

With Friends Like These...

by Doug Strassler

On the Night of Anthony's 30th Birthday Party, Again reviewed March 13,
2009

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Once you've earned the right to drive, vote, and drink, the thrill of milestone birthdays is pretty much gone. What's left, except to bemoan having gotten on in years and to wax nostalgic for the past? As a result, birthday parties tend to be breeding grounds for disaster. Perhaps Anthony, the title character of *On the Night of Anthony's 30th Birthday Party...Again*, should have remembered that before lying that he was a year younger than his true age of 31.

Anthony may be the title character of the L. Pontius play currently being seen at Manhattan Theatre Source, but he isn't the most prominent one. In fact, the rest of the ensemble share more stage time than does Andrew Glaszek, who plays the birthday boy.

Pontius' play follows the farce framework made popular by such playwrights as Alan Ayckbourn (*Absurd Person Singular*) and Michael Frayn (*Noises Off*), albeit with slightly flimsier results. Charlie (Tom Everett Russell) is throwing a surprise birthday fete for his partner, Anthony, in the couple's new condominium. He has invited their close-knit circle of friends to the event, all of whom have shown up. But while only some have arrived bearing gifts, all have brought along some baggage.

The main plot revolves around Ben (Tyler Hollinger) a free spirit who has decided to run off with his friend Kate (Synge Maher) despite having dated Jenny (Kate Grande) for the last year and a half. Meanwhile, Otis (Carsey Walker Jr.) uses the occasion to nurse his own love jones for Kate as well as a hankering for marijuana. Kate has invited her boss, Max (Brandon Potter), to set her up with single friend Beth (Stephanie Lovell), though he really also harbors a secret crush on his employee. Due to a misunderstanding on Max's part, he thought that this dress-up event required a costume, and has arrived in full bunny rabbit regalia.

As Anthony devolves into a one-track play that might as well be called *Everybody Loves Kate*, director Megan Demarest does her best to distract with the usual door-slamming and eavesdropping that befits such works of farce. Unfortunately, Jason Bolen's set consists solely of the guest bedroom, so instead of one door opening right when another

closes, characters have to enter and exit the same bedroom door. The pacing is currently not fluid enough to keep the show running at the appropriate level. There are too many stops and starts, and Anthony's rhythms are far too choppy.

Aside from Jenny and Max, all of these characters are supposed to be best friends since college. However, Pontius' determination to have various characters explain aspects of their shared history and personality that other would have already known makes them feel like they know each other far less than they should. Occasionally, it even forces the characters to appear dumbed-down. The skilled Hollinger makes for a charismatic ladies' man, but not even he can sell Ben's forgetting his engagement to Jenny. How could something like that completely slip one's mind?

Pontius also fails to mine the characters' history with one another. If they know secrets about one another, the occasion of Anthony's party would be an ideal time to unleash them, but this opportunity for drama is lost. Is there a reason, for instance, that Beth hasn't dated in three years? Or for Otis' sudden crush on Kate? Or why Ben and Kate were never an official couple? Saying that everyone's long friendship made Jenny feel excluded lacks a true payoff.

Perhaps the most bothersome aspect of Anthony is the tonal shift between its two acts. Just when one thinks Anthony will remain an off-stage device, the character emerges. Glaszek does an impressive job in the second act, balancing an extended monologue with continued costume and prop bits, but it forces Pontius' action to come to a halt when it should continue rising to a logical climax. He literally forces the majority of his characters to stand still for the better part of the act. And it is hard to grasp why Anthony is so upset. Did he have a bad day? Is he apprehensive about aging? Does he harbor a secret of his own? Or is he really just irked by the various characters running into the guest bedroom? That reason doesn't seem weighty enough for the tirade that ensues.

Only some of Demarest's actors are able to hold their own. Russell is always a hoot as the anal party host. He should have had more to do; Charlie is merely a caricature. If he had been less reactive, he could have been a more bodied character. Lovell is terrific. Her sense of timing and delivery remain spot-on, even when Beth's scenes begin to feel a tad repetitive. Grande shows a lot of promise, though Pontius doesn't seem to have much respect for the put-upon character. I wasn't even sure who to root for in the Ben-Jenny-Kate triangle. Jenny seems too good for both of them. So, in fact, does Max. Hopefully Anthony will opt to go out of town for his next birthday.

ON THE NIGHT OF ANTHONY'S 30TH BIRTHDAY PARTY, AGAIN

Manhattan Theater Source

Category: Comedy

Written by: L. Pontius

Directed by: Megan Demarest

Produced by: Whirled Peas

Opened: March 11, 2009

Closed: March 28, 2009
Running Time: 1 hr., 55 min.

Theater: Manhattan Theater Source
Address: 177 MacDougal St
New York, NY 10011

BOX OFFICE

Tickets: \$18.00

None

CREDITS

Creative Team

Written by: L. Pontius

Directed by: Megan Demarest

Produced by: Megan Demarest and Montserrat Mendez

Light Designer: Drew Vanderburg

Sound Designer: Ien DeNio

Set Designer: Jason Bolen

Costume Designer: Carly Hirschberg

Cast

Andrew Glaszek as Anthony

Kate grande as Jenny

Tyler Hollinger as Ben

Stephanie Lovell as Beth

Synge Maher as Kate

Brandon Potter as Max

Tom Everett Russell as Charlie

Carsey Walker Jr. as Otis

Crew

Stage Manager: Danielle Newell

Assistant Stage Manager: Catherine Amore, Emily Kaczmarek, Marianna Polyak