

2nd Story Previews Impressive *Sons of the Prophet*

2nd Story Theatre's dominance of the East Bay continues as they solidify their expansion in Warren with a production of Stephen Karam's 2012 Pulitzer finalist, *Sons of the Prophet*. Having just concluded a magnificent showing of *Dancing at Lughnasa* in the main theater (UpStage), 2nd Story's new space downstairs (DownStage) follows the celebrated *Lobby Hero* with this intimate, yet expansive tragicomedy. 2nd Story is no stranger to Karam's work, having delivered the exquisite *Speech and Debate* a few summers back, and Director Wendy Overly adds her distinctive touch to a piece that seems wild and mundane in one fell swoop. *Motif* was invited to attend the first preview performance to get a sense of what is in store for audiences by the time the show enters its official run. Regardless of how the piece gels and settles in after further performances, Overly and company have managed to fulfill Karam's desire to illuminate suffering and loss with pointed humor and dogged perseverance.

Unlike the ebullient *Speech and Debate*, however, *Sons* sputters after its initial exposition peters out. The script concerns the Douaihys, a Lebanese-American family suffering compounded loss and adversity in the wastes of eastern Pennsylvania. The sons, Joseph and Charles, navigate the recent, somewhat bizarre loss of their parents as they struggle to care for their aged, ailing Uncle Bill. Both sons are gay, Uncle Bill is an ardent bigot and Joe's acerbic employer, Gloria, is blackmailing him for a career boost (or prescription drugs ... or both). This setup leads to a somewhat dizzying array of plot twists and amusing secondary characters as we glean what seem to be overtly autobiographical details from Karam's script. What is set up as a cathartic race to the finish, symbolized most poignantly by Joseph's phantom pains that have curbed his Olympic dreams, ends up more like a studied stroll across the finish line. Karam seems to tell us that life simply doesn't work like a Lifetime movie - we laugh, we love, we die and everything in between can get very, very messy.

So it goes, and Overly's cast takes a very difficult script and makes the most of it, succeeding, in some cases, spectacularly. Out of an overall solid cast, featuring many 2nd Story regulars (including Paula Faber who rallies to channel an inner Carol Burnett in a tour de force toward the end of the show), the standout here is Vince Petronio as the willfully inappropriate, yet heartfelt, Uncle Bill. While it would seem that Joseph's Job-like struggles to frame his own suffering would be the play's through line, it is Petronio's Lebanese Archie Bunker who becomes a pivot point for all concerned. The two sons must care for him while struggling with their own issues: the loss of their parents, their socio-religious identity and the challenges of homosexuality in a small town. Gloria intrudes on their home and winds up as a sort of uneasy ally and Vin, the culprit of the accident that took away the family stability must seek acceptance, if not approbation, from Bill more so than Joseph. This may not be what Karam intended, but his forceful, memorable performance serves to make the wonderfully realized chemistry between Joseph (an understated Jed Hancock-Brainerd) and Charles (a delightfully sardonic Andrew Iacovelli) subservient to Petronio's grounded, yet perfectly crafted character work. Charles Lafond (seen recently in Counter Productions' *Speed the Plow*) does a neat Anderson Cooper take while Sharon Carpentier and Susan Powers handle the background comic relief in a play that needs all it can get, lest we start weeping.

Trevor Elliot's sets for 2nd Story never fail to amaze, and here, with Moe Assad, he delivers yet again. Audiences enter the DownStage space to a deceptively simple room, a two-tiered monolith that comes alive through clever use of projections and lighting with the flexibility of moveable set pieces and carefully choreographed changes that create a wide variety of tableaux. Lighting designer Steve McLellan creates pockets of reality within these confines and allows us to make the necessary leaps in time and space required to keep up with the constantly shifting scenes and scenarios. Special notice for costume designer Jessie Darrell Jarbadan, who manages to make the appalling Uncle Bill seem cuddly while Gloria's awful, yet flattering dress in the first scene allows us to forgive the inanity of statements like, "You're white the way a Jewish person is white." The absurd is the norm in Nazareth, PA. Small towns hide a litany of stories and most of them are sad. We laugh at the plight of the Douaihys even though nothing truly funny is occurring. Tragedy wears a clown nose and bigotry wears animal prints. *Sons of the Prophet* may well be titled *Sins of the Father*, since no one here chose their suffering, only the manner in which they approach it. Wendy Overly and her cast didn't write Karam's hilarious, yet plodding script, but their choice in handling it triumphs over all adversity. DownStage at 2nd Story is shaping up to be a worthy companion to its UpStage predecessor; it may be time to schedule even more drives out to Warren and remember that some of the best professional theater in the state is way out on the East Bay.

2nd Story Theatre presents Stephen Karam's Sons of the Prophet October 31 through November 24th in their DownStage playing space. 28 Market Street, Warren, RI, 02885. Call 401-247-4200 or visit <http://2ndstorytheatre.com/downstage/#/sons-of-the-prophet> for more tickets and information.