

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Terry Brennan

Nothing is Certain, Except Death and Hoagies

by Mira Treatman

In a quest to reach new audiences for performing arts in Philadelphia, [Theatre Philadelphia](#) and [thINKingDANCE](#) are joining forces and exploring how dance writing and discourse can provide new perspectives on theater. Since May 2018, tD writers have been lending their varied backgrounds, interests, and approaches to criticism to professional works of theater in Philadelphia. Let us know what you think in the comments!

Grief and food are fast friends. In *Operation: Wawa Road Trip*, a pair of siblings, played by Taiwo Sokan and Jahzeer Terrell, go on a [Harold and Kumar](#)-esque journey following the death of their father. The destination? The ultimate Philadelphia comfort food jawn, Wawa.

Tribe of Fools' annual Fringe offering, directed by Joseph Ahmed and written by Caitlin Corkery, has the fixings of a delightful romantic comedy, made all the better by a refreshing fraternal relationship as the focus. *Operation*'s formula is tried and true: Frat Pack humor, Odyssean tropes and stock characters, viscerally impressive physical tricks, campy dance numbers, absurd non-sequiturs, and a base layer of deep commitment from the entire creative team.

The majority of the show takes place inside Sokan and Terrell's car as they chug along from their father's funeral in Ohio to spread his ashes at a Wawa parking lot somewhere in Philly. Yes, this guilty pleasure of a set-up is the entire plot.

Along the way the siblings encounter ridiculous highway characters brilliantly played by Tiffany Bacon, Janice Rowland, and Kyle Yackoski. A bumbling wizard floating around the car in a fever dream, a soda wench in some deserted corner of a Sheetz, and a road rageful cat-obsessed couple, just to name a few, are roadside attractions awaiting the siblings. It makes about as much sense as the grief of losing a parent.

At times the siblings' scene work is like overhearing friends gabbing when they think no one is listening. They're unhinged from the confines of the funeral, prattling as feisty little kids in the back seat of a station wagon. The writing is honest and colloquial. The humor lives in the specificity of the characters' language, such as [using the word "random" as slang](#). Many of the cultural references date to about twenty years ago, presumably the heights of the creators' youth.

For those in the audience well-versed in *Mario Kart*, *Dungeons and Dragons*, *Lord of the Rings*, and general nerd culture, this Wawa pilgrimage provides a feast of biting referential jokes. The opening night audience roared with delight each time the performers reveal another surprise. At one point, the whole ensemble dances with stuffie video game characters, and an audience member gasps, "Ooh! That right there! That is my childhood."

The one thing this show lacks is stillness. From start to finish, the performers are in constant motion, even when performing rest. This stylistic approach to storytelling feels especially cinematic in its pacing and tonal shifts. What a great, and sometimes rare, pleasure to see happy, smiley people dance to upbeat music, especially in the context of the cult-pop icon that is Wawa.

Why, of all things, Wawa? For starters, it's divisive. As Wawa becomes increasingly ubiquitous through its store expansion, it also becomes a litmus test for any given person's relationship to Philadelphia.

At a moment in our city's history where an influx of new (Yorkers) residents move in to seek cheaper rent, let it be a line in the sand that Tribe of Fools serves up an original idea, stays true to their vision, and chases their hoagie dreams to fruition. This is what Philly is about, and no threatening levels of Sheetz invasions or Eagles heartbreaks or interstate gentrification can stand in the way our local artists' drive to produce unpretentious work authentic to themselves.

What could have made this show better? Wawa running the concession stand in the theatre lobby.

[Operation: Wawa Road Trip](#), Tribe of Fools, Proscenium Theatre at The Drake, 2019 Fringe Festival, September 5-21.

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