

HI DRAMA

EVA HEINEMANN AND TONY MARINELLI REVIEW

THIS IS GOVERNMENT

New Light Theater Project & Pendragon Theatre

Written by Nina Kissinger

Directed by Sarah Norris

Movement Direction: Yasmyn Sumiyoshi

Scenic Design: Daniel Allen †

Costume Design: Krista Grevas †

Lighting Design: Hayley Garcia Parnell †

Sound Design: Jennie Gorn †

Props Design: Peggy Orman

Production Stage Manager: Kelly Mccarty †\*

Assistant Stage Manager: Cat Copeland †

Company Manager: Bethany Fitch

Casting: Gama Valle

CAST:

Vann Dukes: Kaz

Charles Hsu: Tip

Kleo Mitrokostas: Emi

Susan Lynskey: Stevie

EVA HEINEMANN:

Nina Kissinger's THIS IS GOVERNMENT shows the inner workings of a Congressman's staff office.

Kaz (Vann Dukes) is in charge of interns Tip (Charles Hsu) and Emi (Kleo Mitrokostas) who are childhood friends from the same home town. They work for Congressman Bochman who was the first to introduce an extensive Healthcare Bill, but now seems opposed to it.

In the midst of this political upheaval, an unknown individual takes it into their hands to threaten to blow up the Congressman's office unless he finally talks to them.

Kaz is by the rules, Emi is easily triggered, and Tip just wants to be a famous performer.

How will the three of them emerge from this?

This play makes you think of the machinations of Government and the people it affects in a whole new light.

NOTE: I have finally figured out why I love the New Light Theater Project so much. They pick the best plays no matter the genre. You know when you go to a New Light production you are going to get a quality play with a strong plot and expertly cast and directed.

MAJOR HAPPY FACE

TONY MARINELLI:

In the American experiment known as representative democracy, it is generally understood—or at least mythologized—that the citizen elects a legislator to embody their will in the chambers of Congress. A noble ideal: one voice echoed at scale, magnified by civic structure. In practice, however, this is mostly theater—though without the benefit of rehearsals or dramaturgy. Ring up Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez’s office today, and unless your name appears next to a PAC on an FEC filing, you’re more likely to be greeted by a voicemail prompt than by your “representative.” And if a human does answer, they are probably an overeducated 24-year-old making less than your dogwalker.

Such is the setting of Nina Kissinger’s *This Is Government*, a politically-inflected chamber play now receiving a taut, ninety-minute staging at 59E59 Theaters in a co-production from Pendragon Theatre and New Light Theater Project. The title, which reads at first glance like the sort of blunt, utilitarian phrase one might find engraved on a bronze plaque outside a post office, belies the prickly wit and creeping dread within. What begins in the register of sitcom gradually bends toward the tragic—though it never quite discards its laugh track instincts.

The scene is a modest office in the Cannon House Office Building—the kind of drably carpeted warren that serves as the underlit engine room of our supposed republic. Here, we meet Tip (Charles Hsu) and Emi (Kleo Mitrocostas), two unpaid—sorry, “stipended”—interns in the service of Representative James Bochman, a backbencher from California who we never actually see. Presiding over their flailing efforts is Kaz (Vann Dukes), a staffer with just enough institutional memory and bruised idealism to know that nothing in this building works as advertised, including the air conditioning.

If the dynamics sound familiar—underpaid idealists holding the fort while their ostensible superior plays politics elsewhere—it’s because they are. One could just as easily be describing the internal workings of any not-for-profit with a serious mission: a charismatic leader at the top, poorly compensated labor at the bottom, and the vague promise of impact glimmering faintly on the horizon. That Kissinger captures this bureaucratic symbiosis so deftly is one of the production’s triumphs.

But then comes the inciting incident: a lockdown triggered by a person claiming to have a bomb.

What ensues is not quite a thriller, not quite a farce, but rather a discomfiting hybrid: *The Office* meets *Fail Safe*, with shades of *Network* and a sprinkle of *Parks and Rec*. It is, against all odds, gripping.

As Tip, Charles Hsu delivers a performance calibrated for broad comedy—limp wrists, sharp tongue, bottomless supply of nervous energy. The characterization leans heavily on stereotype, but Hsu finds within the caricature a flicker of desperation, of thwarted ambition masked by wit. His would-be comedy career—“experimental extemporaneous revelationing”—might be DOA, but his flair for drama is undeniable.

Kleo Mitrokostas's Emi is a minor miracle of studied neuroticism: the kind of white liberal who proudly voted for Warren, owns a set of Le Creuset, and still manages to cry during Hamilton. She is a dream hoarder in the Richard Reeves sense—a product of elite upbringing who believes herself to be the underdog. Mitrokostas plays her panic attacks as both endearing and cringe-inducing, which is to say, truthfully.

Vann Dukes, as Kaz, provides the necessary ballast. A nonbinary Black staffer from a poorer, redder part of the district, they carry themselves with the wariness of someone who has learned, through hard experience, not to speak until it matters. Dukes' performance is grounded, contained, even enigmatic—exactly the right counterbalance to the interns' caffeine-addled energy.

Director Sarah Norris wisely lets the performances breathe, maintaining a buoyant pace while never losing track of the deeper tensions at play.

Daniel Allen's scenic design—complete with authentically dreadful carpeting and the sort of institutional window that exists solely to let hope out—feels lived-in and grimly accurate. The mismatched floor-to-almost-ceiling filing cabinets practically define dreary.

Hayley Garcia Parnell's lighting design subtly tracks the progression from daylight to government-issue fluorescence, while Jennie Gorn's soundscape features a slyly ironic use of game-show music, reminding us that governance is increasingly indistinguishable from spectacle.

But the heart—and perhaps the conscience—of *This Is Government* is Susan Lynskey's Stevie who appears as she delivers her phone messages. In less capable hands, the role could have easily tipped into caricature: the kooky constituent with too much time and too little medication. Instead, Lynskey renders her with a devastating realism. Dressed in cargo pants and an old floral tee, her hair pulled back into a no-nonsense ponytail, she looks like any woman you might see in a Target parking lot or a town hall meeting. And that's precisely the point. Stevie is not a sensationalized extremist; she is a discarded citizen, left behind by a system that promised to listen and then refused to pick up the phone.

The great achievement of Kissinger's play is not in its comedy—though there are laughs—nor in its pacing, which is brisk and mostly sure-footed. No, what lingers is the way *This Is Government* captures the slow corrosion of civic faith.

Yes, the play has its creaky moments—some jokes overstay their welcome, some character lines feel sketched rather than shaded. But beneath the quips and anxieties lies something much more serious: an urgent inquiry into what happens when the mechanisms of democratic feedback falter entirely. It is not enough to say “this is government.” The real question is: for whom?

Indeed, *This Is Government* finds its most resonant and haunting register not in its moments of farce or tension, but in its coda.

Here, playwright Kissinger—no longer content to merely satirize the bureaucratic absurdities of congressional life—shifts subtly but decisively into a more elegiac mode,

sketching in only a few minutes the contours of a moral and existential crisis facing an entire cohort of young Americans.

These are, after all, the children of liberal democracy's twilight—raised on a steady diet of civics-class optimism and earnest mantras about service, truth, and institutional integrity, only to emerge into adulthood amid a landscape riddled with cynicism, procedural rot, and the ominous drumbeat of authoritarian flirtation.

They are strivers, yes, but ambivalent ones—haunted by the suspicion that ambition may itself be a form of complicity. Kissinger gives them no easy answers, only the aching weight of the question: if not us, then who? And perhaps more chillingly—if the system is broken, can it be repaired at all?

Kissinger is aiming not merely to entertain, but to provoke reflection, and perhaps even to warn. One suspects that her real subject is not governance per se, but the tragicomedy of belief in a time that has little use for it. She is, as they say, onto something. Let us hope she continues to pursue it.

MAJOR HAPPY FACE

CLOSES SEPTEMBER 28TH

PERFORMANCE SCHEDULE:

Tuesday through Saturday at 7:15pm

Saturday and Sunday at 2:15pm

59E59 Theaters

Theater B,

59 East 59th Street

<https://www.59e59.org/>

Photos by Burdette Parks