

Theater review: Two cops square off in gritty 'A Steady Rain' at None Too Fragile

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By Kerry Clawson

Beacon Journal arts writer



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Tony Zanoni (left) and Chris Richards in None Too Fragile's production of "A Steady Rain."
(Brian Kenneth Armour)

Drama: *A Steady Rain*

Where: None Too Fragile, 1835 Merriman Road, Akron

When: Continuing through Nov. 11, 8 p.m. Thursdays-Saturdays, additional "Sea's Night" for special-needs patrons and caregivers, 4 p.m. Nov. 11

Onstage: Chris Richards, Tony Zanoni

Offstage: Robert Ellis, director/set design; Brian Armour, stage manager/sound; Marcus Dana, lighting; Frank Comunale, costumes

Cost: \$25

Information: 330-962-5547 or www.nonetoofragile.com

In the testosterone-filled play *A Steady Rain*, crooked cop Denny takes his partner and family on a collision course as his obsessive actions make his life and career spin out of control.

The 2009 Broadway play, now playing at None Too Fragile in Akron's Merriman Valley, is a two-man show that needs only two chairs, interrogation lights and some wild storytelling to bring to life a gritty, sordid story of two policemen who have been longtime best friends.

Playwright Keith Huff has created a story of escalating violence and immorality that manages to shock us each step of the way as the crisis grows. Just when we think things couldn't get more out of control, they do.

Blowhard Denny and his partner, Joey, best friends since kindergarten, both have their flaws. One struggles with alcoholism; the other appears clueless about his own racism. But while Equity actor Chris Richards' Joey continually tries to do the right thing, Tony Zanoni's Denny is the most dangerous kind of cop — one who says he's above the law.

Joey's so used to Denny's dirty activities, he has turned the other way and covered for his friend for years. Denny's warped sense of morality includes his dalliance with a prostitute.

Bob Ellis, who has acted in previous *None Too Fragile* hits, directs this cop drama that is so intense at every turn, it left some audience members repeatedly gasping Friday on opening night.

Zanoni, in his *None Too Fragile* debut, fumbled through a handful of his lines opening night. As Denny, he didn't come across as sharp or as precise as Richards' Joey.

Zanoni also seems older than Richards (also debuting at *None Too Fragile*), even though their characters are supposed to be the same age. Nevertheless, Richards and Zanoni generally play off each other well in this work that alternates between separate monologues looking back and present-moment dialogues.

In Zanoni's hands, Denny's relentless pursuit of pimp Walter and his teen brother seems to be done for completely selfish, egotistical reasons, not in the name of protecting or avenging his family, as he says. Denny is so wrapped up in his own warped sense of self-righteousness, he comes off as an absentee husband and father who's really largely indifferent to his family's agony.

Richards, a 30-something, classically trained actor who normally looks like the boy next door, has transformed his natural look and demeanor as Joey. The skillful actor creates a tough-guy attitude with the set of his jaw, a hardened look to his face, spiked hair and a Chicago accent.

At the same time, Richards brings a vulnerability to Joey, a recovering alcoholic who has fallen in love with Denny's wife and family. It's all part of an incredibly heavy story penned by Huff, who has so skillfully written about the dark underbelly of mankind in *House of Cards* and *Mad Men*.

As Denny's dirty activities escalate, he ends up incriminating his partner in a scandal involving a Vietnamese boy and a cannibalistic killer, reminiscent of serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer's story.

Both cops exist to varying degrees in a moral gray area. But Denny seems to be completely blind to his own corruption until he reaches a breaking point and begs Joey for help. Folks will have to see the play, *None Too Fragile's* last of the season, to see how that turns out.

Arts writer Kerry Clawson may be reached at 330-996-3527 or kclawson@thebeaconjournal.com. Like her on Facebook at <http://www.facebook.com/kclawsonabj> or follow her on Twitter @KerryClawsonABJ.