

THEATER REVIEW | NEW JERSEY

A Political Play From the '40s, Very of the Moment



Hernando Rico Sanchez

IMPOLITIC The "State of the Union" cast includes, from left, Allen Duane as Judge Alexander, Sandy Cockrell (who also directs) as Mary Matthews, Eileen Gaughan as Mrs. Alexander and Kelly Cooper as Grant Matthews.

By ANITA GATES

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"State of the Union" is a very funny, very smart play. And when it won the [Pulitzer Prize](#), people must have thought: Oh, good. Now that all the manipulation and dishonesty in presidential politics have been exposed, things will change and the American government can go back to serving, and existing for the good of, the people.

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That was in 1946. So there's your first laugh of the evening.



"State of the Union," by the renowned 20th-century playwriting team of Howard Lindsay and Russel Crouse, has never been revived on Broadway, so it's a real treat that J City Theater has mounted a smoothly done production in its new space at St. Michael's Church.

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One of the play's great pleasures is how easy it would be to convince somebody — by changing a few things here and there — that it was written last month.

The first scene sets up the situation. "We've got the Congress, and in '48 we'll have the White House," says Jim Conover (Stu Richel), a political strategist. Three other people are seated around his desk: a young newspaper reporter, Spike MacManus (Kellis Carroll); Spike's publisher, Kay Thorndyke (Wendy Weber Eaton); and an unsuspecting rich businessman, Grant Matthews (Kelly Cooper). Jim has decided that Grant should be the next Republican candidate for president.

There are a few small complications. Grant is having an affair with Kay. His wife, Mary (Sandy Cockrell, who also directed), is having a dalliance with a military man. But the real problem turns out to be that Grant enjoys telling the truth and thinks that a speech is a success if he gets a dozen glowing telegrams from local citizens and one outraged wire from a labor leader. Jim and Kay try to explain their relative significance.

But Mary is on her husband's side. Although the Matthewses have been largely estranged, Mary has been brought back into the picture, trotting along on a multicity tour, to make Grant look like a happy family man. She begins falling in love with him again, when she sees him "cockeyed drunk with sincerity."

The first clue that this is a play from another era — other than the suspenders and the old-fashioned telephones — is how many characters there are. J City has double-cast in a few cases (Mr. Carroll, for example, plays a senator as well as the reporter), but at times there are 9 or 10 actors onstage at the same time.

The second clue is the constant drinking. When Mary decides to have a Sazerac or four at an important dinner party, she does indeed say some things she shouldn't have, but no one suggests an intervention. In the 1940s, that's just what people did when they drank a lot. And in this play everybody seems to drink a lot.

The party takes place at Grant and Mary's apartment in New York. The program doesn't credit a scenic designer, but whoever assembled the set did a clever job. The same tasteful sofas, desks and chairs serve as the furnishings in the Matthews apartment, Jim's Washington home and an elegant hotel suite in Detroit.

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The costumes, also uncredited, are well done, too. Both the men and the women look successful and pulled together in a midcentury way, although Ms. Cockrell's ensemble in the last act looks suspiciously contemporary, and surely no one wore five-inch stilettos right after World War II.

You probably won't see this production of "State of the Union" transferring to Broadway anytime soon, but J City, still a very young theater company, has done an admirable job.

"State of the Union," by Howard Lindsay and Russel Crouse, is at J City Theater, St. Michael's Church, 252 Ninth Street, Jersey City, through Nov. 13. Information: (800) 838-3006 or jcity.org.

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