

VLT

85th SEASON!

The Very Little Theatre
presents
**Laughter on the
23rd Floor**
by Neil Simon

Simon's semi-autobiographical
account of his experience as a young
writer (along with Mel Books) on
Sid Caesar's *Your Show of Shows*.
Directed by Chris Pinto.

Oct. 11-13*, 17-20*, 24-26
*Sunday Matinees

Tix: \$17 (\$12 for Thursdays)
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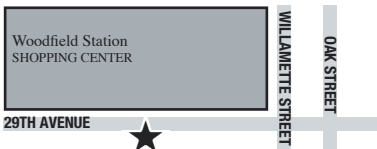
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THEATER BY ANNA GRACE



THE BUSINESS OF LAUGHTER

Very Little Theatre inspires with Laughter on the 23rd Floor

“Even if he was a communist, why would he have cards printed up?” the writer asks, hearing that General George Marshall has just been accused by Joseph McCarthy of being a card-carrying communist. It’s just another day at the office — the crazy, neurotic, hysterical office for Lucus (Zachary Twardowski) as he tries to make it as a comedy writer for a major comedian against the pressures of lowering network standards and Cold War propaganda.

Laughter on the 23rd Floor is one of Neil Simon’s semi-autobiographical pieces that follows a crowd-pleasing formula of nostalgia and witty banter, with a mild political agenda (fascism is bad) we can all get behind.

Coarse doesn’t begin to define the language used in this play. VLT traditionally attracts an older crowd, and it’s a sign of the times that these octogenarians didn’t so much as flinch as strings of ribald repartee launched from the mouths of the actors. While I pride myself on being able to roll with the hippest grandpa when it comes to language, when a term that means both homosexual and the wood once used to burn them is dropped, the language has gone too far.

Director Chris Pinto culled a strong cast and ignited a frenetic energy between them. Paul Rhoden’s layered and volatile Max Prince is cracking jokes and smashing walls in equal measure as he slips into drug and alcohol abuse under the pressure of fame. Particularly adept is Rhoden’s handling of the character’s misquotation of every great war leader from Hannibal to Churchill, like a western civ lecture given by a crack addict. “Never have so many given so much, for so long, for so little, for so few, for so seldom.”

“God, he is good,” a man sitting near me said of Michael P. Watkins as the needy, self-absorbed hypochondriac Ira Stone. It is wonderful fun to watch Watkins up the ante in this cast as he takes each scene to its emotional and comedic limits. Tom Wilson is endearing as the flashily dressed Milt. Jay Hash pulls off the best acting I’ve seen him do as the Russian funny man Val.

Overall direction was strong; Pinto, like Neil Simon, has comedy down. I was impressed at how the actors felt for audience reaction and waited for us to stop snorting with laughter before they led us in to the next round of jokes. But there were some scenes when either the director’s hand was a little too heavy or the actors were not able to access his instruction properly. Actors would be rolling along just fine, then suddenly it seemed as though they were prodded with a big, invisible stick. The cast would shuffle and resetttle like a flock of anxious pigeons, and I found myself wishing they’d just be left in peace to tell their jokes.

For the majority of *Laughter on the 23rd Floor*, the audience was howling with laughter, tears rolling as our bodies fought to deal with such hilarity. Leaving the theater I felt like I just spent a week on vacation, relaxed and happy. ■

Laughter on the 23rd Floor runs through Oct. 26 at the Very Little Theatre.

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