

Review: 'Duck' by Tom Block at the Highwood Theatre

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What difference does 1% make? In the case of *Duck*, a new play by Tom Block currently playing at the Highland Theatre in Silver Spring, 1% can be the difference between life and death.

Duck follows the internal struggle of Duck, a CIA statistician who earned that eponymous nickname because, under periods of great stress, he loses the ability to speak and instead quacks at people like a duck.



Duck (Shaquille Stewart) in the cage of his mind being harassed by his brother Crumb (James Nelson).
Photo courtesy of Tom Block.

Over the course of the 60-minute one act, Duck wrestles with his involvement in two deaths. The first death – of a suspected Middle Eastern terrorist – was carried out after Duck determined the man was 60% likely to carry out an act of violence against the United States. (Duck later admits that he rounded up from 59%, not knowing that 60% was the threshold the CIA used to approve executions.) The second death is that of his father, who, in the early stages of Alzheimer's, had asked Duck to sign a right-to-die document that allowed the hospital to euthanize him when his disease became severe.

As we watch Duck unravel under the burden of his guilt, the central tenet of the play is clear: To what extent does Duck believe himself complicit in these deaths even though he did not carry them out with his own hands? And how can he come to terms with his role in these deaths?

The show is successfully framed through a series of flashbacks, during which Duck's brother Crumb (James Nelson) acts as a sort of "ghost of Christmas past," allowing Duck to revisit key moments in his past that have brought him to this point of crisis. Shaquille Stewart is convincing as the unhinged Duck as he tries to reconcile the fact that some consider him a hero and others a villain.

Clare Shaffer's crisp and well-paced direction keep the play moving seamlessly and the lighting (E-Hui Woo) and sound design (Drew Moberley) add depth and intrigue to the show.

Playwright Tom Block, a visual artist who uses his own paintings to adorn the intimate black-box spaces where his shows take place, has written over 50 theatrical works. He is also the producer of the New York International Human Rights Art Festival. (In an interesting side note, Block is currently involved in a much-publicized dispute with Cardinal Timothy Dolan over the inclusion of two plays with gay and transgender themes in this year's [festival](#).)



Duck (Shaquille Stewart) in therapy with the Army Psychologist (Amanda Spellman). Photo courtesy of Tom Block.

Duck raises interesting questions of universal relatability: We may think we are prepared to follow orders, but are we able to live with the consequences of those decisions?

Running Time: One hour with no intermission.

Duck plays through October 29th at Highwood Theatre – 914 Silver Spring Avenue, in Silver Spring, MD. Tickets can be purchased at the box office or [online](#).

Creative Team:

Playwright: Tom Block

Director: Clare Shaffer

Assistant Director: Nerissa Hart

Lighting Designer: E-Hui Woo

Sound Designer: Drew Moberley

Stage Manager: Rebecca Talisman

Starring:

Duck: Shaquille Stewart

Crumb: James Nelson

Abbie/Dr. Susan Friedman (Duck's Mother)/Tess: Jasmine Jones

Frates/Priest/Dr. Marvin Friedman (Duck's Father): Craig Houk

Dr. Weigert/Dutch Doctor of Euthanasia/Commanding Officer: Amanda Spellman

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