

Review: Haley dials up great performance in 'Talk Radio'

By CHRIS SILK

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FORT MYERS — J. Mitchell Haley's lights out performance keeps audiences from turning the dial on the Laboratory Theater of Florida's production of "Talk Radio," even if the show itself has a bit of static.

"Talk Radio," from Eric Bogosian, spends one night locked in the DJ booth with Cleveland talk radio host Barry Champlain (Haley) and his crew. "Night Talk" verges on national syndication and slick producer (an electric Steven Pawlowski) feels pressure from major sponsors over the content. Barry sucks down a bottle of whiskey and a pack of cigarettes during each night's show and snorts coke during commercial breaks. Like his callers, he's lonely and not entirely sane.

Creative choices in set design, sound and lighting weaken the show, but Haley lifts "Talk Radio" beyond its "look at me, I'm yelling for attention" stance. Haley rages, roars, screams, thunders and caresses his microphone with sensual glee during the dash through Ohio's airwaves. He toys with his callers as if a predator stalking prey; a brutal, teasing segment with a grieving woman is at once hilarious and horrifying. He's matched by Cash DeCuir as a wide-eyed, wired and empty-headed weirdo with a mop of hair and nothing between his ears.

"Talk Radio," written when the first President Bush was still Vice-President, remains relevant even if its obscenity-laden script doesn't shock the way it did in 1987. Barry's antics don't seem out of place next to the everyday crudity coming from Howard Stern, Bill O'Reilly, Don Imus, Glen Beck and the current crop of blathering babblers. "Talk Radio" questions whether a fat, lazy and stupid America even has the will to solve its own problems - or let Barry Champlain solve them for it. Do we? Or will we just order a cup of tea?

Director Elizabeth D'Onofrio drives the show like a runaway train toward its ranting conclusion; the no-intermission 100-minute sprint doesn't always run at top speed. There's little physical movement, with Haley and assistant Stu (a laid-back Don Manley) seated for nearly the entire show; visual clues like lighting that can lower or lift the mood are absent. "Talk Radio" feels inert, its hyper verbiage and Haley's scream-and-leap energy at odds with the placid tempo.

Co-workers - fetch-and-carry girl Linda (a tough-as-nails Mahli Howard) and Manley - have their perches on opposite sides of the stage. Silly byplay - funny faces, grimaces and assorted tomfoolery - often misses because the eye stays on the DJ desk in the center of the stage. The cast doesn't use the rest of the space; a more compact design may have focused the energy and offer a better springboard for their jocularly. Dingy green chairs, battered furniture and circa-1987 phones lend authenticity; the whiff of sad realness can be a bit depressing too.

Six actors create the cast of bored callers who populate the after-hours radio circuits. After a few outings, they tend to bleed together in an unfortunate mishmash of affected accents. Some characters stand out, including a woman afraid of a garbage disposal who recounts her terror with a singsongy glee and a determined anti-nuclear weapons activist. Commercials for the radio show play in the background of some scenes - but it's never obvious if they're part of the scene or just random noise.

"Talk Radio" makes pointed and still valid comments on the current dissolute state of American culture even though it was written more than two decades ago. Staging and directorial issues weaken the production but Haley's shouting, ranting, screaming performance rattles the walls of the Sidney and Berne Davis Art Center.

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