



Humor, debate mix marvelously in thought- provoking 'Lifespan of a Fact' | Review



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As I was driving home from the theater, I had a heart-pounding encounter as a black Toyota Camry suddenly skidded across my lane, directly in front of me on the moonless night, and left me within a hair's breadth of a fiery crash as it collided with another vehicle.

Do you understand my truth of the situation — a near-accident severely frightened me? And if so, then does it matter if the moon was out or not? If the car was a Hyundai or a Camry? If there was no fire when it crashed?

This is the question at the heart of "The Lifespan of a Fact," making its Central Florida premiere with a production by The Ensemble Company at Penguin Point Productions: What good is an important emotional truth if it's built on inaccurate facts?

It's a subject that hits home among cries of "fake news" and the onslaught of sort-of true movies and TV shows that wiggle around inconvenient facts with the disclaimer "*Based on a true story*" or "*Inspired by real events.*"

It might be hard to believe that a play built on such a weighty concept can be funny, but "The Lifespan of a Fact" is just that. In the hands of The Ensemble Company, in fact, it's very funny.

Ryan Ball plays Jim, an intern at an unnamed literary magazine given a last-minute assignment to fact check an emotional essay by John, a prickly but brilliant writer who has a history of playing fast and loose with facts.

Editor Emily has pressure from all sides, including the uncomfortable reality that this essay could be the pinnacle of her career in an industry that is slowly dying.

In the Broadway production, "Harry Potter" star Daniel Radcliffe played Jim with puppy-dog enthusiasm. As directed by Tyler Adcock, Ball has a more dogged approach. He's so singularly focused, his unwillingness to back down becomes a source of natural humor.

And Ball winningly plays up his character's nerd factor; he reminds you of an earnest "Star Wars" fan who knows the precise name of Darth Vader's fifth lieutenant, who appeared for 15 seconds in one scene 40 years ago — and he can spell it correctly, too.

Jim (Ryan Ball) wants to make a good impression when Emily (Laura Cooper) gives him an important assignment in "The Lifespan of a Fact" from The Ensemble Company.

Interestingly, the play is drawn from a real-life situation so it's curious that Matthew MacDermid's writer character doesn't always seem completely real. Could he really be so clueless, as a professional writer, about why facts matter? But a committed MacDermid plays his patronizingly dismissive attitude to the hilt and displays fine comic timing.

Laura Cooper rounds out the trio as Emily the editor, the least developed of the characters. Cooper, though, has a shrewd grasp on an editor's driving motivations: One eye on the clock and one eye on wrangling the egos she is surrounded by.

Adcock might have gotten a little more shading from each actor to flesh out the one-note personalities assigned by playwrights Jeremy Kareken, David Murrell and Gordon Farrell. But the laughs — and the ethical probing — come through loud and clear as the trio debates across Bonnie Sprung's suitably nondescript bachelor-pad set.

The play doesn't settle its own internal question, though as a journalist of twenty-plus years I come down definitely on the side of facts matter — even in literary magazines. As Emily says, nonfiction writing of any kind is a business based on trust. And if readers can't believe in the small details, how will they have confidence in the big ones?

'The Lifespan of a Fact'

Length: 80 minutes, no intermission