

Review: Absurdist, hilarious "Polish Joke" pokes fun at stereotypes, ethnic identity

By CHRIS SILK

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What does a Polish bride get on her wedding night that's long and hard?

Wait for it.

Wait for it.

...

A NEW LAST NAME!

Ah, Polack jokes. Right up there with blonde jokes and "Yo Mama" jokes in the great pantheon of comedy club stereotypes. But where did the stereotypes come from? And why the hell is Jaisu (pronounced "YAH-shoo) bound for Warsaw in a handbasket?

Playwright David Ives explores his own Polish-American background in the absurdist comedy "Polish Joke." Advised at the tender age of nine by his Uncle Roman to "pick a new ethnicity, Jaisu decides to reinvent himself as an Irishman and wipe out his Polish past. The show illustrates - in a humorous and exaggerated style - that ethnicity is much, much more than just an identity.

Be warned. "Polish Joke" teaches its lesson by attacking stereotypes (not just Polack jokes) with ferocity. Easily offended? Stay home. Nor does Ives follow a traditional "setup, punchline, laugh" structure in his comedy. Other than Jaisu, four actors play 17 characters in a variety of absurd (and yes, hilarious) scenes that show the arc toward self-realization. And it is crazy, fascinating and oftentimes head-shaking.

"Polish Joke" represents Shawn Holiday's first directorial effort at the Lab Theater. He played McMurphy in "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest" earlier this season. Working with a non-existent budget and amateurs of varying levels of experience, he fashions a fairly solid, entertaining experience. The show sings on the stage in a way it frankly doesn't on the page - and that's an enormous credit to Holiday and his cast.

The absurdist evening starts from the moment audiences walk through the door. Patrons are greeted by a sea of chairs ... facing the door and away from the stage. Holiday wants to establish the "this ain't what you expect" theme from the first moments. In that, he is successful.

I'm on record though as not being a fan of gimmicks. If you're going to discombobulate the audience to this degree - and leave them hanging until curtain time - then actually go for the joke. Don't just pop out for the pre-show announcement and then force patrons to get up, turn their chairs around and re-settle themselves. You've irritated the audience for nothing - and forced them to be focused on getting comfortable once again instead of paying attention to the play's crucial opening scene.

"Polish Joke" succeeds despite major issues in its staging, nearly all a function of the Lab Theater's micro-budget operation. The set Holiday uses is mostly repurposed pieces from the theater's previous show, "In the Next Room." A minimal lighting grid (and the lack of footlights) can't illuminate characters when they're performing in alcoves below the stage. The play's entire 20-minute opening sequence had faces in shadow.

I certainly understand the economic reality of producing community theater on a tiny (or zero) budget, but less is often more. At the very least, an empty stage and the barest essentials of furniture might have served the piece (and paying audiences) better. As the Lab Theater works toward refurbishing its permanent home, it must continue to address these issues at the current space.

Holiday gets some great performances out of his cast, starting with relative newcomer Adam Kazmarz as I-don't-wanna-be-a-Pole Jaisu. If the performance has the raw newness of an actor on stage for just his second show, Holiday uses that bubbly excitement. Kazmarz delivers a lively, likable portrait of a young man just bouncing through life.

His "aw shucks" attitude comes off perfect for the "what the hell" antics of the piece - which include dream sequences, belligerent flower shop salesgirls and the ghost of Thaddeus Kosciuszko.

What Kazmarz does well is communicate his character's excitement, bafflement and determination. The show's opening segment, featuring Kazmarz and a brilliant Michael McNally as weathered, beaten Uncle Roman sets up the entire night.

McNally lays out the history of Poland, Polack jokes and stereotypes - and tells a young Jaisu to become Irish. Kazmarz, playing a nine-year-old boy in the scene, sits, grins and spins his yo-yo as he absorbs the wisdom. While the subpar lighting reduces the impact, the pair deliver a compelling portrait of old imparting knowledge to the young - and it gives the show heart.

From Uncle Roman's driveway, Jaisu departs on a rather bizarre journey. Gabriela Elvir brings yuppified hiring manager Portia Benjamin Franklin Hamilton Yale to vivid life. Clad in a plum blouse, she plays the naive Jaisu like a fiddle before yanking the secret of his Polish ancestry out of him even as he pretends to be Irish. Holiday's staging - having Elvir practically attack Kazmarz like a stripper - gives the scene snap that it doesn't have on the page.

The bizarre bazaar continues through another dozen scenes. A sparkling Tera Nicole

Miller offers Jaisu (now going by John) a dead bouquet when he walks into her flower shop. He keeps disappearing (because he's trying to erase his identity). Thus, the ditzy shopgirl only serves "real" customers (like Rob Green's over-the-top, screaming, angry garbageman) who pays with a fish!

Green, Miller and Elvir also make up a trio of trippy Celtic travel agents in one of the show's most hilarious segments. With names like Flanagan, O'Flanagan and MacFlanagan, the skit devolves into such a dizzy "top o' the mornin'" circle that the actors can barely hold it together on stage.

Miller staggers into the scene wearing an enormous carrot-orange afro-puff wig and clutching a bottle of whiskey, Elvir whirls in a kilt and Tam o'Shanter. Green leads the pack in a lilting Irish drawl, spouting a green valley full of Irish phrases and drawling out "aye," "ye," "nivver" and "feck" like he was born in Killarney. Look for Green and Miller again in a brilliantly crafted doctor's office sequence when Jaisu is diagnosed as "Polish."

Where "Polish Joke" shines, it is the moments where Holiday ramps up the "tilt your head to the side and stare" absurdity. The comedy is there - in spades - and the opening night audience laughed constantly. Vignettes with a little more subtlety, meant to anchor the play's message, don't always feel on point.

Do you have this feeling of profound and utter futility? Then you're probably Polish. At least that's what "Polish Joke" claims. The play serves of a stereotype-busting evening about finding, reclaiming and being true to your identity - no matter what it is. Look for Adam Kazmarz as happy-go-lucky Jaisu and the supporting cast in a variety of wacky, laugh-out-loud roles.

I'm Scottish. Don't eat haggis. Not in line for the throne. Email me, csilk@naplesnews.com, find me on Twitter at [@napleschris](https://twitter.com/napleschris) or read my [Stage Door theater blog](#). You can also sign up to [receive the Stage Door blog via email](#).

