

Theater review: Two couples chronicle their friendship through the decades

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'Middletown' is an affecting evening of theater. Ready to lift your head out of your burrow and enjoy an entertaining play in the company of others? The Public Theatre may have just what you're looking for.

"Middletown" is the first in-person show presented by the popular Lewiston venue in well over a year. The Dan Clancy play, in its first production by a regional theatre, is cleverly designed to provide an 80-minute or so visit with four likeable and mostly cheerful characters that some may recognize from looking next door, or maybe in the mirror.

Subtitled "The Ride of Your Life," the play takes us through the adult lives of four friends. It's an intentionally minimal production with the actors in street clothes appearing to read the script from music stands. Actually, they're quite well-versed in their lines and simply turned the pages from time to time to suggest progress in telling their character's stories.

The visual images in the show are mostly found in the words uttered rather than in any eye-catching theatrics, though the actors do employ some comic gestures and a few dance moves. Close your eyes and the show could be enjoyed like a cozy audiobook. But it's better to keep them open or you'll miss seeing some good professional actors subtly at work.

The four players represent two married couples of a baby boomer vintage who are longtime friends. They take turns describing the ups and downs of their lives. At times full of predictable middle-class situations, the show can still be quite moving, particularly for those of a certain age who may have lived through similar times themselves.

Joyce Cohen and Craig Bockhorn play married couple Peg and Tom, both slightly bookish but not so much that they can't enjoy a lighthearted get together with friends Dotty and Don, played by Allison Briner Dardenne and Douglas Rees.

The men bond over being Vietnam war vets and both enjoy a good laugh while the women have a sort of opposites-attract relationship. Peg's a bit obsessive-compulsive while Dotty likes to let loose after a few martinis. Despite a couple of tripped up lines in the early going, these performers artfully slipped into individually identifiable roles and quickly won over a rapt Sunday afternoon crowd.

As the years pass in the couple's friendship, issues of marital strains, child-rearing crises and general satisfaction with life give way to serious health threats and loss of loved ones. Each actor has a go at a "serious" moment or two and was able, judging by their audible responses, to pull the audience (all masked) in for the tough times depicted as well as the comical scenes.

The play touches only very gently on the political and cultural controversies occurring at the time of the play (from the 1970s forward) and veteran local director Janet Mitchko, cast, crew, and staff have put together a show that has a timeless feel about it. "Middletown" makes for an engrossing and very friendly welcome back to live theater in Lewiston.

The show will also be available for streaming.



Craig Bockhorn as Tom Hogan and Joyce Cohen as Peg Hogan in the Public Theatre's production of Middletown in Lewiston.