

The Groundling

by [Collin McConnell](#) · February 19, 2015



I walk downstairs to the Axis Theater and it's not a theater at all. It's a garage. Not a set built to look like a garage. Not an over-cluttered garage, or an impeccably clean garage. Just a garage.

It's disorienting. A little unnerving. And very impressive.

The lights dim along with a gentle, but ominous, droning swell, and then begins the seemingly light-hearted comedy about a Long Island contractor trying to put on a play for his family.

Bob and Karen Malone's marriage is on the rocks, and they do nothing to hide it. So Bob, inspired by a production of *Love's Labor's Lost*, takes upon himself to write and produce a play in his garage for his family (perhaps, to save his marriage), hiring Dodd and Victoria (the bumblingly arrogant director and struggling female lead from the Shakespeare production), and casting local teens (and his deaf father-in-law).

But as the play progresses, the question of why Bob and Karen's marriage is on the rocks nags more and more. All they do is yell at each other, yet the play-within-the-play is filled with all the sweetness and love of when they first met -- until a final, heart-wrenching twist puts everything into place.

Sometimes, it's really good to be reminded why we do theater.

Chad Yarborough's beautifully simple set begins the play on the exact right note: real and human. The explosive first scene between Bob (captured with all the love, eagerness, and utter heartbreak by Robert Ierardi) and Karen (Eva Kaminsky) tosses us easily into the world of aggression that is their daily life. As the other cast of characters arrive, the incredibly sharp line is drawn: there is the world of theater (fun and bubbly, and filled with love and people like Dodd), and there is the world of Bob and Karen's marriage. The tension draws out through the entire play, until it finally snaps with realization. There are, of course, a few lovely moments where that line slackens -- just a bit -- to really see inside these people: Victoria, the young actress brought in from the city, shares an awkward late night in the garage with Karen, where Kaminsky does the incredible by allowing a tenderness to seep out, briefly sharing the depth of Karen that is so well masked by her show of aggression (and

Kendall Rileigh as Victoria finds a wonderful balance of sharp derision for being duped into all this and genuine concern for doing justice to the play... and for the people she finds herself surrounded by). David Zeffren's lighting design lives mostly in the natural world, though occasionally finds a way to illuminate harsher truths through soft or lingering suggestions.

The Groundling grew on me. I was put off in a strange way by how natural the set was, and the play at first felt as though it were an artificial look at an amateur theater maker (and a gentle mock of the dreams of so many New York City independent theater artists). But Marc Palmieri's script is much more than that, and I had the rare joy of allowing the play convince me to go along on a journey myself. And, ultimately, it was a worthy journey, digging deep into our need for expression, for community, for love, and for art.