

Book of Jolivet: Wilbury Group's World

Premiere of Cain + Abel



Photo by Maggie Hall

God is kind of a dick. Why does he allow so much suffering? Why all the smiting? What is his obsession with blood sacrifice? For their latest production, The Wilbury Group staged the world premiere of Ben Jolivet's *Cain + Abel*, a thoughtful take on the impotence of God in a world of temptation and hurt.

This is a new play. I think that scares people, somehow. If they're going to spend the money to go to the theater, the play had better be worth it. So let me be clear. *Cain + Abel* is a good play. Well worth your while. Easily up to par with the work Wilbury produces and in keeping with their progressive aesthetic. *Cain + Abel* goes like this: Cain, an intellectual, and his brother, Abel, a meathead, have philosophical differences about the limits of religion, namely sacrifice, in their lives. Abel is married to Mariah, but finds himself tempted by the slithery Lilith. Cain develops a relationship with a mysterious Wanderer and has an existential awakening. While sex and temptation drive Abel deeper into guilt, he feels the need to repent, to surrender something to God. The resulting climax is a satisfying spin on the old story.

Playwright Ben Jolivet has crafted a dramatically tight, existential think piece in the key of Genesis. This could have been a preachy play where characters talk at length about purpose and identity in a Judeo-Christian vs. Atheist tone, but instead Jolivet demonstrates his themes using real drama — his characters want things and they act. Jolivet has a knack for comedy and delivers some gems of poetry and wisdom throughout the play.

The production itself is totally engaging. Visually and dramatically interesting from start to finish. The set is a rock garden-slash-sandbox filled with actual sand. (My sympathies to the actors and stage crew who got sand all up in their crevices.) Director Susie Schutt made great use of the sandy stage, having characters crawl and perch and roll in the dirt. Floating dust added an extra dimension of theatricality. These ethereal clouds added real weight to moments of stillness in the play. Not sure if it was entirely intentional, but definitely cool.

The cast was solid. As Cain and Abel, Jeff Hodge and Tobias Wilson, respectively, share some tender, brotherly moments and navigated seamlessly through comedy into tense conflict. Roger Lemelin's resonant voice and epic beard make him ideal as the Wanderer. And Melissa Penick is indulgently evil as Lilith, not to mention hilarious.

I liked this play. Drug use, abundant sex, profanity — it passed all the marks. I commend the Wilbury Group for their initiatives in developing new works. If the scene is going to survive, Rhode Island needs writers for the stage. And good ones. Ben Jolivet nailed it with *Cain + Abel* and I look forward to his future collaborations with Wilbury.