

Written by Thom White

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After 12 years in the television-news business, I spent my first Election Day in more than a decade not covering the elections, but rather seeing a play about a bid for the presidency and the decision of whether to use personal attacks on opponents. And while watching the District Theatre's *The Best Man*, directed by Bryan Tank, I wondered if the point being made in this political morality play – that the business of politics is on a downward moral spiral – is one that *needs*

to be made. Don't we, as a nation, already know that dirty politics are wrong, and doesn't this make the message of playwright Gore Vidal's 1960 work dated? A day later, though, I read an article about personal attacks and dishonesty continuing to be a part of political campaigns because these tactics

work,

and so Vidal's play, for better or worse, appears relevant after all.

Vidal's tale concerns two candidates vying for their party's presidential nomination and the endorsement of the soon-to-be-former president. Though Matt Mercer's William Russell has a penchant for younger women who are not his wife, he's otherwise an ethical man, believing in honesty, taking the high road, and the honor of serving in political office. Russell is up against Jonathan Grafft's Joseph Cantwell, a populist senator who does not share Russell's scruples. Cantwell is plotting to release Russell's confidential mental-health records in an effort to destroy his candidacy and, thus, take the nomination from him. Yet when Russell's campaign gets hold of damning information about Cantwell, Russell wrestles with whether to stoop to Cantwell's level – preventing Cantwell from moving forward with his disrespectful plans to bring personal

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issues into politics – or to publicly counter his attack.



Mercer's performance is like none I've witnessed from him, as I'm used to seeing the actor as humorous and/or odd characters such as Estragon in the former Harrison Hilltop Theatre's 2010 *Waiting for Godot*. He's hilarious in roles that allow him to be, and so I was a bit taken off guard to see him in a staunchly serious part as an upstanding politician. But Mercer shines in it – perhaps even brighter than he does in his comedic offerings. In *The Best Man*, he's utterly believable (despite being a bit too young for the part) and offers up an evident moral fortitude; his Russell is respectable and commands respect because, despite the man's philandering ways, he deserves and earns it.

Cantwell, however, does not, even though Grafft – whom I've liked on stage since the Harrison Hilltop's 2010 *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* – delivers a powerful portrayal as what we've come to see as the typical politician: someone hell-bent on success through whatever means necessary, with his lack of sincerity suggesting untrustworthiness. Grafft plays Cantwell's political power with aplomb, though I do think the character is missing some depth, as the senator's manipulative nature is evident in his words but not in Grafft's vocalization of them. (This, though, is a minor issue.)



Pat Flaherty, once again, does not disappoint, as his performance as President Arthur Hockstader upholds the actor's reputation for strong, engaging, and impressive characterizations. Denise Yoder, as Russell's wife Alice, doesn't quite suggest her character's described shyness, but is so classy, kind, and First Lady-esque in the role that this is easily forgivable. (Yoder also looks fantastic in costume designer Angela Rathman's period ensembles.) Jessica Nicol-White, whose Tamora in the Prentie Players' *Titus Andronicus* blew me away with her cunning and sexuality, here plays Cantwell's wife Mabel, a young Southern woman whose outward social charm disguises her true nature (just as "Bless your heart!" sometimes masks a condescending insult). Like Tamora, Nicol-White's Mabel is cunning, but in a more delicate, carefully vocalized way, and the performer is absolutely fantastic for it.

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With its cast including nine other supporting actors – each worthy of praise for the nuance they add to even the most minor roles – the District Theatre's *The Best Man* proves not only thought-provoking but entertaining. Tank's pacing helps the production's almost two-and-a-half hours seem like much less time, while his ensemble of actors clearly makes Vidal's moral points without seeming patronizing.

The Best Man runs at the District Theatre (1611 Second Avenue, Rock Island) through November 18, and tickets and information are available by calling (309)235-1654 or visiting DistrictTheatre.com