

Review: '#hero' at The Chain Theatre (NYC)

By Chris McKittrick on February 28, 2013

Unless it is during a festival, many indie theatre companies tend to stay away from original work, at least for their first few productions. Unfortunately the reality is that often it's hard enough to draw audiences with work they are familiar with, so trying to get them to try something new can sometimes be an impossible task. So the fact that **taxdeductible theatre** is staging an original play, *#hero*, as its first full-length play is a major accomplishment in itself. The fact that it's so intelligently reflective of our media-driven society is another.

It seems counterproductive, but our cynical, social-media driven world likes tearing heroes down even more than celebrating them, so seconds after someone does something considered heroic that person is immediately under a microscope in order to find something negative. That is the idea behind *#hero*, in which New York City police officer Norman Burrows (**Robert Larkin**) becomes a social media sensation after saving the life of a woman who faints on the subway tracks. He is initially hesitant to be recognized for his good deed, so his wife Grace (**Wendy Bagger**) arranges an appearance on a national morning talk show with a publicist, Cory (**Bryn Boice**). Norman is soon absorbed into pop culture as a celebrity, and the nature of that status changes not only his relationship with Grace but also everything that made him such a hero in the first place causing the gap between his public "Officer Burrows" persona and troubled private self to grow.

Though Norman is the character who undergoes the most change (and Larkin does a convincing job transitioning from reserved police officer to self-absorbed celebrity), the real standout of the production is Bagger as Grace. Bagger demonstrates the quiet strength of a woman whose life has dramatically changed all because she got what she wished for — recognition for her husband — to a degree she never anticipated. Her performance could easily involve her flying off the handle to show her emotional state,



but Bagger and director **Robert W. McMaster** are smart enough to know that this isn't the most effective way to play her character. By the end of the play she has sneaked into the role of lead character so subtly that it comes as a welcome and clever surprise.

The production makes excellent use of The Chain's black box stage and media capabilities. Norman's amusing work as a pitchman in various commercials are broadcast from overhead projectors, as are some segments of the play that are "filmed" in a live feed, something that Projection Designer **Darwin Gilmore** ought to receive significant credit for. The stage is also a unique setup — the audience sits facing the center from opposite sides of the room, as if one was watching a parade go by. Considering the content of the play, this gives even more of the feeling that we are constantly observing these media figures today.

The story for *#hero* grew out of **taxdeductible theatre's** *The Dare Project*, a series of 10 minute plays. Therefore the play is "authored" by the group itself (though the script was written by the group's artistic director, **Scott Casper**). This can be seen in the vignette nature of the scenes because the action in the play takes place over one full year. This is an effective way to demonstrate Norman's "descent" into celebrity, yet it also leaves some unresolved questions. For example, the exact nature of the relationship between Norman and Cory is never completely defined, and I wondered how much Cory was taken-in by Norman's status as a hero as that relationship developed. On the other hand, scenes that are normally overdone work very well. In one instance, Norman has an encounter with a seemingly clairvoyant prostitute played by **Sara Antkowiak** (who, as Woman #1, is a virtual all-star as she takes on many female roles in the play with different visual appearances). I figure I have seen enough movies and plays in which an accented prostitute shares some deep knowledge with her troubled client, but Antkowiak is so good in the role and the scene plays out uniquely that it becomes something new altogether.

So, the biggest compliment I can give the cast and crew of *#hero* is that the approximately 110 minute play is just too short to fully tackle the full potential of these characters. I felt like I could've spent a lot more time watching Norman's rise to stardom and the implications it held for his relationships. Then again, if I really want to see more of that story all I need to do is switch on the news and observe the latest rise and fall of a "hero." Since one of the objectives of theatre is to comment on human nature and society, it seems almost too perfect that taxdeductible has latched onto such a timely theme with such great success.

#hero runs March 1st – 3rd and 6th – 9th at The Chain Theatre in the Long Island City section of Queens, New York City. For information, visit [taxdeductible theatre](http://taxdeductibletheatre.com). Photo by Nicholas Alexiy Moran.