

A Messy View Of Political 'Madness' In Sleeping Weazel's Feverish Satire

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By [Jeremy D. Goodwin](#)



Veronica Anastasio Wiseman and Stephanie Burlington Daniels, foreground. Steven Barkhimer and James Barton, projected onscreen. (Courtesy David Marshall/Sleeping Weazel)

There's a Phil Ochs [quote](#) I come back to a lot: "ah but in such an ugly time the true protest is beauty." That is, defiant beauty that demonstrates an alternative to the darkness of the day.

Another form of protest is to breathe in the prevailing ugliness and belch back a sort of funhouse-mirror depiction of it, magnifying its worst elements into a living portrait that's both exaggeratedly monstrous and unsettlingly familiar.

Playwright Charlotte Meehan and director Robbie McCauley choose that second route with “Cleanliness, Godliness, and Madness: A User’s Guide.”

The world premiere play, a deliberately messy combination of political satire, love story and fever dream, is a message-in-a-bottle from Donald Trump’s America — or rather, such a message as imagined from the blue states. It seems intended to exorcise demons, not change minds, and as such is essentially a pep rally for the like-minded. But I suspect that’s a feature, not a bug.



Veronica Anastasio Wiseman (foreground) and Stephanie Burlington Daniels (projected onscreen) in “Cleanliness, Godliness, and Madness: A User’s Guide” at Boston Center for the Arts. (Courtesy David Marshall/Sleeping Weazel)

Meehan, the artistic director of Sleeping Weazel (which [performs the play](#) at Boston Center for the Arts’ Black Box Theatre through Sept. 24), wrote it with her central actresses in mind. It’s indeed a delight to watch the interplay between Stephanie Burlington Daniels (Mary) and Veronica Anastasio Wiseman (Grace), playing two women who start a morals movement as both an escape from their caveman-like husbands and an excuse to pursue the same-sex attraction that underlies their relationship. Their overzealousness plays as dark comedy.

Mary and Grace live in an unspecified American locality, a place where husbands rule their wives like couch-potato kings and the neighborhood is relieved when a white adult beats up a black child. The boorish and brutal husbands in question — Dick (Steven Barkhimer) and Harry (James Barton) — are seen and heard only in video projections, appearing like Big Brother to demand dinner or specify when their wives are “allowed” to visit the basement or leave the house. In a disconcerting touch, the men’s words are sometimes disconnected from their facial movements, as if they are broadcasting their commands directly into their wives’ (and the audience’s) brains. (It does seem a technical misfire, though, that many of the video exchanges are cut in a manner that slows the rhythm of conversations in unnatural ways; maybe a bit more tech preparation was needed for this key feature of the production.)

McCauley and her design team, including Sara Ossana (scenic), Mathew Provost (video), Colin McNamee (lighting), Mirta Tocci (costumes) and Oliver Seagle (sound), create a purposely disorienting world that nevertheless flows smoothly from scene to scene. It’s a fitting staging for action that plays as both real and uncanny, of-the-moment and neither here nor there.



(L-R) Veronica Anastasio Wiseman and Stephanie Burlington Daniels.
(Courtesy David Marshall/Sleeping Weazel)

For all the social commentary here, the two women’s relationship is the crucial center of dramatic gravity. Wiseman plays the slightly older mentor

figure, who advises Daniels' trusting neophyte in both the proper performance of morality and the times that call for private exceptions to their religious code. The women's motives are always overlapping and diverging in different ways, and it's not clear they share the same objectives in their verboten relationship. Wiseman's Grace is cool and confident, gliding around the stage and smoothing out her outfit when she feels pangs cued by her manipulative behavior. It's to the production's credit that the audience sympathizes with her despite her more villainous traits. Daniels' Mary is open-hearted and vulnerable, and though she plays some moments for exaggerated laughs, Daniels creates a believable figure for whom we wish the best.

This is important, because Meehan is aiming to make a comment on contemporary America with character types (just look at their names) and outsized situations that feel like they take place in an alternate reality — plus a visit from an otherworldly figure (played by director McCauley) that's treated casually, in magic-realist fashion. The script specifies that the action happens in fall 2016, but the show feels like both a dark warning and an unpleasant memory.



(L-R) Stephanie Burlington Daniels and Veronica Anastasio Wiseman.
(Courtesy David Marshall/Sleeping Weazel)

Grace, obsessed with gun rights and disdainful of gays while secretly pursuing a lesbian relationship, seems like a cartoon version of a hypocritical, religious conservative. But the current Republican nominee for the presidency has been described unflatteringly by voices on the right as a liberal's cartoon version of a conservative. When comedy and tragedy fuse, what is left to satire?

In such an ugly time, Meehan seems to say, lets luxuriate in that ugliness to better understand it. In a program note (and an unpublished essay about the rise of Trump), Meehan describes being raised by enthusiastic John Birch Society members she calls religious zealots. So this play's depiction of a suffocatingly regressive America is an earnest cri de coeur, not merely a cynical gallery of straw men.

Still, there's no effort at persuasion here, just a depiction of various kinds of ugliness — meant to be taken under protest.

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