

# Cultural Daily

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## Down but Not Out on New Orleans' Airline Highway

David Sheward · Wednesday, May 13th, 2015

Yes, we've seen these people before: desperate but lively outsiders congregating at a rundown hotel, or bar, or other common area forming an unconventional family unit because their own relatives and society in general have rejected them. American theater has given many examples of the genre: O'Neill's *The Iceman Cometh*, Saroyan's *The Time of Your Life*, Williams' *Small Craft Warnings*, Lanford Wilson's *Hot L Baltimore*, and August Wilson's *King Hedley II*, *Two Trains Running*, and many of his other masterpieces. But though the inhabitants and visitors to the decrepit Hummingbird Motel in Lisa D'Amour's *Airline Highway* may seem familiar, they still touch your heart and get under your skin.

In Joe Mantello's exquisitely orchestrated production, now filling the final slot of Manhattan Theatre Club's 2014-15 Broadway season after a run at Chicago's Steppenwolf Theatre, these colorful but marginal denizens of the New Orleans party culture celebrate their fabulousness as they eke out a living providing pleasure to the tourist trade. Just as she did in her Pulitzer finalist play *Detroit*, D'Amour creates a mesmerizing mosaic by assembling dozens of fascinating details. In that earlier work, she captured a broad section of the vanishing American middle class through the travails of two underemployed suburban couples. Here her canvas is broader with portraits of several more characters—a loving makeshift club just barely scraping by and whooping it up as their unique NOLA world is slowly swallowed up by Costcos and strip malls.



K. Todd Freeman, Julie White, Judith Roberts, and Scott Jaeck in *Airline Highway*

Credit: Joan Marcus

The loosey-goosey plot follows 24 hours in the parking lot of a once-glamorous motel (designed with gritty realism by Scott Pask). The semi-permanent guests are preparing for the jubilant “funeral” of their beloved, still-living mother figure, the chronically ill Miss Ruby, a once vibrant stripper and club owner. There's Tonya, a middle-aged hooker with a drug problem; the cross-dressing and sassy Sissy Na Na; the forlorn Krista, currently homeless; incompetent but compassionate handyman Terry, who harbors a crush on Krista; and Wayne, the easy-going manager who turns a blind eye to the group's shadier practices. In the midst of the various dramas comes the former Bourbon Street barker Bait Boy, now leading a “legit” life as the live-in boyfriend of an older Atlanta businesswoman.

Bait Boy brings along Zoe, the teenaged daughter of his lover, who interviews the residents for a school project. This excuse for exposition is one of the play's flaws. But though she is being used as a dramatic device, Zoe, along with all the other characters, is a fully-drawn, complicated figure,

attracted to this glittering but chancy demi-monde.

The cast, almost all holdovers from *Steppenwolf*, creates an entire solar system of interconnected friends revolving around the extinguishing sun of Miss Ruby. You want to know these people and their stories and these actors fill that need. Julie White, a New York addition, is particularly rich in her limning of Tonya. Watch as White silently reacts to the implied offer of a drug dealer. Tonya's entire history of drug dependence, bad choices, and resolve to change play on White's expressive face, in her limbs and her whole body, and all she says is "I'm fine."

K. Todd Freeman is an explosive Sissy, Caroline Neff an intensely needy Krista, Judith Roberts a bizarrely funny Miss Ruby, and Joe Tippett a seductive and destructive Bait Boy, all lonely travelers on this endearing and heartbreaking *Airline Highway*.

April 23—June 14. Manhattan Theatre Club at the Samuel J. Friedman Theatre, 261 W. 47<sup>th</sup> St., NYC. Tue., Wed., 7 p.m.; Thu.—Sat., 8 p.m.; Wed., Sat., Sun., 2 p.m. Running time: two hours and 20 mins. including intermission. \$67—\$137. (212) 239-6200 or [www.telecharge.com](http://www.telecharge.com).

This review has previously appeared on [ArtsinNY.com](http://ArtsinNY.com) and [Theaterlife.com](http://Theaterlife.com).

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