

## WEEKEND PICK

# A 21st century political satire comes to Gloucester Stage

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Gloucester Stage's production of "The Totalitarians" sends shock waves through the audience as it tells the story of how a campaign manager, desperate to make a mark on the political scene and further her career, brings a less-than-worthy candidate to the forefront of an election.

That ripple is only one part of the story in a dark comedy that evokes laughter and some "I can't believe they did that on stage" moments in this New England premiere of "The Totalitarians" by Peter Sinn Nachtrieb. While this is not the first play by Nachtrieb that Jeff Zinn has directed, the timing seemed good as the country faces its own crazy election season. This play already has been staged this summer in California and Texas.

"I really enjoyed the script. I just laughed out loud," said Zinn, the Gloucester Stage managing director. "It's sort of a no-brainer because of the whole election cycle we are in."

The playwright spins a provocative tale of a brewing oligarchic takeover in the state of Nebraska with an over-the-top personality in the candidacy of Penelope Easter, otherwise known as Penny. She is brought to the top of the election game after her troubled campaign manager pens a script that strikes a chord with Nebraska voters.

Of course, there is the knowledge of a shady financial backer, and in the end it is not clear what each character truly believes.

Don't judge the work based on the first act -- the second act ends with an unexpected Batman-like "wham."

"For me, the play is connected to what we're all living through now, but at enough of a remove to be entertaining and even flat out funny," Zinn said. "Audiences will recognize a little bit of Sarah Palin and Michelle Bachmann, and even the Koch brothers. It may prompt them to think a little bit as it reminds us all of the inherent absurdity of politics."

Three women who saw the show this week left commenting that it was a thought-provoking piece, which fits the mission of Gloucester Stage to bring such works to the local stage.

Some of the actors are not new to Gloucester Stage with the return of Amanda Collins as the campaign manager and Lewis D. Wheeler as her physician husband. Newcomers to Gloucester Stage are Breean Julian, who plays Penny, and Alex Portenko, who is the character trying to stop Penny's ascent.

"I knew I needed an actress who could make big choices and could justify them in the role of Penny, and Breean was the one who really nailed it. I would say this woman is absolutely out of her head and gave her liberty to go wild with it. Breean went right there," Zinn said.

But there is more to being just "over-the-top," he said.

"There always has to be a strong visceral core. It has to come from somewhere, the desperation of the character," Zinn continued. "In this case, she is insecure. Everyone thinks she is stupid and she is really driven. All these human driving forces make it more than just a cartoon. Frankly, all the characters are driven by very human impulses."

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