

Wraith Radio by Chris Fontanes
reviewed by Justin West on Facebook
November 13, 2016

Just got home from seeing [Wraith Radio](#), the latest outing from [Chris Fontanes](#) and [Bottle Alley Theatre Company](#). What follows is my take on what I consider to be an unmissable show.

Finding the fucking BAM Academy is always an adventure. Circling Austin's nether regions on the shittily-lit - and aptly named - Industrial Blvd, I finally managed to find it tonight. By some stroke of sheer luck I went to the right door. If you're on the same quest, look for the light, and hopefully the smokers out front.

Once in my seat, it took me a moment or two to realize that I had stepped over the actors on my way in. That was among the last of the "normal" thoughts I had before things got started.

Fontanes' works rarely take place in the kind of tangible places and linear timelines you expect to visit in a theatrical setting. Rather, there's a sense of fluidity in his stories and characters, an other-worldliness about them that is nonetheless keenly familiar and relatable, and figuring out just where (or when) they're taking place is often part of the art.

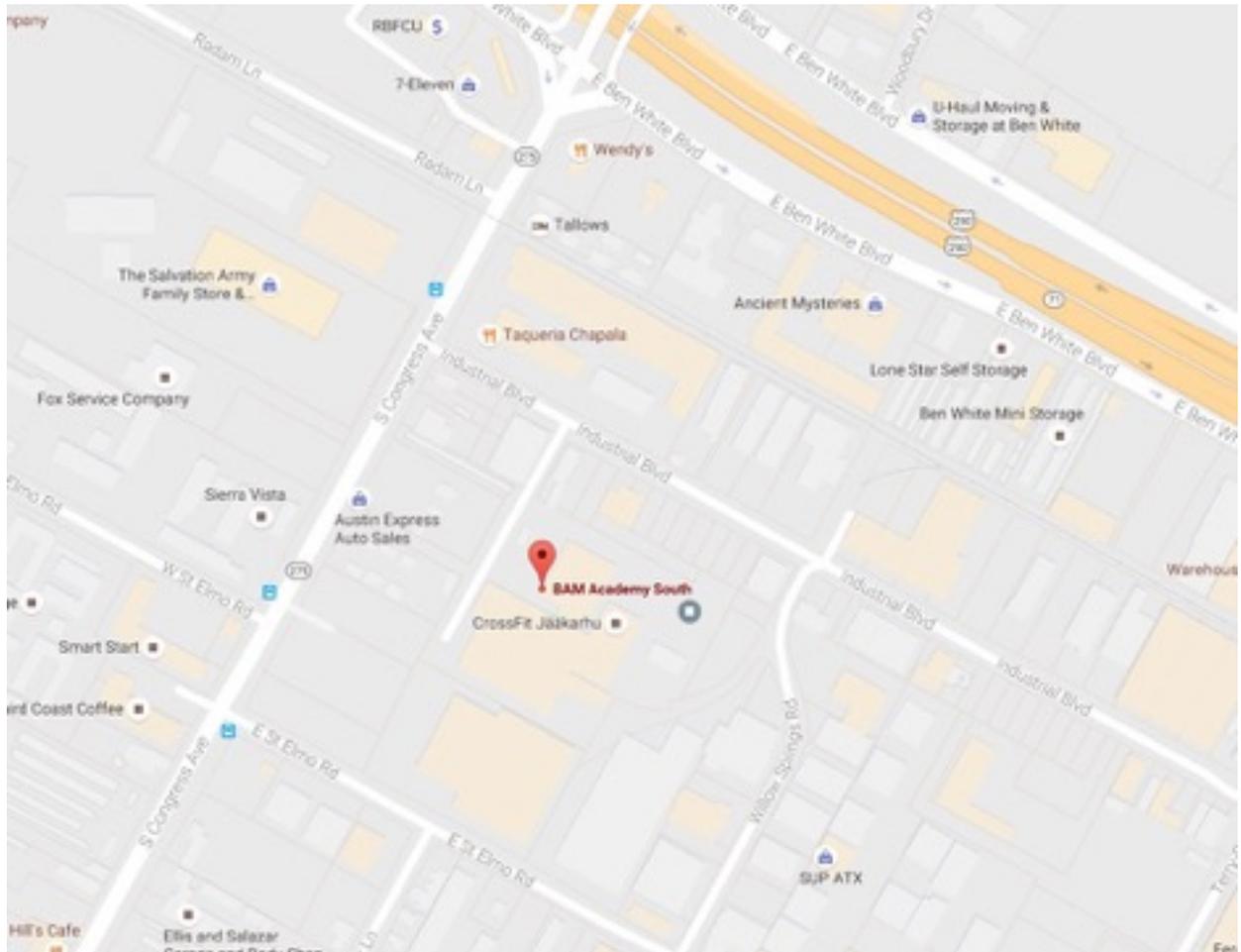
Wraith Radio is no exception to this style that Chris has honed over the years, but much to my surprise this work veers decidedly into the literal in one important segment that brought real fucking tears to my eyes. We're told, very plainly, what might actually be going on out there in the "real world," in the walls beyond the dreamy dialogue exchanged by perhaps-spectres bathed in eerie light. The performance of Ellen Falterman as Star cannot be overstated here, as she pours herself into a role that looks as emotionally painful to perform as the makeup suggests it should be, physically. For ten minutes or so we hang on her every word, our minds wandering to a place she achingly paints for us, and for a while we go where her mind is. To take an audience to where a character is thinking and feeling is no easy task, and she does this masterfully.

But from this image we are pulled, and by none other than Death, himself. [Tim Olivares'](#) version of this bastard is a charming one. Well dressed. Proper. Vile in his business, perhaps, but finely tuned in his ways, precise in his approach, and only as stern as needed. His portrayal of the ender of our days is subtle and calm, as I suspect Death prefers his... clients. More pliable that way. Death hints at heartache, himself. But how, I wonder? Now there's a story I wanted to hear. And when the inevitable time comes for him to go about his work, we almost want to follow him ourselves. Which, when you realize that's how you feel, is pretty god damn terrifying. But we're reassured. It really will be okay, he makes us feel. Just relax...

[Michael Rodriguez](#) gives a stellar performance as Jessie, whose confusion mirrors our own as we try and navigate this story. It's through Jessie's eyes that we see glimpses of a world that was, or maybe was, for these characters. It's in those moments that Michael shines, particularly when opposite Emily Rankin as the titular character, Wraith. Together, there are moments of "normalcy" between these two that hint at what their relationship was like before... well, just before. And they work. Extremely well. The nuances of their interactions suggest a deep history and a comfort with one another only a long-lasting relationship would bring. They talk to each other differently, without pretense, and we miss them without knowing them. Emily, in a brilliant performance as Wraith, is angst incarnate. Here is a tortured character, who's perhaps lost grips with reality and doesn't seem to be aware that it's a problem. She seems to be without remorse, however tormented she is. We hurt for her, because clearly she has been through some shit. We want to help, we want to just listen, but we are prisoners, unable to do anything but watch this all play out. Unable to speak to this person who so clearly wants there to be someone on the other end of that radio.

As an artist, I have always struggled with the abstract, but Chris Fontanes delights in it. In [Wraith Radio](#) I saw something a bit different from Chris. Perhaps the year-long hiatus did him some good, but this show felt more... mature. Light played an important role, here, as I've not seen from his plays before. As did the "stage" itself, and the

character's movements among it. In general, to steal a line from Chris himself, if the success of a show is being left wanting more, I was certainly there. The standing ovation they got from us likely would have lasted longer if they hadn't forced us to shut up.



See this show. If you can find the fucking place. It's Bottle Alley's best work yet (that I've seen).