

Theater Review: 'New Country' is Original, Exuberant & Poignant

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on April 23, 2016 - 4:47pm

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CHICAGO – The Country Music industry has become as huge as any category of music entertainment. So Mark Roberts, the creator of the TV sitcom “Mike & Molly,” has fashioned a boisterous new play about the machinations of that genre of music industry, and gave it the plaintive title of “New Country.”



Play Rating: **4.5/5.0**

“New Country” is making its Midwest premiere after a triumphant Off Broadway run in New York City. It involves a two-faced but wildly popular country singer on the eve of his wedding in Nashville. Roberts has combined the “cletus” element of the genre, through his self-portrayed character Uncle Jim, and the business side through a pair of duplicitous handlers. What follows is a focused and (at times) emotional statement on the industry of entertainment, especially regarding who wins and who is left behind. What Roberts never forgets is his funny bone, the play is freaking hilarious, and hits all the right notes in its observations.



Uncle Jim (Mark Roberts), Chuck (Will Clinger) and Paul (Frank Nall) in 'New Country'

Photo credit: NewCountrythePlay.com

Justin Spears (Matthew Gall) is country music's newest and biggest stars – but he has an image problem that his managers Paul (Frank Nall) and Chuck (Will Clinger) need to smooth out. They've arranged a coupling for him, one that has morphed to an engagement and wedding. On the eve of the nuptials, the plan begins to unravel, as Justin has both cold feet and a change of heart regarding who will be representing him.

Enter Uncle Jim (Mark Roberts), whose raunchy life has been a role model for Justin. The hard living relative seems to spark a truth bomb in the situation, exacerbated by Sharon (Sarah Lemp), who has come to exact a revenge as a scorned lover. Nashville is hopping on this night.

The play begins with a riff on the wedding, introducing the audience to the environment and its characters. Frank Nall as Paul is the anchor, the steady veteran manager that is Colonel Tom combined with Ari from Entourage. Chicago treasure Will Clinger is his right hand, and provides some of the more salacious descriptions of his role in the wedding. These two get better as the one act play unfolds, morphing into a single force by the conclusion.

It's appropriate that the author of the play, Mark Roberts, is also the highlight as Uncle Jim. He understands the character inside and out, and is able to draw the pathos from his dirty side. The character has diabetic seizures, and Roberts sells those effectively. They become touch points as the story transitions, and that vulnerable characteristic brings needed sympathy to the hardcore show business rat f**king. Uncle Jim also has the funniest lines, and delivers them with a country patter that's a cross between "Hee-Haw" and David Mamet, if such a comparative exists.



Sharon (Sarah Lemp) Confronts Uncle Jim in 'New Country'

Photo credit: NewCountrythePlay.com

It's an ensemble piece, and the three other players take the bulk of the negative energy, and deliver it with surprising empathy. Matthew Gall has the heaviest lifting as the singer Justin, but plays it as a price-of-fame merry go round. Colter O'Ryan Smith is a side character named Ollie, and his oiliness oozes onto the stage, until the truth of his role becomes like a poker chip on the table. Sarah Lemp's Sharon is the character most lost when she enters, and gets a bit of satisfaction before riding into the sunset, literally. She's a dark angel.

If you enjoyed the sitcom writing of Mark Roberts – he's worked on "Mike & Molly," "Two & a Half Men" and "The Big Bang Theory" – there are patterns in the play that riff on his style within those shows. But this is also a contemporary journey of staying true to yourself, in the midst of a an emotional and financial hurricane, in the rat f**kery of the 21st Century.

"New Country" is performed at the Den Theatre of Chicago, 1333 North Milwaukee Avenue, at various days and times through April 30th, 2016. [Click here](#) [17] for more information, dates/times and to purchase tickets. Featuring Mark Roberts, Will Clinger, Frank Nall, Colter O'Ryan Smith, Matthew Gall and Sarah Lemp. Written by Mark Roberts. Directed by Ian Streicher.



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