

Good People Gets a Positive Judgement



“You have to be a selfish prick to get anywhere.” (David

Lindsay-Abaire, *Good People*)

We all know someone who pulled themselves up by the bootstraps, worked hard and made good. We often congratulate them and praise their achievements. It is at this point that the judging begins. Did the success change them? Are they still in touch with their roots, their family and the old neighborhood? If so, then we often decide that they were always “good people.” If not, they “sold out” and forgot where they came from. And what of the considerably larger number who don’t make it out and continue to struggle for the rest of their lives? That being most of us, we tend to base our character evaluations on actions and demeanor, choices and the maintenance of relationships rather than status. Once again, we bestow the praise, “good people.” The phrase is a value judgment and one that is earned and maintained by a shifting sense of criteria. To be called “good people” - is it what we do, or say, or are private, positive intentions enough? We judge people based on how we relate to them, but under what rules do we judge ourselves?

This character assignation is an inextricable part of our lives and frames the ever increasing divide between the have and the have-nots in Lindsay-Abaire’s look at his own South Boston upbringing. *Good People* raises many questions, but primarily he asks if hard work and sacrifice is really enough to succeed in life. Where do luck (and often dumb luck at that) and opportunity factor in to the equation? The Gamm, under the astute direction of Rachel Walshe, explore those questions in a play that makes us laugh at ourselves while we re-evaluate how we determine a person’s true character and the meaning of success.

The sound design by Kerry Callery draws us into a blue collar, almost white trash atmosphere even before the show starts, with its WHJY-inspired 70s-80s litany of jukebox heroes, often with a nod to Boston (i.e., Billy Squier and The Cars) and the days of big hair and denim. Clever, as we don’t hear sounds of the present day as much as we are reminded of the place in which our main characters find themselves stuck, treading water sometime in the latter part of the 20th century while the world passes them by. The beautifully designed set by Jessica Hill is a sprawling masterpiece, placing Margaret (Margie) and her folk in a grungy, yet cozy wood-paneled world of bingo and handcrafts while her former neighbor and boyfriend Mike Dillon’s world is white, antiseptic and tastefully pristine. In the second act, the set fully becomes Mike’s world and panels of white slot into place to obscure Margie’s life and immerse her in the possibility that all of this, her former lover’s 1 percent paradise, is tantalizingly within reach. Margie and her adult, special needs daughter are struggling to pay the rent,

keep a job and keep afloat while Mike, “good people” by all accounts, is now a married doctor living in tony Chestnut Hill. At the suggestion of a friend, Jean (played with irascible wit and earthiness by Casey Seymour Kim at her finest), Margie visits Mike, hat in hand, to beg for a job. Mike clearly is uncomfortable, but is eventually guilted by Margie into allowing her to come to a dinner party on the off chance she might meet a wealthy patron who can offer her work. When Margie receives a call that Mike’s party is cancelled, she assumes it’s a lie and is determined to show up anyway, but not before Jean plants the idea in Margie’s head that she ought to tell Mike that her daughter is his in the hopes that he will provide the child support that has been apparently missing from the supposedly absent real father.

It is at this point that the idea of what constitutes “good people” is put to the test. Mike’s wife, Kate, is black, a fact that does not go unnoticed or unmentioned in the course of events as Mike and Margie’s shared past is slowly unraveled. Jeanine Kane never fails to deliver for The Gamm, even if some roles aren’t quite a perfect fit. Here, though, role and actor are a perfect marriage and Kane gives an award-worthy performance, imbuing this edgy denizen of Southie with pathos and fragile beauty. Bill Mootos also shines as Mike, drawing out the layers that Lindsay-Abair skillfully weaves, ensuring that Mike is neither good nor bad, black nor white, Southie nor Chestnut Hill. It is rare to feel such anger and empathy at once for a character and Walshe has skillfully allowed Mootos to get out of the way of the script and simply be a conduit for this carefully sculpted character. The climactic scene in Mike’s house is one of the finest three-person triangulation of intentions you’ll witness on any stage. Mia Ellis is grounded yet triumphant as Mike’s wife, Kate, struggling to make sense of these two people who have so much past and have such a potential impact on her present.

As much as the three principals carry the show, however, this is often an ensemble piece, evidenced perfectly by the first scene in the bingo hall, where the symbolism of blind luck is deftly explored while Margaret Melozzi and Marc Mancini join Kane and Seymour Kim in a riotous display of comic timing and perfectly handled Boston accents. This is probably one of the best roles Mancini has had to date with The Gamm and a sign of better work to come. We only get to see Margie explore the comic potential of the fish-out-of-water routine that is her visit to Chestnut Hill, but we would love to see the other three in a similar situation, so realized are their characters. A spinoff, perhaps?

Good People could end with the safe ending of ambiguity, leaving us to “answer for ourselves” the questions of character and intentions that are presented by Margie’s visit to Mike’s house, but Lindsay-Abair takes the challenging route of giving us definitive answers in a stunning and rather unexpected denouement that packs more of a wallop than one would expect as the play trails off. It is these very answers that force us to reexamine *Good People* over and over. Suspicion and ambiguity only breed more of the same, but hard facts force us to choose a side. Does pride come before a fall or does sticking by our convictions make us, if not better people, at least good ones?

The Sandra Feinstein-Gamm Theater presents Good People, by David Lindsay-Abair, through December 8th. For more information on show times and tickets, visit <http://www.gammtheatre.org/> or call 401-723-4266