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Irreverent comedy 'An Act of God' opens at Bucks County Playhouse

(6 photos, unable to save or copy)

By Andy Vineberg

Harry Bouvy, who stars as the title character, knows the play has the potential to offend, but believes the humor and emotional payoff will make for an enjoyable night at the theater.

New York City actor Harry Bouvy had promised himself he'd never do another one-man show. Four of them were enough.

But when director Tracy Brigden, a woman he had worked with twice before at the City Theatre Company in Pittsburgh, asked him to star in her first show at the Bucks County Playhouse in New Hope, he couldn't tell her no. The chance to work again with a director he liked and respected and to perform at the Playhouse for the first time were too alluring to pass up.

Besides, how often does an actor get to play God?

"I was born to play the role," he quipped.

Bouvy, whose stage credits include national tours of "Wicked" and "The Producers," stars as the title character in the irreverent Broadway comedy "An Act of God," which opened this weekend at the Playhouse and runs through June 16.

The play, from former "Daily Show" head writer and executive producer David Javerbaum, originated as a series of tweets from God and later became a book before being adapted for the stage. In the story, God has tired of the Ten Commandments and comes to Earth to present 10 new ones, and he does so in the guise of a human actor — in this case, Bouvy. (On Broadway, the part was played by sitcom stars Jim Parsons and Sean Hayes).

"The convention of the show is God has gone into the body of charming actor Harry Bouvy. In that way, he's playing himself playing God," said Brigden, who spent 16 years as the City Theatre's artistic director. "Like the same way George Burns wasn't exactly the cliché, classic version of the powerful Zeus-like old man with a long white beard, this is another kind of take on God, that's more human.

If You Go

“An Act of God”

When: through June 16

Where: 70 S. Main St., New Hope

Tickets: \$40-\$80

Did you know: The play’s writer, David Javerbaum, won 13 Emmy Awards for his work on “The Daily Show”

Information: 215-862-2121; bcptheater.org

“It allows a lot of leeway to personalize it, which is what makes this production unique and very different than the one on Broadway and the ones around the country. It is God in the body of whoever is the actor. The New Hope production is the only one of its kind because it’s Harry Bouvy as God.”

Technically, it isn’t a one-man show, as Bouvy is joined onstage by archangels Michael (Ashley D. Kelley) and Gabriel (Joe Kinosian). But the bulk of the dialogue is his.

As God, he waxes philosophical and cracks one-liners on topics such as sports, politics and pop culture, with some specific messages for Kanye West and Matthew McConaughey, among others.

The way Bouvy sees it, God can look at heated topics such as the divisive political climate with a lot more perspective and humor than humans can.

“I’d like to believe that if there’s a God, he’s fairly amused, just because if God is up there, he’s been up there millions of years, or 6,000 years anyway, depending on who you’re talking to,” he said by telephone last week before rehearsal in New York. “I think he has more of a perspective on the passage of time than we do as human beings. He probably sees Donald Trump as just a blip in time, this is just a thing that’s happening, but that’ll change and then something else will happen. Hopefully, he’s got a sense of humor about it.”

Bouvy, who was raised Catholic while growing up in Pittsburgh, considers himself agnostic now, acknowledging he has no idea whether God exists. He knows there is potential for people to be offended by the play, but doesn’t think it makes fun of the idea of God, or people who believe in the idea of God.

“The show absolutely pushes the envelope on several fronts,” he said, “but what I certainly didn’t know or expect about this play was there’s an emotional payoff, that God, like characters in most traditional plays, goes through a kind of change by the end.

“When I was first asked to do it, I thought it’d mostly be one long series of jokes. There’s still a lot of funny stuff, but I didn’t know there was going to be this actual shift, this emotional payoff that kind of makes the jokes more palatable. I think there are some things in God’s life he regrets, and rather than look at them and face them, he makes jokes about them. By the end, he’s not making jokes anymore because he’s had a realization about himself.”

Of course, this being an edgy comedy, that emotional journey is not without some language and opinions from God you most certainly will not find in the Bible. But those aren't necessarily the parts of the play with the most potential to rile some audience members.

Bouvy's cast mate Kelley, a Temple University graduate, is the daughter of a pastor, and she was able to share some insight with the cast and crew about which sections of the play might be offensive to her father.

"When we tell the story of Adam and Eve, for example, we sort of change the Bible story to fit the needs of the play, and that was something he might be offended by," Bouvy said. "Which I thought was interesting. I thought people might just be offended by the fact that God swears a couple of times, or God talks frankly about sex a few times, things like that. But it's more about how the Bible stories are changed in the play, or seen through a different point of view.

"I think good theater, if you come not wanting to be offended, maybe you should not see a show. I think shows are meant to provoke thought, that's where I ease my mind with it."

Brigden acknowledged that, as a visiting director, audience reaction is not her concern the way it was during her years running the theater in Pittsburgh. But she believes the play has the potential to be enjoyed by people with a wide range of tastes.

"I do think the play is an equal-opportunity offender," she said. "Certainly, (Javerbaum) wrote for (Stephen) Colbert, Jon Stewart, so his bent is very liberal. But I suppose, politics aside, it's really a primer on how to be a better human.

"In this moment in our country, our world, we can all be better humans, and I think this is a good reminder for everyone, no matter what your political or religious leanings."

You also need an actor with the right combination of "chops and charm" to deliver that message, and Brigden believes Bouvy is perfect for the job.

"For the audience to fall in love with the character and want to go on a journey with them and hang out with them for 75 minutes, the actor has to be funny but also have a certain charisma and charm, a sort of incorrigible funny sarcasm and still be very likable," she said.

"Harry is really charming, really charismatic, really engaging, and you want to hang out with him as a person and an actor."

For Bouvy, whose last one-man show was a one-man stage adaptation of "It's a Wonderful Life" in 2005, in which he played every character from the movie (and felt he was being judged by audience members on how accurate his impressions were), this show was too enticing to pass up, even if the role does require an incredible amount of work and preparation.

"I think it's just a really fun evening in the theater," he said. "I think there's something very profound in this piece about what we say about what God is, and what God wants from us as people. You just have to keep an open mind for the first part of it, and allow yourself to have an enjoyable time and hopefully not take it too seriously. If people do that, I think they'll ultimately have a great time."