

# Theater review: In Park Square's deft 'Trying,' an aging lion meets his match

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It sounds like the stock formula for a two-character tearjerker: A crotchety old man facing his own mortality hires a young, bright and spunky secretary. After some initial bumps in the road, the two develop a fast, albeit bittersweet bond.

But there's more to "Trying" than that. The production of Joanna McClelland Glass' 2004 play now onstage at Park Square Theatre transcends the potential triteness of its genre with an intriguing back story, some smart writing and a pair of illuminating performances by Richard Ooms and Emily Gunyou Halaas.

Glass based her script on her own experiences. In the 1960s, she worked as a secretary to Francis Biddle, a Philadelphia blueblood who was attorney general under FDR and chief U.S. judge at the Nuremberg war crimes trials.

The play begins in the last year of his life, during which the cantankerous Biddle is struggling to complete his memoirs and keep up with his correspondence. Functioning, as he himself says, "between lucidity and senility," he's chewed through a series of personal secretaries with his abrasive and demanding manner. Glass - in the pseudonymous character of Sarah Schorr - agrees to take on the old lion and, through grit, intelligence and perseverance, manages to tame him.

Glass clearly retains a great deal of affection for her crabby erstwhile boss. Her crisply written script eschews the easy cliché and gives Biddle all the best lines, most of which are patrician pronouncements as much as they are dialogue. "I have a list of ailments from here to Mount Rushmore," he proclaims by way of introduction on Sarah's first day of work.

It would be easy to make a caricature out of Biddle, and Ooms flirts with the idea. Instead of leaning on the countless uptight-gentlemen characters he's played in the past, Ooms unearths additional insights for Biddle. One minute he's the bowed-but-stern elder statesman, hectoring and lecturing and rasping out his lines. The next, he's a spoiled child, sing-songy and pitching a tantrum.

Ooms never relinquishes Biddle's entitled, exacting prickliness, but you can see him gradually sanding down the edges as he warms to Sarah. It looks effortless, but Ooms crafts his performance to make it look natural but never cloying.

Emily Gunyou Halaas gets a less-flashy role as the long-suffering Sarah. By ceding the spotlight to Ooms with her restrained and disciplined work, she creates her own gentle glow of limelight.

Emotions like frustration and impatience and forbearance are difficult to play on stage, but Halaas finds a way. Her carefully gauged performance is both maternal (she ever-watchful, ready to spring to her frail boss's aid) and hints at a daughter's eagerness to please.

Credit goes to director Warren Bowles for balancing this pair of performances so deftly, and also to a design team that renders the play's setting in 1967 with discreet directness: You can almost smell the must and history in scenic designer Michael Hoover's creation of Biddle's garage-top office. Amy B. Kaufman's Jackie-O knock-off costumes for Sarah are understated and period perfect. Jacob W. Rosene's sound design contains observant little touches, including the distinctive whoosh of a gas heater firing up.

With the leaves just beginning to turn on the trees, this chronicle of a man in the late autumn of his life feels like a warm, comfortable sweater of a play. Pull it on, and brave the coming chill.

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IF YOU GO

**What:** "Trying"

**When:** through Oct. 7

**Where:** Park Square Theatre, 20 W. Seventh Place, St. Paul

**Tickets:** \$36-\$33

**Information:** 651-291-7005 or [www.parksquaretheatre.org](http://www.parksquaretheatre.org)

**Capsule:** A deftly done play about history, aging and forbearance.

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