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New Hope Free Press

Thu, May 24th, 2018

Soul Searching and Laughs in ‘An Act of God’ at Bucks County Playhouse



Harry Bouvy as God (Photo: Joan Marcus).

By John Dwyer

“An Act of God” is a play by David Javerbaum, a nice Jewish agnostic from “The Daily Show.”

What is odd about the play is that it is not really a play — it is God doing stand up. If you are looking for a protagonist and antagonist onstage, you are not going to find one. It is the Creator and his creation; that is, the comic and the audience. The title is even perhaps a pun as it is God’s act, not dissimilar to Joan River’s act or Chris Rock’s act. And just like a comedy act, it doesn’t have a dramatic arc, but a theme. In this case, the theme is the Ten Commandments and “isn’t it about time they got a re-write?” The director, Tracey Brighten, emphasizes the stand-up comedy aspect by having the set design and costumes reflect a late night talk show, the setting where most of us have seen stand up comedy acts. And, yes, this is funny stuff. But material is only as good as the comic delivering it.

So, how does God fare? Mezza mezza. Harry Bouvy is “The Lord, Our God.” He tells us that in real life, outside of this moment, he is the actor you may have seen on “Law and Order” who looks like Stanley Tucci. Stanley Tucci is from Vatican central casting. And that is ok, but not what I would have preferred. Regardless, Bouvy has boundless energy and is continuously engaging, as only a perfect God can be. The show is pretty much a 75-minute monologue (with a few interruptions from two angelic sidekicks) that flies by and it teaches us a lot.

But, I wonder what could have happened if greater chances were taken in going with the stand up approach. When this was done on Broadway, God was Jim Parsons (“The Big Bang Theory”) and, in a later incarnation, Sean Hayes (“Will and Grace”). Of course, this casting made God seem gay — or at least gayer than what we see on the playhouse stage. Also, Parsons and Hayes are two seasoned sitcom stars.

So, I would like to make two points. One is that casting a normal white guy missed an opportunity, and point two is about acting chops versus comic chops.

Point one: casting the stereotypical God.



Ashley D. Kelley, Harry Bouvy, and Joe Kinosian (Photo: Joan Marcus).

The casting is unusual in that it is not unusual. My perception of God growing up was one of two things. It was God looking like George Bernard Shaw, a la the cover of the album of “My Fair Lady,” or it is his looking like the Pope, which is a white, mid-sized Italian-looking man.

When God is seen as gay, black or as a woman (i.e. Kathleen Turner who appeared in the role in November at the George Street Playhouse in New Brunswick), you realize He is everywhere and in everyone. Unusual casting is an opportunity to make a point. No point gets made by a heterosexual-seeming white man. I am not surprised when God is Stanley Tucci.

Of course, Bouvy could “act” gayer. He did play Carmen Ghia from “The Producers,” according to his bio. (Carmen Ghia is a character that makes Liberace look butch). But I think his direction — and it may be even the playwright’s intent — is for the actor playing God to be a combination of one part God to one part the real life character of the actor. Bringing you back to the philosophical thought that God is not just in the universe, he is in each and every one of us.

Point two: Acting chops versus comic chops. Harry Bouvy acts the hell out of God! He does a great job. That being said, there may be lost opportunities that would have been mined by actually casting a stand-up comedian. There is a moment when the Archangel Gabriel goes out to the audience to see if there are any questions. From what I could tell, the question was scripted and was not really coming from an audience member. Why not let the audience ask a real question? Many stand ups would be fully prepared for that. Certainly, a Margaret Cho or Alec Mapa or David Chappelle would be. As would, I believe, a Jim Parsons or Sean Hayes, both who had the benefit of years of performing their TV shows in front of a live studio audience. In “An Act of God,” there are moments of exposition that can benefit from doing shtick, from taking advantage of a comic’s bag of tricks that could be used to lighten up dead spots, where the pitcher (so to speak) is winding up for the joke.

Though I was entertained by Bouvy, I think he may be more straight man and less comic, sexual preference not implied. Imagine you had the choice of a study partner. Each choice was equally knowledgeable. Both got the same heavenly A+ on the paper. One was Abbot, the other Costello.

If you wanted to learn more, you would go with Abbot. If you wanted to be entertained, you would go with Costello.

But, again, Bouvy is amazing, and it would be a sin not to see this show. The standing ovation at the end of the show is well deserved.

The set looks like it is from a late night talk show and quite clever. It is heavenly place to do standup. Kudos to Reid Thompson. God is joined by two angels who support as Ed McMahon and Doc Severinsen types. Their functions are Ed/Gabriel the Archangel doing interviews in the audience and Michael/Doc Severinsen at the keyboard as needed. The humans playing them are Ashley D. Kelly and Joe Kinosian respectively, and they give divinely inspired performances.

This show has had an interesting road. It started out as tweets that became so popular they became a book “The Last Testament: A Memoir by God.” And then it became a play. God still has an active twitter account. Go to God@theTweetofGod. One of the latest tweets from God on May 20 is “Retweet this and you’ll go to heaven. (Yes, the standards are now that low.)”

Also, I saw that on his Twitter account that he called the President a certain dirty word. I knew that wasn’t a sin. Glad I don’t have purgatory time for that.

The show continues thru June 16, and tickets can be [purchased online](#).