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Theater review: Many laughs find their way through thin plot of 'The North Plan'

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I get the feeling that playwright Jason Wells intended his farce "The North Plan" as a cautionary black comedy about the potentially draconian results of the Homeland Security Act. Along the way he created an outrageously funny character named Tanya Shepke, who hijacked the play.

Tanya's dumb as a post, but she works a twangy, loudmouthed, f-bomb-based redneck rap that puts audiences in stitches. With Katie Rubin's brassy, confident performance as Tanya at its center, the new Capital Stage production of "The North Plan" blows through Wells' plotless narrative.

Actually, Wells does try to tell a slight story, and he does drop in an even slighter back story, both of which serve to keep a number of characters within earshot of Tanya's rantings. She's in the lockup of the city of Lodus, which we learn is a two-street, four-streetlight town in southern Missouri. (The fine police station set was designed by Jonathan Williams.)

Tanya turned herself in for drunken driving, but that act of good citizenship hasn't turned out quite like she planned, though it's hard to imagine any of her ideas working out the way she thought they might.

Stuck in her one-person cell, Tanya verbally bombards administrative assistant Shonda Cox (Alexandra Barthel). Shonda is a young African American woman trying to work her way through law school, and her job includes watching the occasional female prisoner. Barthel emerges as the true co-star and subtle core of this production with her understated but rock-solid performance.

While Tanya's world revolves hilariously around Tanya, there's something weird going on in the outside world. Has there been a coup, or is there some sort of insurgency? It's not clear, but the government, including the military, is mobilized to emergency levels.

Soon joining Tanya in the male side of the lockup is Carlton Berg (Cassidy Brown) a midlevel member of the State Department. Homeland Security agents want Berg because of some information he has. The hapless agents (excellent comic performances from William Elsmann and Andrew Perez) can't find the information they know Berg has, so offstage they resort to what we imagine are extreme measures. Harry Harris adds depth as laconic Chief Swenson, who wants to keep control of his little station. Wells creates scenes that are both funny and creepy as the agents attempt to find someone in authority to (literally) sign off on doing what needs to be done to find the information.

Never mind that in this modern world (the play is set in the near future) Carlton could have easily disseminated the information he's "hidden" from the feds. Plausibility can be the enemy of comedy,

so Wells often overlooks it as he keeps the laughs rolling. With little story to start with, Wells doesn't have much to conclude, so he just caps it off, so to speak.

Director Peter Mohrmann knows where the gold is here, and he basically turns Rubin loose, which isn't such a bad thing.

THE NORTH PLAN

★ ★ ★

What: Jason Wells' farce about a shadowy American government takeover and those trying to stop it.

Where: Capital Stage, 2215 J St., Sacramento

When: Performances continue at 7 p.m. Wednesdays, 8 p.m. Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays and 2 p.m. Sundays through Feb. 24

Tickets: \$22-\$32

Information: (916) 995-5464 or go to www.capstage.org.

Running time: Two hours including one intermission.

Note: "The North Plan" includes strong language and violence and is intended for adult audiences.

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