



Adirondack Arts & Entertainment

A Review of Pendragon Theatre's *This is Government*

by Tim Rowland

Writing timely political plays about the current demolition derby in Washington is tricky stuff; no matter how bad a playwright imagines things, reality is likely to have deteriorated exponentially by the time the script hits the director's inbox.

So it's with a disorienting sense of relief that we learn the antagonist in Nina Kissinger's *This is Government* is only carrying a bomb. Whew, that could have been so much worse.

This is Government, a fast-moving comedy thriller, makes a brief introductory run at Pendragon in Saranac Lake this weekend before opening Off-Broadway at 59E59 Theaters in New York City.

The action takes place in the congressional offices of Rep. Bockman, a Joe Manchin-style, left leaning moderate representing a conservative district who must disguise his liberal proclivities to keep his job. This is distressing to the high-strung intern Emi (Kleo Mitrokostas), an idealist who has yet to stumble upon any ideals that suit her fancy.

It is less so to her fellow intern Tip (Charles Hsu) whose Gumbyesque flexibility — physically, intellectually and moralistically — are well suited in an America where the lines between politics and performance art have been blurred.

The third member of the office is the staffer Kaz (Vann Dukes), who loves the work, but remains embedded in Washington because the DEI-hostile hicks back in the district are not embracing of their type.

Kissinger and director Sarah Norris capture the congressional-office id quite well, specifically the general goofiness of the young aides, who are still willing to work for famously low pay, and whose honest desire to change the world has yet to be crushed like a bug by Congress' unfailing failing.

From the opening curtain it becomes impossible to take your eyes off Hsu, for fear of missing any nuance of an overall electrifying performance that leaves us comforted that there are certain things in life AI will never be able to replicate.

Mitrokostas grows as the play moves forward, and the tension becomes a sandbox for her escalating anxiety, which years of therapy has apparently not cured. We all know an Emi, whose special blend of insecurity and unfiltered verbosity have us walking on eggshells for fear something's going to blow.

The steadying force in the office is Kaz, an unglamorous role in this shrieking TikTok world of ours, but one Dukes manages well as the relatable adult in the room.

Together, the three become known as the "Phone People" to Stevie (Susan Lynskey), a dissatisfied and borderline psychotic resident of Bockman's California district, who years prior began habitually calling the office in hopes of speaking to the congressman. He is never there, of course, never available to listen, and his absence becomes a timely metaphor for today's representatives who refuse to hold public meetings in their districts for fear of being held accountable for their actions.

Finally, Stevie, who has become obsessed with the fate of a health care bill to which Bockman holds the deciding vote, decides that the only way to get her representative's attention is to assemble a bomb and park it outside his office. The irony of course, is that, as the House office building is locked down, it's her beloved Phone People who are at risk, as the target of her threatened violence has been whisked to safety.

Stevie becomes the heartbeat of the play, appearing spectrally at the side of the stage to embody past voicemails that the Phone People are frantically re-playing in order to learn what makes the bomb-wielding Stevie, er, tick. Lynskey's Stevie is a disquieting gem, never raising her voice, her face drawn into equal parts grimace and smile.

We never learn Stevie's politics, but we do learn that jumping to conclusions about her as a person are dangerous and fraught. Certainly that happens to the Phone People, all of whom approach the end of the play with outlooks that have been considerably altered.

So too does the audience learn that the Phone People are, hopefully, us — still capable of caring and intent on making a difference in the worst of all possible times.

This is Government, while plenty funny, is also a caustic commentary on the growing divide between the leaders and the people of what used to be our democracy, and the cynical wedge being driven between neighbors who, if politics are factored out of the equation, are more similar than we might think.

The set of *This is Government* is a Congressional anachronism: Towering filing cabinets out of the 1960s, corded phones and bulky, shin-barking computer towers. We leave the play vaguely desirous of going back to that old-school cocoon. And maybe we could if we'd only listen.

Pendragon's This is Government runs through Aug. 30. For more information and tickets, visit pendragontheatre.org/