

[Inspecting Carol, by Daniel Sullivan](#) · Nov 17, 12:00 AM by B. Morrison

On Friday night, tired and a little discouraged by the results of the week's work, I went to see this production by the Reisterstown Theatre Project. *Inspecting Carol* is a comedy about a small, cash-strapped theater company rehearsing for their annual production of *A Christmas Carol*. With only four days for rehearsal, some of the characters repeatedly admonish everyone to get down to business, while others run rogue by trying to rewrite the story or create distractions by arguing about costumes or leading vocal exercises.

I don't know when I last laughed so hard. Within the first couple of minutes, a sardonic look from the actor playing M.J. McMann, the stage manager, had me chuckling. As the ridiculousness escalated, any residual self-consciousness vanished and my guffaws turned to helpless shouts of laughter, leaving me bent weakly over my knees wiping away tears.

I'm generally not a big fan of comedy, as it seems to be practiced today. Disparaging, hurtful jokes make me sad, and most physical comedy just seems painful. Stories where you can see from a mile away that a character is setting himself/herself up for an embarrassing if not distressing situation bore me.

However, this production found my sweet spot. The actors' facial expressions were priceless. Pratfalls and other physical comedy bits were used sparingly and always as part of the story. There was a bit with one of the ghosts—I don't want to give anything away—that had me laughing so hard I could barely hear the lines. There was plenty of wordplay and just the right amount of repetition, enough for the line to become like a family's in-joke without edging over into a boring anecdote you've heard too many times. And best of all, there were long cons, humor set up throughout the play that culminated in a surprising payoff at the end.

Afterwards, I talked with Paul, who plays Kevin Trent Emery, the long-suffering business manager. Paul mentioned that when he first read the play, he didn't think it was funny. It was supposed to be a comedy, but nothing in the script seemed humorous. It wasn't until he heard the other actors speak their lines that he began to realise how hilarious the production could be. His comment made sense to me; the humor was less in the words themselves than in what the actors and director did with them.

As a writer, I'm very conscious of the fact that all I can do is throw the words out there and hope that gentle readers will interpret them, if not necessarily in the way I intended, at least in a way that is meaningful to them. I know only too well from my own reading that coming off a spectacular book can doom an okay one, just as a tired or cranky mood can keep even a great novel from catching my interest. Playwrights, on the other hand, have the advantage of an intermediary: actors who interpret their words for the audience. As a writer of prose, I have to find ways to bring those cues—sardonic looks, pratfalls, etc.—into the text. Similarly, without set and costume designers to create the visual space, I have to incorporate those descriptions without slowing the story down too much. I once heard Timothy Findley—one of my favorite authors—talk about how his early acting career had taught him about dramatic structure and pacing. I need to think more about what the theater has to teach prose writers.