

## Theater Review: American Theater Co.'s 'We're Gonna Be Okay' Seeks Identity in Early 1960s

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on February 3, 2018 - 8:07pm

- [Adithis Chandrashekar](#) [2]
- [American Theater Company](#) [3]
- [Avi Roque](#) [4]
- [Basil Kreimendahl](#) [5]
- [Brittany Love Smith](#) [6]
- [Cuban Missile Crisis](#) [7]
- [Diversity](#) [8]
- [Gay](#) [9]
- [HollywoodChicago.com Content](#) [10]
- [Identity](#) [11]
- [John F. Kennedy](#) [12]
- [Kelli Simpkins](#) [13]
- [Patrick McDonald](#) [14]
- [Penelope Walker](#) [15]
- [Sarai Rodriguez](#) [16]
- [Theater](#) [17]
- [We're Gonna Be Okay](#) [18]
- [Will Davis](#) [19]
- [Theater, TV, DVD & Blu-Ray](#) [20]

CHICAGO – The 1960s were a time of historical social transition. The movements – civil rights, feminist, gay rights – all had roots in that tumultuous decade. The Chicago premiere of Basil Kreimendahl's "We're Gonna Be Okay" echoes all of those movements in its characters, and collides them against the October 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis. The show has a Thursday-Sunday run at the American Theater Company through March 4th, 2018. [Click here](#) [21] for more details, including ticket information.



Play Rating: **4.0/5.0**

Directed by Will Davis, the staging is a elegant rendition of neighbors sharing their particular angst, and a bomb shelter. The history is symbolic rather than accurate, choosing to expand upon the freedoms that groups and individuals had to realize in American culture, rather than a retelling of the missile crisis situation. The casting is diverse, with women portraying men, African American actors doing cream cheese suburban neighbors and a trans actor taking on a teenage boy. All the characters are desiring something beyond their current existence, which translates nicely versus a world turned upside down.



Sheltered: The Cast of 'We're Gonna be Okay'



*Photo credit: Michael Brosilow for American Theater Company*

Efran (Kelli Simpkins) is a Mad Man-era alpha male, lording over his wife Leena (Adithi Chandrashekar) and son Jake (Avi Roque). They are neighbors to Mag (BrittanyLove Smith) and Sul (Penelope Walker), who have a daughter named Deena (Sarai Rodriguez). The neighbors are linked by the friendship of Mag and Leena, but not much else. Sul is suspicious of Efran – who loves to hear himself talk – and the two teens are like oil and water. With the 1960s Cold War escalating, Efran and a reluctant Sul decide to build a bomb shelter, and the families actually go down into it when the Cuban Missile Crisis unfolds. In the confined space, they learn more about each other and themselves.

The play builds through the interactions, and culminates in the second act scenario in the bomb shelter. The title is ironic, of course, and the time/place also is a bit deceptive, as the diversity of the cast comments upon the roles of the era... which are not so much historic as symbolic. This is mostly a “coming out” play, of sexual identity, intellectual awareness and role reversals (including an anachronistic feminist maneuver). Those “light bulb moments” are the powerful building blocks of the story, and explodes by the time the characters are confined in the shelter, with an honesty and ultimate poignancy.

One of the more fulfilling elements of “We’re Gonna Be Okay” is the design of the staging. Director Davis, in conjunction with his production team (credits below) created a compelling set, sound and lighting formulation that profoundly generates an emotional buzz. The first act ends with John F. Kennedy’s speech about the Cuban Missile Crisis, and the stark words are a combination of mature leadership and chilling reality. This part was a shared reminder that no one gets out of here alive, and it could come sooner than necessary.



Efran (Kelli Simpkins) and Sul (Penelope Walker) in ‘We’re Gonna Be Okay’

*Photo credit: Michael Brosilow for American Theater Company*

Stand out performances favored the women roles in the story, as their personas went through the most change, and Chandrashekar, Smith and Rodriguez all had highlight moments. There was specific illustrative commentary in women (and a trans actor) playing the male roles, but it didn’t translate into anything definitive within those characters. Penelope Walker, however, was a rock as the skeptical Sul, and provides a quietude that modified Efran’s bombast.

Interestingly, even though the playwright said in notes that he “used his imagination of 1962,” rather than a historical accuracy, there were only one line and a couple of actions that took it out of its era. Otherwise, it’s a universal human experience to understand who they really are as the play’s main theme, and that light shines through within the confines of a sheltered society.

*American Theater Company presents the Chicago Premiere of “We’re Gonna be Okay,” Thursdays-Saturdays @ 8pm (plus a 2pm on Saturdays) and Sundays at 2pm through March 4th, 2018, at the American Theater Co. Stage, 1909 West Byron Street, Chicago. Featuring Kelli Simpkins, Adithi Chandrashekar, Avi Roque, BrittanyLove Smith, Penelope Walker and Sarai Rodriguez. Property Design by Jamie Karas. Sound Design by Jeffrey Levin. Lighting Design by Rachel K. Levy. Written by Basil Kreimendahl. Directed by Will Davis. For more information about American Theater Company, [Click here](#) [22]*



[23]

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- [1] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/users/hankq>
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- [3] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/american-theater-company>
- [4] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/avi-roque>
- [5] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/basil-kreimendahl>
- [6] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/brittany-love-smith>
- [7] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/cuban-missile-crisis>
- [8] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/diversity>
- [9] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/gay>
- [10] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/hollywoodchicagodotcom-content>
- [11] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/identity>
- [12] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/john-f-kennedy>
- [13] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/kelli-simpkins>
- [14] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/patrick-mcdonald>
- [15] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/penelope-walker>
- [16] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/sarai-rodriguez>
- [17] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/theater>
- [18] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/we-re-gonna-be-okay>
- [19] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/will-davis>
- [20] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/dvd-theater-tv-news>
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