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THEATER

Clyde's shows audiences your past doesn't define you

Review: Lynn Nottage's play at Syracuse Stage is a story of grit, determination and passion.

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Courtesy of Michael Davis/Syracuse Stage

Lauren Steele, Pascal Arquimedes, Setareki Wainiqolo and Orion Bradshaw in the Syracuse Stage's "Clyde's."

Clyde's weaves together good music, good food, and good company to tell a story of second chances as rehabilitation and perseverance come together.

The **Syracuse Stage production** takes place in a drive-by sandwich shop just off an intersection, owned and operated by Clyde (Andrea Vernae), a woman who was formerly incarcerated. Her employees are made up of four formerly incarcerated individuals like herself, who are seeking employment as part of their parole.

Rafael (Pascal Arquimedes) is a self-proclaimed sous chef, who refuses to be defined by his struggles with addiction. Arquimedes' portrayal of this character is heart-wrenching — a perfect gentleman who works to prove to his coworker Letitia that she deserves someone who'll always put her first. Leticia (Lauren Steele) is a vibrant single mother of a special needs child, working to put food on the table and make sure her daughter has access to all the medical care she needs. Jason (Orion Bradshaw) is the new hire, whose goal is to keep his head down while he gets back

on his feet. His relationship with his coworkers begins on rough footing, as he has to learn how to approach tough situations and breathe through his hardships. This cast's apparent chemistry allows them to fully capture both the trials and triumphs of these characters.

At the core of this story is the reinforcement that the main characters are more than even their worst mistakes. Clyde is caught in a cycle of misbelief in both herself and her employees, underestimating their collective ability to succeed. The audience first sees her unwillingness to change in the opening sequence of the play, when she and her employee Montrellous (Setareki Wainiqolo) are sitting in the kitchen discussing the potential to take the small business to the next level. It's apparent Clyde has no interest in growing the restaurant, as seen by her refusal to even try the new culinary creations Montrellous has been working on.

Throughout the show, Clyde constantly threatens her employees with her power, reminding them they have no chance of being better than ex-criminals who make sandwiches. Conversely, Montrellous's character is a bright spot in the dark. He pushes her and the rest of the team to dare to be great, while always giving them a chance for redemption both in sandwich making and in life.



Courtesy of Michael Davis/Syracuse Stage

Lauren Steele and Andrea Vernae in the Syracuse Stage production of "Clyde's."

Clyde is representative of more than just a mean boss. She personifies the long-term impact the prison industrial complex can have on formerly incarcerated individuals. **As of 2021, Black Americans were imprisoned at five times the rate of their white counterparts.** In *Clyde's*, four out of the five members of this cast are Black individuals whose stories of misfortune lead them to incarceration. In this show, they are each seen working hard to overcome the system with great determination and access to minimal resources. Clyde is always just a window away, and the moment she hears her staff having a good time she interrupts and threatens a consequence. Her actions of force and surveillance impede the lives of the staff, and there's mistrust amongst each other that compromises their happiness, peace, and the routine of their day. It's only when they begin to stand up to her and lean on each other that they find true peace within themselves. "Let whatever you're feeling be part of this process, not an impediment," Montrellous says, reminding them to always acknowledge their feelings and rise above.

The writing in Nottage's piece suggests the importance that access to resources and community can have on a person's life. Through love and support, the characters are able to see through the weight of their past and recognize all they have to offer the world.

Syracuse Stage's production of *Clyde's* continues through Sunday.



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