

## Public Theatre's in-person 'Middletown' is 'remarkable and moving'

by Rob Tukey, special to the Sun Journal  
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**The Lewiston theater's live performance of the story of two couples is the first since the pandemic, offering viewers a comedy/drama featuring 'cathartic truth and honesty,'**

The return of in-person audiences to The Public Theater in Lewiston will find "Middletown," directed by Janet Mitchko, a truly remarkable and moving experience. Once in your seat — masked

and socially distanced of course — you will be treated to powerfully honest and consummate performances by four outstanding actors: Joyce Cohen, Allison Briner Dardenne, Craig Bockhorn and Douglas Rees.

The unique presentation of the play by Dan Clancy is a transformative journey of two couples, the Hogans (Cohen and Bockhorn) and the Abrams (Dardenne and Rees), as they recount and relive their lives as close friends for 33 years.

The stage is a bare set; a black backdrop populated simply but symbolically with an array of photograph frames of various shapes and sizes. Four stands holding binders face the audience. Low-lit seats at the black backdrop permit characters to exit a scene without leaving the stage.

The play opens unconventionally. Peg Hogan (Joyce Cohen) breaks character and the fourth wall as she steps to the front of the stage to welcome the audience. "Evening," she says. She self-deprecatingly suggests that the stands and binders are because "we didn't have to memorize all the lines. But who doesn't love being read to?" she asks. And with that, the audience is subtly involved. This interaction becomes a unique component of the play, with the audience being invited to become vocally engaged. The playwright's clever and skillful dialogue will repeatedly draw the audience into further participation. Ultimately, the emotive mastery of the players makes it impossible not to respond spontaneously and without request.

The actors take their places at the front of the stage and we become introduced to and acquainted with them. In no time it becomes clear that we are not actually "being read to." The binders are merely devices, symbols; they are books, if you will, of their lives and the friendship that will be portrayed. Often pages are turned in unison and at other times individually with dramatic purpose and palpable effect.

Peg and Tom Hogan become friends with Dot and Don Abrams. How they encounter one another rings true to life. The wives meet dropping their children off at kindergarten, become friends and draw their husbands reluctantly into the picture. The gender differences of "making friends" and finding common connections are amusing and genuine. The women have many mutual interests though disparate personalities, and their conversation flows easily. The men's search for a similar connection is laughably awkward until their common bond becomes poignantly telling without being told. And it all feels real in the hands of these outstanding performers. Throughout the play, with each interaction, if it has happened to you, you know it is real. If it has not happened to you, you will believe it is real and feel the emotion of its truth. No fact-checking needed.

Recounting the plot further would be a spoiler. Suffice it to say that this story that celebrates life and friendship does so through the eyes of two very different and relatable couples. Dot and Don are wisecracking, easy-going



From left, Craig Bockhorn and Joyce Cohen as Tom and Peg Hogan, and Allison Briner Dardenne and Douglas Rees as Dotty and Don Abrams on stage in The Public Theatre's production of "Middletown."

individuals, while the Hogans are more reserved. An odd couple of couples, compelling to spend time with thanks to the great script and acting.

Witty dialogue of rapid-fire catch phrases and one-liners are occasionally employed to quickly move the timeline as the couples age and recount the milestones of their lives and friendship. "Parents are the dentist, grandparents are the candy," says one, referring to generational differences. At other junctures, powerful raw emotions emerge. The actors treat these with honesty, respect and deep feeling. The personal events that are portrayed along the way are so wonderfully and powerfully acted that they transcend "acting." And that is when live theater becomes life. Thankfully it is back.

We've all been through it, and the past couple of years have bound us all closer together through shared experience that has been both frightening, disarming and sometimes wonderful. This play and these actors give cathartic truth and honesty to emotions that they superbly evoke from the audience. See it, it is all there. A standing ovation is richly deserved for sharing it with us in person.

The Public Theatre is also streaming the play for home viewing through Oct. 24. Go to [thepublictheatre.org](http://thepublictheatre.org) for more information.