Sparkling 'Great White Throne' visits a pastor's wife's worst day

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Maybe you have that person in your life.

(Maybe you *are* that person in someone's life.)

A little loud. A little déclassé. A little too eager to be friends.

Maybe, on the worst night of your life, the only one who can comfort you is that person.

Well, the churchy women in "Great White Throne" might remind you the stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.



Renaissance Theaterworks opened a sparkling production of Cara Johnston's "Great White Throne" Oct. 18. Directed by María Amenábar Farias, this world-premiere show fits Renaissance's mission to the max: theater by women for everyone. A comedy with dramatic

moments, it allows veteran actors Libby Amato and Marcella Kearns to use all the arrows in their quivers.

Over an unbroken 90 minutes, "Great White Throne" takes place entirely in the lavish, incredibly pink bathroom (designed by Laura Ledin) of a Southern megachurch pastor's wife (Amato). She's bracing for the call that will reveal her pastor husband has just been fired for a major transgression (probably not the one that's your first guess). Hearing Amato's agonized screams, a deacon's wife (Kearns) races over from the church next door.

Neither character is named in Johnston's play until the last line, so I'll just refer to them by the actors' names.

The queen bee of this huge congregation, Amato is beautifully dressed in a satiny pink suit and is icily proper when trying to get rid of this interloper. While a loyal, hard-working servant of this church, Kearns has never been part of the inner circle. She's thrilled just to see the pastor's bathroom and check the hair products!

But as they banter, argue, disclose, console and fire off Scripture verses and hurried prayers, facades come down and the needs of each woman are revealed, aided by the medicinal use of vodka (even though it's a teetotaling congregation).

Playwright Johnston, who went to Bible college herself, knows this milieu. She's critiquing the megachurch community's assumptions, especially about the roles of women, from the inside without demeaning faith per se. What is actually Christian belief and what are the hierarchical preferences of some men in power? These questions have been pondered and debated since Saint Paul. "Great White Throne" allows the two women to grapple with them.

Someday, when Kearns looks back on her theater career, I predict she'll remember this character as one of her best and most fulfilling roles. From rapid prayers to a couple of hilarious pelvic thrusts, she gets to do it all. As funny as she often is here, Kearns also switches in a nanosecond to serious facial expressions that react to and comment on the pastor's wife's statements. Her deacon's wife has depths, and we get to see them.

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The pastor's wife is a kind of princess who has never seen life outside the castle until this moment. Amato lets it all hang out in presenting her character's brittle fragility, which often comes out in cutting and condescending remarks.

In her director's note for this production, Farias likens this play to Ibsen's "A Doll's House" as a story about women straitjacketed by social roles and expectations. I can see and hear that. Stepping back even from the church theme, "Great White Throne" is also a critique of the way

hierarchies limit human vulnerability and connection. Just pray there's someone who will come running when they hear you scream.

If you go

Renaissance Theaterworks performs "Great White Throne" through Nov. 8 at 255 S. Water St. Visit *rtwmke.org* or call (414) 278-0765.