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Bucks County Review: 'Act of God'

by Neal Zoren



Ashley D. Kelley, left, Harry Bouvy, and Joe Kinosian

Harry Bouvy is vivacious portraying God — yes, that God — as a variety show host, writer David Javerbaum proves capable of providing good ideas and decent lines, and Tracy Brigden's direction is brisk as an express train, but nothing short of divine intervention can prevent "An Act of God," the season opener at New Hope's Bucks County Playhouse, from being more than a tediously self-conscious extended party joke that makes you want to go home early.

In Javerbaum's 75-minute opus, God taking corporeal form as one Harry Bouvy (or any actor who happens to be playing the lead), convenes an audience to explain some of his doings and to introduce a new Ten Commandments that is more current and inclusive than the Biblical model. Read "politically correct."

While "An Act of God" offers moments of fancy and occasionally raises a salient point, it is mostly a collection of gag-ridden twaddle that lacks the wit, foresight, perception, or thoughtfulness to elevate it to a piece of whimsy, let alone to render it a pungent comedy or sharp-eyed lampoon.

Javerbaum's material comes off as top-of-the-head shtick the author tossed off without much effort, filled with odd notions that die on the vine because they have nowhere to go and weren't that bright,

poignant, or funny to begin with. Even with Brigden's lively, non-stop approach, the show comes off as smug, self-congratulatory claptrap that never gains the traction to engage, let alone entertain.

Bouvy does his best to light a spark, but "An Act of God" just drones on, showing its seams and asking for acceptance it just doesn't deserve. It's not clever enough to be satirical, not pointed enough to be provocative, and not consistent enough to let you just go with it and take it for minor-league stuff you can enjoy at some mild, basic level like you can with pieces like "Fully Committed" or "Buyer and Cellar."

I kept waiting for Javerbaum to be naughtily irreverent, or even slightly cheeky, but it never happened. All I saw were uninspired clockwork antics that landed with a thud and went nowhere after that. Sure, there's a humorous gambit or two. Javerbaum can craft the occasional laugh, and Bouvy has a comedian's timing. One idea out of a hundred is bound to hit paydirt. In general, the play is one big conceit with little variation, even as a new commandment is revealed, and no forward drive.

How it got to Broadway is a mystery. Or perhaps a miracle. In New Hope, energy and earnest presentation can't save it. If it was longer, and had a second act, I doubt I would have returned for it. Enough was already too much.

Despite the poor quality of the piece, the Bucks County Playhouse gave "An Act of God" the first-class production values that have become the expectation since Alex Fraser, Robyn Goodman, Josh Fiedler, and Stephen Kocis took charge of the theater in 2015.

Reid Thompson's set glitters with television-style tinsel. God's platform consists of a tasteful pale blue sofa on which He can pontificate nicely and get some relief from being on His feet as if he's doing a Johnny Caronesque monologue.

Gina Scherr's lighting keeps up the image of high-tech late-night talk show. It paints the stage with cheery luster that triggers extra animation from Bouvy's God and seems in keeping with Brigden's hell-bent-for-leather pace.

Scherr is smart in muting the Commandments as they come up on companion screens placed upstage-left and right, calligraphic-like letters set against a cloudy – heavenly? – background.

Design elements are attractive and attracting, including the silver curtain resembling vertical blinds Thompson brings in for variation.

Yet you know Javerbaum's script is the culprit when you see how hard Harry Bouvy works to sell his material. Things like pointing to someone in the audience when a specific sin is mentioned, backfire, not because Bouvy does them badly but because they're so trite. "Late Night Catechism" or "Sister Mary Ignatius Explains It All to You" do this kind of audience teasing so much better.

Bouvy is like a motivational speaker trying to whip up his crowd. The problem is the whip Javerbaum gives him is made from capellini. Bouvy's jaunty approach to the material might be appreciated, but Javerbaum's jokes are generally too one-and-done to let Bouvy go on a roll and securely connect with

his audience.

Luckily for him, Bouvy is not in “An Act of God” alone. His God has an archangel (Gabriel) who is also his bandleader sidekick, played with offhand ease by Joe Kinosian. The cleverest part of “An Act of God” might be the tunes Kinosian plays on his keyboard to musically illustrate a point.

Ashley D. Kelley, as another archangel (Michael), has the thankless task of pretending she’s God’s roving reporter taking questions from the audience. The questions Javerbaum cooks up to challenge God include some meaty ones that might juice up the discussion, but the author has God dismiss every one of them with some lame excuse, such as the need for faith or the answer being too complex.

Kelley, like Bouvy and Kinosian, is a trouper. She keeps a smile on her face and enthusiasm in her voice as she pretends to bring the crowd’s concerns to Himself. Brigden is astute in structuring the show so Kelley’s bits seem like a natural part of the format and never an interruption. The bright red dress costumer Michael Krass provides Kelley adds to the zest of Brigden’s production. Alas, zest and the similar words used to indicate this show’s breeziness cannot overcome its banality.

An Act of God, Bucks County Playhouse, 70 South Main Street, New Hope, Saturday. June 16. Tuesday and Thursday, 7:30 p.m., Friday and Saturday, 8 p.m., and Wednesday, Thursday, Saturday, and Sunday, 2 p.m. \$40 to \$80 to \$40. 215-862-2121 or www.bcptheater.org