

Brave and funny, 'The White Chip' takes on addiction

By KATHLEEN PALMER
Staff Writer

With "The White Chip" – playing at Merrimack Repertory Theatre in Lowell, Mass., through Jan. 31 – Sean Daniels, MRT's creative director, takes on his personal journey from a Mormon childhood, through a successful career in theater, as he destroys family relationships, his professional reputation, and his love interests with a spiraling-out-of-control alcohol addiction.

No, no. It's hilarious. Really.

Billed as "a darkly funny take on the science of addiction, recovery, and the importance of finding just the right Jews at just the right time," Daniels' autobiographical endeavor is fearless, fast-paced and very funny. A cast of three strong actors – Benjamin Evett, Isabel Keating and Jeffrey Binder representing Daniels – bang through many characters via simple costume-change devices (a scarf here, a jacket there) to relive Daniels' life and struggles. The rapid-fire changes and monologues by these actors are impressive, as is the brave, witty script by Daniels.

From his first beer at age 13 – "It tasted like metal, regret and water" – to being sent to Mormon "reboot camp" for some hardcore "emotional manipulation," to jumping off roofs at college, the first-person narrator shows how his early life of carefree youth drinking slowly went off the rails insidiously, until he was finding all kinds of tricks to day-drink as an adult.

The "Pros and Cons whiteboard" is a great device to pop up the results of his addiction; either spinning things like that jump into "Pro: No longer afraid of heights" or

IF YOU GO

Merrimack Repertory Theatre presents 'The White Chip' by Sean Daniels

WHEN: Through Jan. 31. See website for dates and times.

WHERE: Nancy L. Donohue Theater, 50 E. Merrimack St., Lowell, Mass.

COST: \$20-\$60.

TICKETS/INFORMATION: 1-978-654-4678, box_office@mrt.org or online at www.mrt.org.

dropping some hard truths: "Con: People leave you." There's just enough cool projection effects happening on the sparse set to get the point across, without distracting.

Daniels puts it all out there – all the justifications, all the accommodations, all the compartmentalizations ("I'll only have my relapses out of town!"). The character of Sean continuously repeats in his denial "Does that sound like I'm screwing it up?" as he, inevitably, screws it all up.

And incredibly, he makes it laugh-out-loud funny. I scribbled notes furiously in the dark, trying to capture the many witty lines ("Now the country-music portion of my life begins"). We watch Daniels' onstage proxy – a brilliant turn by actor Jeffrey Binder, with his lovable demeanor and whip-fast perfect delivery; his breakdown manic rant toward the end is incredible – as he tries and fails and tries and fails; as he reaches sobriety for 70 days, three times, only to crash and burn; that brutal summer he lost four beings in his life in one manner or another.

The show also manages to make funny his tak-

From left, Isabel Keating, Benjamin Evett and Jeffrey Binder star in Merrimack Repertory Theatre's presentation of "The White Chip."

Photo courtesy of MEGHAN MOORE

ing and tossing each AA new-beginning-sobriety white chip into a bucket of accumulating failures by playing the classic Benny Hill theme song "Yakety Sax" behind it. And within the frantic-paced, nonstop dialogue and constant movement of the three actors, only a few brilliant moments of complete silence are put to perfect use. No one in the audience made a sound, either.

I don't want to give away my favorite aspect of the show, which occurs when he finally goes to rehab. After trying one philosophy, it is suggested perhaps he'd have better luck if he went to "get sober with the Jews." It is positively hilarious what happens there, and the epiphanies he has are such a relief to him.

I love that MRT created a White Chip Shot campaign, where local people in addiction recovery received free tickets to a special performance Jan. 19. There's also a free childcare performance at 4 p.m. this Saturday. MRT continues to find new ways to reach new audiences.

Big kudos to Sean Daniels for putting it all out there. "I'll be honest. I'm terrified for you to watch this," he said in his playwright's note. "But I'm working to not let shame dictate any of the choices I make."

We're glad.

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