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The profane puppetry of 'Hand to God'

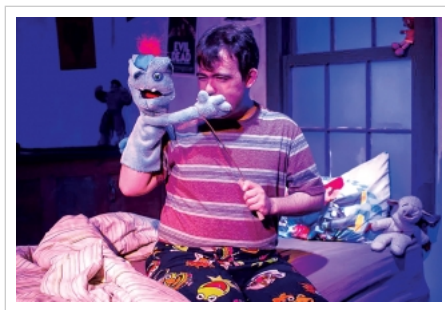
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Jonathan Brangwynne as Jason/Tyrone in STC's production of "Hand to God." (photo courtesy Some Theatre Company)

ORONO - If I were to tell you about seeing a possessed puppet and the disaffected teenager attached to it take over a small-town Texas church basement, you might think I was describing some sort of fever dream.

In fact, I'd be talking about "Hand to God," the latest production mounted by Orono's Some Theatre Company. The Tony-nominated play - written by Robert Askins - is directed by Elaine Bard; the show runs through June 23 at the Keith Anderson Community House in Orono.

It's a dark and provocative comedy, packed with blue language and blasphemy; the piece offers up challenge after unapologetic challenge, daring to cross any line you might think of. It is profane and wicked and thoughtful - as smart as it is discomfiting.

And it is REALLY funny.

Jason (Jonathan Brangwynne) is a teenage boy living in a small town in Texas. His father recently died and his mother Margery (Corissa Bither) has been seeking a way to fill the emptiness left by his passing. In an effort to find meaning, she pours all of her energy into the church - specifically, a puppet youth ministry suggested by the pious and mild Pastor Greg (Shayne Bither).

And so Margery brings in Jason, along with nerdy, kind-hearted Jessica (Else Jolliffe-Saunders) - who Jason kind of likes - and foulmouthed delinquent Timothy (Robert Brangwynne) - who Jason definitely doesn't like - to help bring the puppets to life. And boy, does Jason ever bring his puppet - named Tyrone - to life.

Except, maybe it isn't all Jason's doing.

See, Tyrone appears to have a mind of his own. He says and does things that Jason himself wouldn't ordinarily say and do. And as the questionable behaviors by those around him start to mount up, Tyrone comes more and more to the forefront - the puppet even changes as time passes, in ways that are more than a little unsettling. Jason doesn't appear to be in control anymore ... if he ever was.

And when Tyrone pushes Jason to the edge - with a little help from some awful and unpleasant revelations - the church basement becomes a battlefield upon which one young man must figure out what kind of person he ultimately wants to be. Family, friends and faith are all in a tangle - and it's up to Jason to cut through to the crux.

Full disclosure: anyone who knows me knows that I love puppets. I especially enjoy puppets interacting in decidedly adult ways. So obviously, "Hand to God" is in my wheelhouse; puppets dishing out profanity-laced

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innuendo is my jam.

What I didn't realize was how sophisticated and truly transgressive this play actually is. It is very much in your face with the challenges that it issues, both narratively and thematically. Social mores - sexuality and morality, faith and grief - are being undermined right before your eyes, though you might not realize just how much because - again - a lot of it is coming from the flapping mouth of a puppet.

Director Bard has never been one to fear transgressive weirdness, so this script is an obvious fit for her sensibility. Her ability to embrace strangeness - to lean into the off-kilter aspects of a piece - is one of her greatest strengths as a director and producer. "Hand to God" is as much in her wheelhouse as a theatermaker as it is my own as a theatergoer.

None of this works, by the way, unless you get legitimately strong puppet work. Without a rock-solid performance from the Jason/Tyrone combo, you're straight-up doomed. Jonathan Brangwynne as Jason is pretty good, shy and lacking affect in a way that conveys the withdrawn nature of the character. Brangwynne as Tyrone is outstanding, a cackling, crackling presence that feels completely separate from Jason. Tyrone is a charismatic presence on stage and Jason isn't at all, as weird as that sounds.

Corissa Bither as Margery wraps her grief in delusion, offering a journey that feels grounded despite some fairly ludicrous destinations. Robert Brangwynne is a drawling d-bag, a sneering bully motivated by spite and lust. Else Jolliffe-Saunders endows Jessica with both affability and unanticipated depth, illustrating that one needn't be all yin or all yang. And Shayne Bither is excellent as the milquetoast Pastor Greg, whose nice guy/man of faith veneer can't completely cover a venal sense of entitlement buried within him (he also has maybe the best running gag in the show, one that I won't reveal here).

Look, "Hand to God" isn't for everyone. This is a piece that some will find off-putting and others downright offensive. That's OK - sometimes we need art that puts off or offends. Some Theatre Company has never been a group afraid to challenge itself or its audience; this show is very much in keeping with that tradition. I can promise you one thing - if you do go, you'll be getting a theatrical experience unlike any other.

Cross my heart. Hand to god.

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