in a Weird Al wig and flowing clothes – who fooled at least one audience member, sitting next to me at that performance. Nora has a great line where she notes "No meat, no pronouns. Got it."

Things really ramp up in the second half, in terms of farcical humor and outright physicality – big kudos to Duerr and her bravery at some of the ninja stuntwork she did, and to Gregorio for a final exit that would terrify me. The best part of farce is how it always comes to a chaotic, silly culmination. I mean, at one point, muffins are hurled into the audience. It's hilarious.

"Home of the Brave" is a charming, upbeat, light-hearted way for MRT to end its first season helmed by Daniels.

Be sure to catch this



Photo courtesy of MEGHAN MOORE

Adrian (John Gregorio) tries to sway Sen. Bernadette Spence (Karen MacDonald) into a run for the White House, in Merrimack Repertory Theatre's "Home of the Brave."

final show; it will surely entice you to join them for their upcoming season in September.

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