

# REVIEW: RIVERSIDE'S 'COFFEE AND HOPE' IS POTENT THEATER

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By Rob Cline

As the audience enters Riverside Theatre for “Coffee and Hope” — written by Riverside’s resident artist and production manager Ron Clark and directed by Kevin Harris — Clark is already on stage. In the waiting room of a women’s cancer center, his character Frank gets a cup of coffee, flips through some magazines, listens to the piped-in music and people watches as other folks wander in and out. The device establishes the rhythms of the liminal space that waiting rooms become, both physically and psychologically, and brings the audience into that space as well. What happens there is emotionally wrenching and quietly affirming.

Clark was moved to create “Coffee and Hope” after his wife, Riverside artistic director Jody Hovland, battled breast cancer, and the play honors the experiences of men who, like Clark, serve as caregivers. As the play reveals, these men are often themselves in need of care.

After interviewing more than 20 men, Clark created composite characters who tell their stories to the audience and to each other. The script explores a range of reactions and coping mechanisms, touching on issues of faith, anger, love and sex, celebration and sorrow. Four actors — Tim Budd, John Watkins, David Q. Combs and Brian Bentz — each play three characters, all of whom interact with Frank.

Though several of the stories told directly to the audience are powerful, indeed, the play’s best scene finds five characters swapping laughs and stories. In that moment and throughout the play, the cast is aware of the spaces where silence communicates as much as words, and those moments are some of the play’s most affecting.

The production is well-paced and the shifts in emotion are well-handled as the play moves toward its most cathartic moments. That’s a credit to both Clark’s script and Harris’s direction because the subject matter could easily overwhelm attempts at shadings and lead to a flat, if overwrought, tone. Instead, “Coffee and Hope” is richly layered.

Though each of the actors asked to switch from character to character does a more than credible job, it is arguable that the play would be better served by a full cast. Not only would this allow the audience to better differentiate the characters and their individual stories, it would create opportunities for additional onstage combinations that might be interesting to explore. For example, Budd's priest and counselor come to mind as two characters who might have striking things to say to one another.

The play includes three musical numbers that seem somewhat out of place. Though all three — one extolling the virtues of coffee, one a touching love song and one about growing up to be an anesthesiologist — are clever and well-performed (and scenic designer Tony Zabka earns kudos for his ingenious method of secreting a piano on stage), they do little to augment the play. Instead, it feels as though they are remainders from a possible musical version of the show that failed to come to fruition.

Similarly, a screened portion of the stage that occasionally features shadowy scenes from the men's stories is more of a distraction than an amplification. The same could be said of the jet-like noise that conveys the characters from the waiting room into the space where they speak directly to the audience. Those moments are sufficiently defined by Jason Lester's lighting design.

In the end, "Coffee and Hope" doesn't need songs, dimly lighted background scenes or intrusive sound effects. Clark has mined his own experience and the experiences of the men he interviewed to create potent theater. Crafted with care and love, the stories themselves — brought to life by this excellent cast — provide all the comedy and drama the production needs.

*"Coffee and Hope" continues at Riverside Theatre through November 9.*