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Funny, smart 'North Plan' will keep you on edge

By **CHRIS JONES** and **CHRIS JONES**
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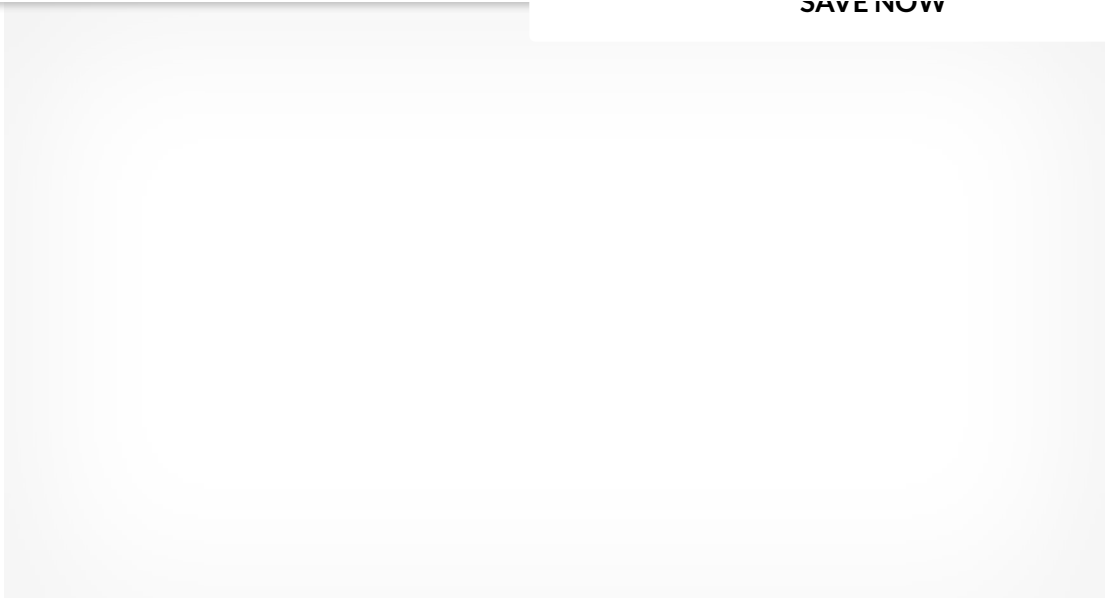
Just as you cannot put Baby in a corner, you cannot put Kate Buddeke in a cage. Not without expecting some fireworks.

But a wire lockup is where Buddeke, playing a petty Missouri criminal, resides during the first act of director Kimberly Senior's zesty new production of "The North Plan." Jason Wells' black, dystopian and darkly entertaining comedy imagines a world in which the Department of Homeland Security has assumed all

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"The North Plan" has some Pinteresque menace and Mametian insouciance but is very much in the more playful Martin McDonagh or Tracy Letts school of playwriting. It was first seen in 2010 as part of the Steppenwolf Theatre's First Look Repertory of New Work, also under Senior's direction.

This new production at Theater Wit, which uses some of the same cast, is a significant improvement, partly because the second act has more menace and tension but also because Buddeke's live-wire, on-the-edge performance adds a certain out-of-control element to events that Wells clearly intends to escalate into a kind of pervasive panic. You never quite know (and it feels like the rest of the cast

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Not any more. The caustic tone is much better sustained now.

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Other entertaining performances include a clever turn from a deliciously exasperated Kevin Stark, who plays a decent-minded government bureaucrat, pathetically ill-equipped to deal with these new masters, and from Will Zahn, whose study of small-town police chief is very shrewd. Wells clearly intends that character to represent the fundamental decency of small-town Americans, whose slow-burn conservatism might irritate urban liberals but who can be relied upon to do the right thing by the Constitution when the chips are down. Avoiding cliches, Zahn fills that out very nicely. The DHS agents (played by Tom Hickey and Brian King) are more your standard-issue dramatic thugs with pretentious language, but

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In its most interesting sections, "The North Plan" ponders how a Washington-sourced panic would impact a small town. On occasion, it even has you wondering what you would or would not do if America suddenly took a terrifying turn and, as is the case in this play, ended up with the U.S. Army and Marines in a stare-down from opposite ends of Pennsylvania Avenue.

Overall, such moments of political potency take a back seat to the theatrical entertainment — "The North Plan," staged on Jack Magaw's detailed set, goes only so deep. And Senior has not solved one of the main problems that emerged in the first production: How to sustain in very close theatrical quarters a long second-act sequence in which someone is always holding someone else at gunpoint. There are sections here where you know that Buddeke's Tanya could be disarmed, just as you know that her stealthy movements would be visible to the characters from whom she supposedly is hiding. Such contrivances pull you out of the show, and those scenes need a lot more work.

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Still, "The North Plan" is fun, smart, involving and just disturbing enough for a Saturday night on the town.

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When: Through April 1

Where: Theater Wit, 1229 W. Belmont Ave.

Running time: 1 hour, 50 minutes

Tickets: \$18-\$36 at 773-975-8150 or **theaterwit.org**

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