

Our Man in Santiago

Is this “comic spy thriller” even *funny*? How about *thrilling*?

By Andrew Andrews



Michael Van Duzer as Henry Kissinger and Steve Nevil as Richard Nixon in Benjamin Scuglia and Little Jack Productions' run of Mark Wilding's retro comic spy thriller, *Our Man in Santiago*.
Original photos by director Charlie Mount.

CIA operative Daniel Baker has just arrived in a hotel room across the street from the presidential palace in Santiago.

Reporting to his new boss, Jack Wilson, Baker has been called in because Chilean President Salvador Allende is about to be ousted in a coup d'état supported by the American agency.

Baker is having second thoughts about his country's involvement in the foreign affair. But when U.S. President Richard Nixon and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger call Wilson for an update, the senior officer promises the leaders that the plan will go off without a hitch, thanks to a “man inside the palace.”

Baker, it turns out, is going to be that man, commanded to waltz on in with forged press credentials while everyone else is evacuating.

Inspired by a Harpers Magazine article by Gabriel García Márquez about real-life events in 1973, this darkly comic spy thriller launched at LA's Theater West before making its way east to Manhattan.

The cast of five poses dramatically on the set. One man in a suit appears to be entering through a doorway, three other suited men look at him seemingly surprised, and a woman in a dress sits on a leather sofa between them all, holding up one hand to the left and another to the right. Nick McDow Musleh, Steve Nevil, Prescilia Esparolini, Michael Van Duzer and George Tovar make up the cast, with Scenic Design by Jeff G. Rack and Lighting and Sound Design by the director.

This play has a lot going for it on the surface, but a few disconcerting flaws if you look just a little deeper.

First, the good:

- ★ The production value is really high for off-off-Broadway, with an elaborate set and equally strong, delightfully low-fidelity sound and lighting effects that harken to the 70s.
- ★ The script is full of tension to keep you hooked and enough comedy to draw a laugh now and then. It's not quite as farcical as it claims, but that's not necessarily a bad thing.
- ★ The five actors (transplanted to NYC from the original west coast production) are well-suited to their roles, including magnificent caricatures of Nixon and Kissinger that would make Rich Little proud.

On the down side:

- ★ The notion that the CIA would send an uncommitted agent to serve a major role in a political uprising is extremely far-fetched.
- ★ The characters repeatedly refer to the Pepsi Challenge, which didn't exist until two years later.
- ★ The idea that Maria, the hotel maid, wouldn't understand the English phrase "don't come in" but then uses words like "hooligans," "unspeakable" and "particles" just moments later, shouts of further carelessness in the writing.

There are other faulty premises that would give away the plot, but the funny thing is: depending on how easily you can suspend disbelief, you can actually leave the theatre quite satisfied by its humor, drama and political satire.

If they'd only work out the kinks in the script, this could easily become a first-class show.



Andrew Andrews attended *Our Man in Santiago* at AMT Theater in Manhattan on Wednesday, September 14, 2022 @ 7:30pm to write this review.