

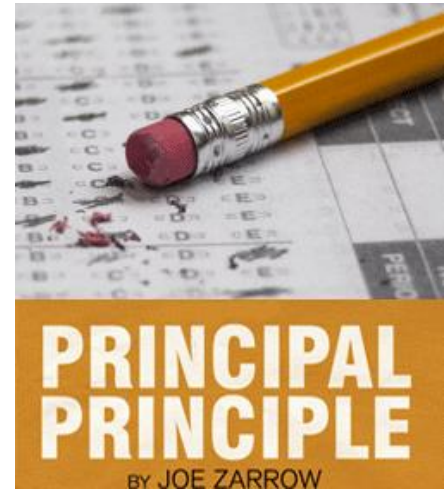


**PRINCIPAL
PRINCIPLE**
BY JOE ZARROW

jzarrow@gmail.com
joezarrow.com
(773) 541-0425

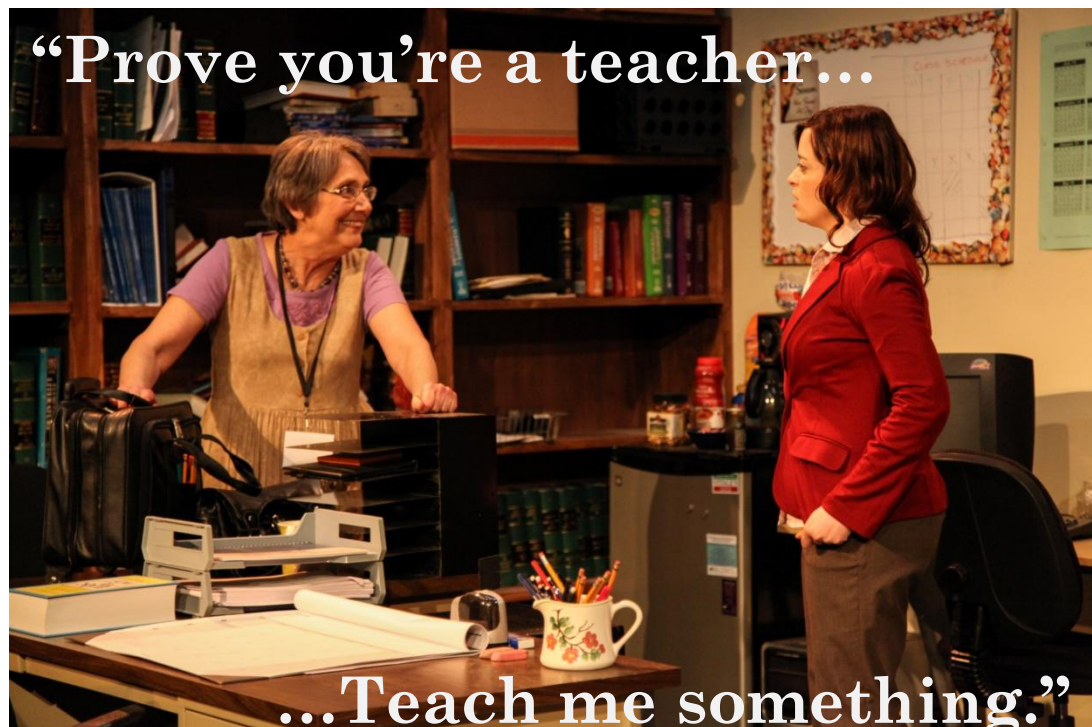
PRESS PACKET

Synopsis



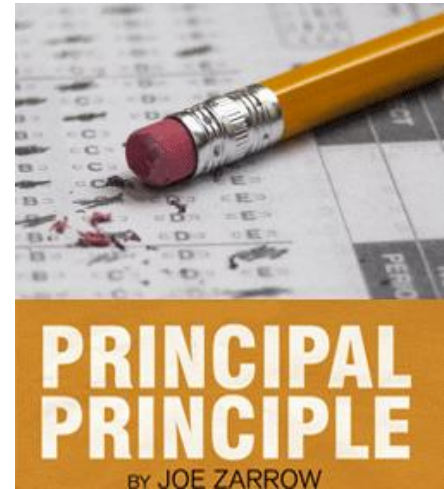
Armed with her dreams of changing the world and eight weeks of training, Kay quits her corporate job to teach English in a Chicago public high school. She arrives to find that the copy machine, the system, and the spirits of her fellow teachers are all broken. Or are they? A dark comedy of academic intrigue, *Principal Principle* takes a peek at the politics behind the closed doors of the teachers' lounge.

Principal Principle is based on playwright Joe Zarrow's personal experiences as a Chicago Public School teacher. Ultimately, *Principal Principle* explores the question: **how does a teacher succeed within a broken system?**



Photos by Emily Schwartz

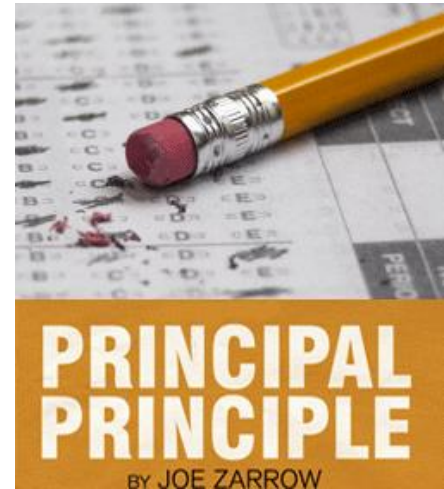
Author Bio



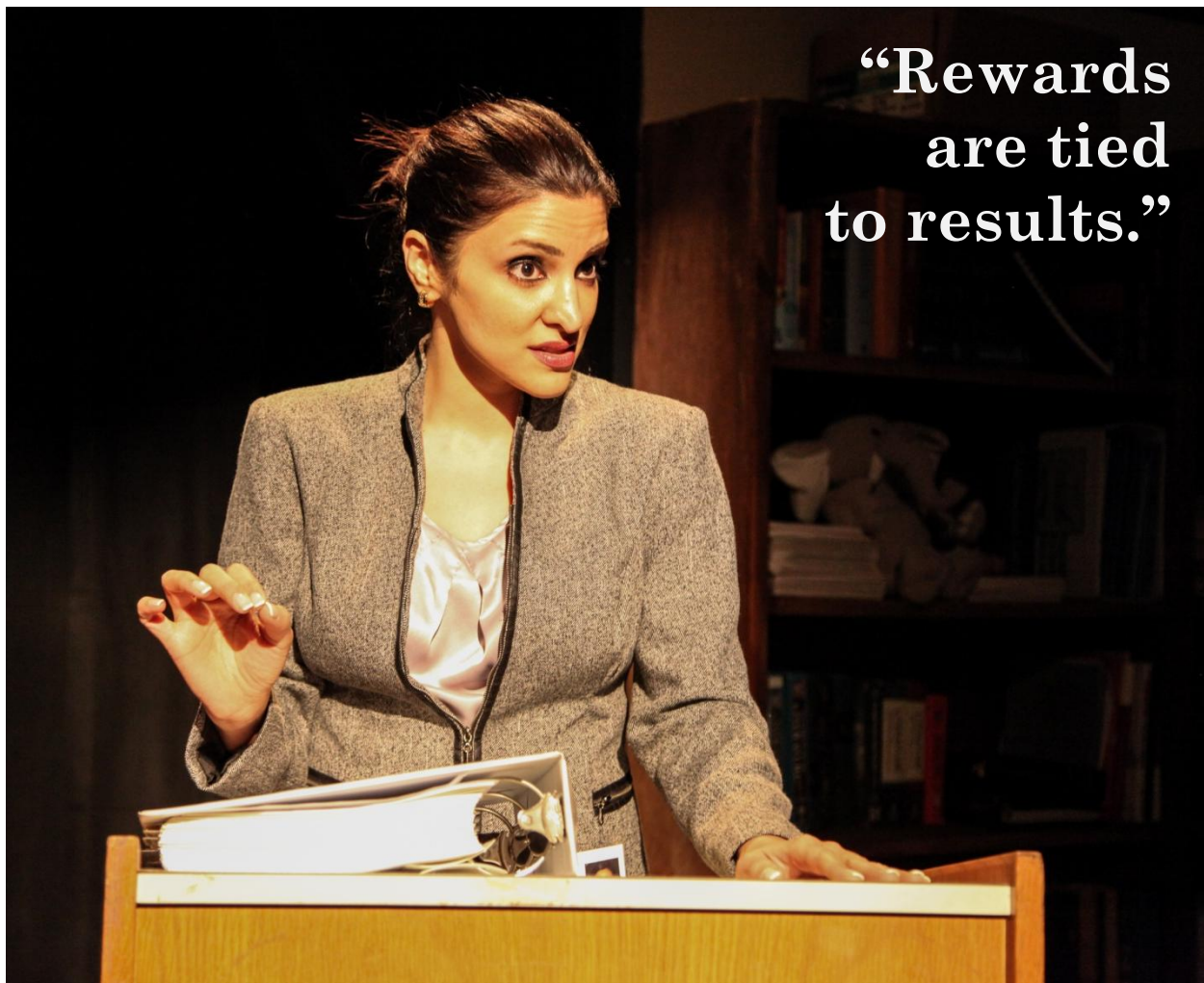
Joe Zarrow is a playwright and actor. Stage Left Theatre presented his gentrification farce *The Pigeons* in the Downstage Left reading series before it was produced by Walkabout, and his short play *Everythingaoke* recently premiered in LiveWire's VisionFest. Recent Chicago performances have included *Unwilling and Hostile Instruments*, *State & Madison: The Grid* in *The Chicago Landmark Project*, and *Lies & Liars* (Theatre Seven of Chicago), *Bulrusher* (Congo Square), *Arcadia* (New Leaf), *Amuse Bouche* (Pavement Group), *Bottom* in *Midsummer Night's Dream* (Sankofa), *Walk Two Moons* (Adventure Stage), and *200 Funny Things* (Collaboraction). Joe is an Artistic Associate of both Theatre Seven of Chicago and Pavement Group, and he serves as Pavement Group's Literary Director. Joe was a full-time English teacher for seven years, the last four of which were with Chicago Public Schools. Joe is a graduate of Brown University and NYU, and in 2014 Joe will attend the School at Steppenwolf.

joezarrow.com

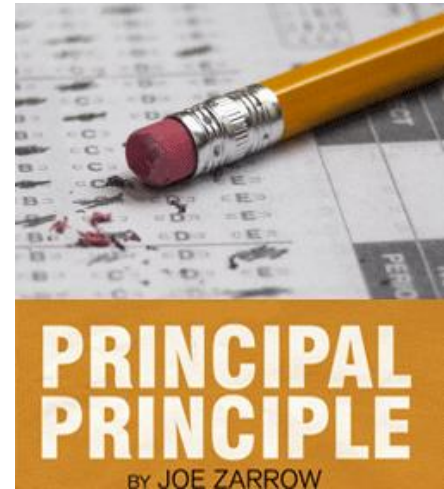
Development History



- Stage Left Theatre / Theatre Seven of Chicago - World Premiere – 2014
- Brown/Trinity Playwrights Rep - Developmental Production – 2012
- Acadiana Repertory Theatre New Works Festival - Reading – 2012
- Theatre Seven of Chicago - Reading – 2012



Selected Press



"There are very few excellent plays about public education. This is one."

- Chris Jones, *Chicago Tribune*

"★★★★ This clear-eyed glimpse into the teachers' lounge makes hearty laughs part of an all too relevant lesson plan."

- Kris Vire, *Time Out Chicago*

"Nails the issues with an ideal mix of stinging satire and abiding sadness. Highly recommended."

- Hedy Weiss, *Chicago Sun-Times*

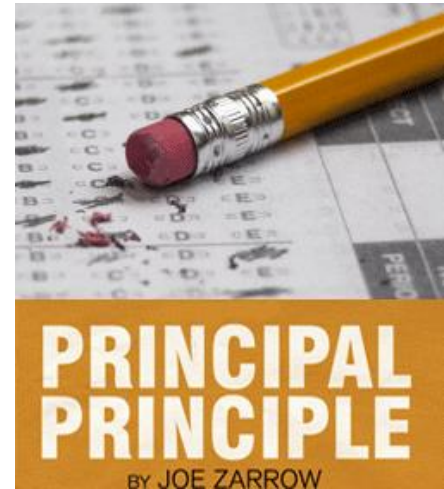
"Former public school teacher Joe Zarrow achieves something remarkable...an entertaining play about education that re-creates all the quirks and craziness of modern education without lapsing into either cynical hopelessness or Hollywood-style superteacher fantasies. His dialogue feels authentic, and his characters are flawed but likable human beings, not mouthpieces for this or that ideology."

- Jack Helbig, *Chicago Reader*

"Engaging, intelligent, and important. Highly recommended."

- Peter Thomas Ricci, *Chicago Theater Review*

Selected Audience Response



From goldstar.com user reviews

Excellent play. A very timely portrayal of standardized testing programs and inner-city teachers who are bound by them. **The kind of play that will get you thinking.** Highly, highly recommended.

Interesting and entertaining; a **MUST SEE** for any CPS teacher!



If you are or ever have been a teacher, you will **love** how realistic this is.

Well-written play. Well-developed characters. Intelligent, funny, amusing, and entertaining! **Highly recommended.**



PRINCIPAL PRINCIPLE

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In insightful 'Principal,' reading, writing and reality

THEATER REVIEW: "Principal Principle" by Stage Left at Theater Wit
★★★★½

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Chris Jones

3:09 p.m. CDT, May 5, 2014

Sometimes it takes a Krispy Kreme doughnut to crystallize a delicious paradox. So it goes in playwright Joe Zarrow's "Principal Principle," a searingly satirical yet very knowing behind-the-classroom look at the modus operandi at a fictional outpost of the Chicago Public Schools. At this school, nutritional guidelines do not permit those obsessively sweet treats to be sold in the school cafeteria. But they're being used as a fundraiser, which means the kids are chomping them down anyway.

That is just one of the absurdities at which the hard-working but wearied teachers in Zarrow's play must roll their eyes and deal. I did not ask to see identification at Stage Left Theatre's co-production with Theatre Seven on stage at Theater Wit last week, but I'd wager current CPS teachers were well-represented in the front few rows of the packed theater, given all the knowing laughs, the nodding of heads, the sighs of recognition, the audible "uh-huhs" and the like.

Those educators were supporting the work of one of their own — Zarrow, who is both a playwright and an actor around town, spent several years teaching English for CPS and his excellent play, which is set in the English teachers' lounge, is very much in the tradition of



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CHRIS JONES RECOMMENDS



Chicago Tribune reviews are on a scale of ★★★★★

- "Avenue Q" ★★★★★
Through June 29 at the Mercury Theater
- "Blue Man Group" ★★★★★
Open run at the Briar Street Theatre
- "Cock" ★★★
Through May 25 on the Profiles Main Stage
- "The Dance of Death" ★★★★★½
Through June 20 at Writers Theatre
- "Depraved New World" ★★★
Open run on the Second City Mainstage
- "How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying" ★★★
Through June 1 by Porchlight Music Theatre
- "If There Is I Haven't Found It Yet" ★★★★★½
Through May 24 at Steep Theatre Company
- "Les Miserables" ★★★
Through June 8 at Drury Lane Theatre
- "Million Dollar Quartet" ★★★★★½
Open run at the Apollo Theater
- "Mud Blue Sky" ★★★★★½
Through June 29 at A Red Orchid Theatre
- "Our Class" ★★★★★
Through May 11 by Remy Bumppo at the Greenhouse
- "Principal Principle" ★★★★★½
Through May 18 at Theater Wit
- "Seven Homeless Mammoths Wander New England" ★★★
Through May 17 at Theater Wit
- "The Sound of Music" ★★★★★½

the inside writing job. "Principal Principle" is a thinly veiled account of life inside a huge bureaucracy that talks the talk of accountability and assessment, but inevitably runs into trouble when such standardized procedures actually are applied to human beings who, as non-standardized human beings usually do, move to protect their own vulnerable flanks.

But the satire of the public-education machine is not what impressed me the most about this play. Rather, it's the way Zarrow manages to explore most of the dilemmas that surround big-city public education within a very workable and enjoyable dramatic structure (this is, such themes notwithstanding, a very funny show). Zarrow does not run from race, the silent third rail of much policy debate in this area. And he does not seem afraid of the consequence of political correctness, or even a discussion of how a lifetime of teaching — heck, a lifetime of doing most things — can breed a certain cynicism and resistance to the latest model of administrator, however capable that authority figure may be.

It's certainly true that Zarrow's teachers represent certain types, but they still are empathetic figures. Shelley (the excellent McKenzie Chinn) is a brilliant and experienced educator who has been slowly pushed to the breaking point by a standardized curriculum that does not recognize her expertise, but rather forces her to teach "Huckleberry Finn," with all of its racist implications, to a student body composed almost entirely of African-American kids. Indeed, the best scene in the play takes place between Chinn's Shelley and Cassy Sanders' Kay, a young, white, gung-ho Teach for America-type whom all the other teachers suspect (with considerable foundation) as being in these low-paying trenches merely for a year or so to make her more attractive on her law-school applications. She is thus interested in her relationship with her insecure boss, Principal Banerjee (Arya Daire) and therefore a ready informant as to what really goes on around the Xerox machine.

When it works. If the kids don't do well on their standardized tests, the money for a new cartridge likely will flow to higher-achieving departments.

One of the many questions this play (directed by Scott Bishop) asks is whether those young careerists are a plus or a minus in this world. In that fine scene, Sanders' seemingly progressive Kay launches into a well-meaning monologue on the timeless beauty of the moment when Huck Finn discovers racism, both within himself and the world at large. Surely, she argues, the students would appreciate that. Chinn's Shelley stares at her, marveling at what she does not see about the lives of her charges, but yet (and this mostly is thanks to the complexity of Chinn's acting) you glimpse both a flash of insecurity (perhaps this young woman is right) and a huge rush of weariness at the life-truth that many of our battles at the office must constantly be re-fought as the cast of characters change.

I'd say Bishop's production could go further with these actors and take more risks in exposing these teacher's quotidian battle scars. The tensions in the production do not always equal the tensions implicit in the script. But all of the acting (Barbara Roeder Harris and Elana Elyce complete the ensemble cast) is honest. And while Joe Schermoly's design is not a big-budget creation, it still allows you to clearly see the not-so-easy school beyond its not-so-friendly confines.

There are very few excellent plays about public education. This is one — a brand new one, by, for, about, and penned in Chicago. If you are part of the sacred profession that educates young minds, I think you'll see a little you know, plenty worth thinking about, and much about which you deeply feel.

cjones5@tribune.com

[Twitter@ChrisJonesTrib](https://twitter.com/ChrisJonesTrib)

When: Through May 18

Where: Theater Wit, 1229 W. Belmont Ave.

Running time: 2 hours, 5 minutes

Tickets: \$18-\$27 at 773-975-8150 or theaterwit.org

Through May 25 at the Civic Opera House

• **"Thinner Than Water"** ★★½

Through May 25 at Gift Theatre

• **"The Wizard of Oz"** ★★★

Through May 11 at the Cadillac Palace Theatre

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Principal Principle

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Photograph: Emily Schwartz

Barbara Roeder Harris and Cassy Sanders in Principal Principle at Stage Left Theatre and Theater Seven of Chicago

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Time Out says

Posted: Sat Apr 19 2014

Stage Left Theatre and Theatre Seven of Chicago at Theater Wit. By Joe Zarrow. Directed by Scott Bishop. With Cassy Sanders, McKenzie Chinn, Elana Elyce, Barbara Roeder Harris, Arya Daire. Running time: 2hrs; one intermission.

Theater review by Kris Vire

Kay is a young white woman who's jumped into teaching via an accelerated certification program for "career changers." When she arrives in the English Lit office for her first day of inservice at Chinua Achebe High School Academy somewhere on Chicago's South Side, one of her new colleagues, eyeing her with a mixture of suspicion and amusement, asks where she's from.

"Oh, I have a studio in Logan Square," Kay says. But her inquisitor didn't ask where she lives—the question was where she's from, and in Kay's

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case, the answer is Naperville.

In many depictions of inner-city educators, this early exchange would appear to mark Kay as one of two types: either the Michelle Pfeiffer White Lady Savior, here to help Achebe's underperforming students and burned-out teachers reignite their spark, or the naïve suburban mark, who shows up to school only to get schooled on the harsh truths of teaching.

Thankfully, playwright Joe Zarrow's bracing new comedy respects the system and the audience too much to take any such easy route. Zarrow, who was himself an English teacher for several years, including a four-year stint with Chicago Public Schools, populates the fictional Achebe English office with an array of types: Kay (Cassy Sanders), the newbie; Denise (Barbara Roeder Harris), the vet in her last year before retirement; Ola (Elana Elyce), the maybe too agreeable department head; and Shelley (McKenzie Chinn), the practical idealist.

All four chafe against the principal, Ms. Banerjee (Arya Daire), another corporate jumper who overindulges in jargon and sports metaphors and is seen as the face of whichever standardized, data-driven curriculum is being mandated from "downtown" this year.

But Zarrow's too smart to allow any of his characters to come across as purely heroic or nefarious. They deal with the headaches of broken budgets and broken copiers, unruly students and indifferent parents, and the pressures of outside politics and far-off educational consultants, all while trying to do right by their students even as they clash over methods.

The intraoffice debates over educational philosophy get fiery (and provoked some amens in the audience at the preview performance I attended), but to the great credit of the playwright, director Scott Bishop and a first-class cast, the arguments always feel rooted in character, and Zarrow coats them thick with gallows humor.

Chinn is particularly compelling in her righteous indignation that the "Cornell Review curriculum"—the latest cookie-cutter fad in a fat binder, which Banerjee refers to as "a franchise player"—compels her to teach *Huck Finn* to a student body that's 95 percent African-American. Sanders, too, skillfully conveys the way Kay's rulebook dependency wears away as she acclimates to every day's compromises.

It's the bond that develops between Shelley and Kay in their desire to make their lessons relevant to their kids' lives, even if it means putting their principles above their principal, that propels the first act, and it's the break between them that drives the conflict in the second. The moment of Kay's change of heart is a bit underwritten—one of the few components here that feels more like a storytelling necessity than an organic act. But this clear-eyed glimpse into the teachers' lounge makes hearty laughs part of an all too relevant lesson plan.

By Kris Vire

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School drama educates about how teachers are tested

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By HEDY WEISS Theater Critic April 20, 2014 3:10PM

Updated: April 21, 2014 2:20AM

The philosophical chaos and social dissension that now permeates every aspect of the Chicago Public School system is all too familiar. But there is something about seeing how this all plays out in the lives of the four quite different teachers and one administrator in Joe Zarrow's "Principal Principle" that nails the issues with an ideal mix of stinging satire and abiding sadness.

Zarrow's drama, now in its world premiere in a co-production of Stage Left Theatre and Theatre Seven Chicago, chronicles one year in the life of these five women, all of whom work in the fictional Chinua Achebe Academy High School (named after the Nigerian novelist). Located in a "middle-of-the-road" neighborhood on Chicago's South Side, the school's student body is 95 percent African-American.

The teachers are all part of the English faculty and include: Denise Corey (Barbara Roeder Harris), the white, "old school" veteran who has seen it all and is just a year from retirement; Ola Lawrence (Elana Elyce), the serious-minded, non-confrontational department chair, who is black; Shelley Woods (McKenzie Chinn), the smart, creative but racially obsessed teacher with a latter-day Angela Davis mindset, and Kay Josephs (Cassy Sanders), the hardworking "newbie" (white, and from Naperville), who left the business world, spent an intensive summer in the Inner-City Teaching Corps, and is determined to succeed.

The bane of the teachers' existence is Ms. Banerjee (Arya Daire), the chic, highly paid principal — a corporate-minded woman who spouts all the trendy jargon as she presents each of them with the Cornell Review, a massive looseleaf binder with the latest prescribed guidelines from "downtown." It supposedly holds the miracle cure that will improve test scores.

Each of the four teachers has her own set of personal and pedagogical "principles" and techniques for dealing with a situation that requires far more than "teaching to the test." And Zarrow, who spent seven years in the classroom, including four with the CPS, clearly knows the full roster of challenges, from the mundane (malfunctioning copy machines and a lack of materials that results in some buying office supplies with their own money), to the desperate, to the demoralizing (students' chronic absenteeism and the whole array of family and community problems, as well as teacher evaluations based largely on test scores that are not necessarily an indication of true learning).

Under Scott Bishop's crisp, fast-moving direction (on Joe Schermoly's picture-perfect set complete with old metal desks), the ideally cast actors give vivid portrayals. Providing blackly comic "interludes" are the announcements over the public address system (deftly voiced by TaRon Patton) — a litany of policies, procedures and orders that suggest a detention center more than a center of learning.

The saddest thing here is that these teachers are filled with the best intentions, and want to engage, challenge and prepare their kids for the real world. The real world, however, is a mess.

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Principal Principle

When: 4/18-5/18: Thu-Sat 8 PM, Sun 3 PM

Price: \$18-\$27

stagelefttheatre.com

Chicago playwright and former public school teacher Joe Zarrow achieves something remarkable in his dark comedy, about a Teach for America-like teacher adrift in a fictional CPS high school. He has succeeded in crafting an entertaining play about education that re-creates all the quirks and craziness of modern education without lapsing into either cynical hopelessness or Hollywood-style superteacher fantasies. His dialogue feels authentic, and his characters are flawed but likable human beings, not mouthpieces for this or that ideology. Director Scott Bishop's fine cast brings out the best in Zarrow's material. McKenzie Chinn blazes as a fiery radical determined to teach no matter what faddish obstacles the administration throws in her way. And Arya Daire is chilling as the narcissistic, oblivious principal. —**Jack Helbig**

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(based on 14 user reviews)

Tags: Theater & Performance, Recommended, The Short List (Theater), New Review (Theater and Comedy)