

Written by Mike Schulz
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Even considering the show's cast and director, if you had told me a week ago that the musical comedy *Are We There Yet?* would wind up being my favorite Circa '21 Dinner Playhouse presentation over the past two years, I wouldn't have believed you.

Its concept is lifted directly from *I Love You, You're Perfect, Now Change*, albeit with a focus on families rather than romance: Four performers - two women and two men - each portray numerous characters in an unrelated series of alternately comedic, heartwarming, and musical vignettes. Its poster, an exaggerated cartoon image of a harried family trapped in a cramped automobile, suggests overly aggressive,

National Lampoon's Vacation

-style zaniness. And although the two works aren't related, its title also belongs to that shrill,

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overbearing Ice Cube movie from 2005, which wasn't exactly the cheeriest of omens. (Neither, to be honest, is the production's set, which is functional enough, but which has been painted a splotchy blend of dark yellow and white; it looks like a house built of cheddar Jack cheese.)

I am officially eating crow, because not only is nearly everything about the theatre's latest offering first-rate, but a first-rate *surprise* - *Are We There Yet?* is continually sharper, funnier, and more moving than you expect it to be. Much of its credit goes to John Gladini, who has composed a batch of sprightly, harmonically adventurous tunes with clever lyrics, and writers James Hindman, Ray Roderick, and Cheryl Stern, whose satiric and dramatic sketches oftentimes defy expectation in incredibly satisfying ways.



But enough can't be said about the invention and sincerity of performers Erin Churchill (nee Dickerson), Sandra D. Rivera, Tristan Layne Tapscott, and Tom Walljasper, or the nuance and generosity of Ann Nieman's direction. (Or, for that matter, the expert contributions of on-stage musicians Stephen Hopkins, John Ladson II, and the peerless Ron May, who looks as though he couldn't possibly be having more fun.) The music and script are already more than agreeable, but in the hands of these talents, *Are We There Yet?* is downright magical.

A few of the authors' sketch-comedy conceits are amusingly over-the-top, and when they are, the actors attack their stereotypes with unmitigated zeal. (One spectacularly heartless routine finds a quartet of conniving European relatives waiting, none too patiently, for the family patriarch to die.) Yet even when the show's humor is at its broadest, the portrayals are peppered with flaky, unpredictable grace notes that reveal active comic minds at work, and that make you laugh for being so recognizably, weirdly *human*. Engaging in some casual flirtation with his character's wife, Tapscott yips like a puppy and does a mad little backward hop, and upon meeting Walljasper's cretinous pre-pre-school administrator, Churchill's mom-to-be

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instinctively wipes off his moist handshake. (That's not the only thing wiped off in this skit - watch how discreetly Walljasper handles the breaking of Churchill's water.)

In addition to ensuring that her two-hour production moves along at a speedy clip, Nieman does a superlative job of guiding her cast toward the reality in the characters' nuttiness, so that the laughs - and there are some *big* ones here - resonate with actual feeling. And she's even better with her handling of *Are We There Yet's* legitimately touching vignettes, which, thanks to the actors' alert and inspired performances, never slide into melancholy or unearned sentiment.



Rivera has a lovely, unforced comedy style - she's great as a mother making desperate deals with God in exchange for her son not screwing up his baseball game - and her big-hearted, beautiful underplaying is especially notable as a birth mother searching online for her long-lost daughter. Blessed with the sort of stage presence that's at once electrifying and blissfully soothing, Churchill can perform outsize comedy and divinely subtle emotionalism in practically the same breath, which she does to splendid effect when one of her characters here endures an initially questionable, ultimately delightful blind date. Tapscott is wonderfully funny when attending a daughter's unbearable dance recital or interrogating a flummoxed prom date, but late in Act II, the actor also performs a startling, deeply felt monologue as an elderly man facing the first stages of Alzheimer's, which he pulls off with exquisite commitment and grace.

Walljasper, meanwhile, has been given his meatiest, most substantial area role(s) since My Verona Productions' *The Pillowman* back in 2006, and it's a thrill seeing this superb actor back in leading-man form. Whether playing a kindly (though demanding) coach or an edgy father-of-the-bridg or a happily Viagra-fueled widower, Walljasper invests every character with his knockout combination of imagination and honesty; roles of such richness and variety can't

The Mamas and the Papas: "Are We There Yet?," at the Circa '21 Dinner Playhouse through September 13

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come along often enough for Walljasper's fans, but then again, productions of *Are We There Yet*

's caliber don't come along often enough, either. Circa '21's latest is an exceptionally good time at the theatre. During the show's opening road-trip number, Walljasper's aggrieved dad snarls, "There's no such thing as fun for the whole family." It turns out he's dead wrong.

For tickets, call (309) 786-7733 extension 2.