

# THEATER IS THE LIFE FOR YOU

*Humor and melancholy mingle in VLT's production of Neil Simon's 45 Seconds from Broadway*



THE CAST OF 45 SECONDS FROM BROADWAY

I'm a snob and a sniff and a two-bit dilettante of the lowest rank.

For instance, I once dismissed Stephen King as an immature populist hack whose middlebrow fiction is an affront to all things literary, and I felt that same way about playwright Neil Simon — a sentimental moron whose tweedy Borscht Belt shtick had transformed the grand tradition of romantic comedy into an efflorescence of twee and treacle.

I'm also a hypocrite and a poseur, because I actually cut my teeth reading King, and I still read him. He's a master of his genre, no less elucidating than entertaining. And just a brief survey of Simon's work — *The Odd Couple*, *Barefoot in the Park*, *The Goodbye Girl*, *Brighton Beach Memoirs*, *California Suite* — shuts me down cold. I love this stuff. It's part of our cultural DNA.

Now 90, Simon hasn't written a play in nearly a decade and a half. One of his last stage pieces was *45 Seconds from Broadway*, now in production at Very Little Theatre.

In a sense, all of Simon's work is minor — the opposite of epic, it's familial and familiar rather than sweeping and staggering, and forever salted with humor — but *45 Seconds* is truly minor, a nostalgic set piece that looks back on a life in theater with an old man's sadness, fondness and timeworn sense of irony. It is *The Tempest* set in Manhattan, with a yearning species of Weltschmerz

replacing Shakespeare's buoyant magical realism.

The play is set exclusively in a diner owned by Zelda and Bernie (the wonderful Denise LaCroix and Achilles Massahos), an older couple whose parental fondness for their customers doesn't necessarily equal good business sense. The place (Bill Campbell's set design is fantastic) is frequented by various "grotesques," as Sherwood Anderson labeled his characters — various struggling or washed-up theater types, wannabees, also-rans, folks living out the faded dream of a Broadway never attained.

Simon substitutes sketches for a strong narrative arc, creating a rambling and sometimes arid play that finds peaks and valleys in its random interactions among the diner's patrons. At the center of it all is Mickey Fox (Chris Pinto), an aging comedian whose penchant for cracking wise hides the heavy melancholy of failure. Pinto, doing his best Jackie Mason, holds things together as a man who is hard to love but impossible not to like.

A constellation of oddballs cycles in and out of the diner: Solomon (Kevin Huslte), a South African playwright stranded in Manhattan; Megan, an aspiring actress/waitress; Bessie (Katherine Collins), about to strike it big in Hollywood; Rayleen and Charles (Diana and Don Aday), an older couple who appear to be wrapped in delusions of wealth and continental grandeur; Mickey's sadsack brother

Harry (Paul Rhoden); gossipy theater patrons Cindy and Arleen (the hilarious duo of Pamela Lehan-Siegel and Janna Blair Slack); and others.

As these various people meet, greet, collide and collude, a tone poem emerges, one that gathers bits and pieces of lives lived and turns them more into an atmosphere than a story. The humor that stitches together the play's early moments, equal parts wise-cracking and bittersweet, gives way in the second act to a sense of impending loss, as the diner's imminent closure looms. This is Neil Simon at his best, mingling a slow churning of everyday sadness and grief into an embattled message of hope.

*45 Seconds to Broadway* is a pleasant, funny and ultimately effervescent (not always a bad thing) meditation on community, viewed through the sometimes sharp, sometimes rheumy eyes of a Broadway man who, when he began, could still smell the musty curtains of vaudeville. If, at times, the play proves slightly tone-deaf about the modern world — harking to that seismic moment when RuPaul humiliated Milton Berle at the 1993 MTV awards — its elegy of loss is nonetheless poignant and timely. As with so much of Simon's work, sadness becomes indistinguishable from the joyful nostalgia that afflicts it.

*45 Seconds from Broadway* plays through Oct. 28 at Very Little Theatre; \$15-\$19, tickets at [thevlt.com](http://thevlt.com) or 541-344-7751.

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