

The Puppet that Tested and Reaffirmed My Faith in Humanity: A review of Burbage's Hand to God

Though the play involves hand puppets, Robert Ashkin's *Hand to God* explores issues like sexual repression, sexual deviance, violence, alcoholism, compulsive overeating and death; and, therefore, is NOT meant for children. This is a play for an adult audience to get down with their flawed selves. The Burbage Theatre Company has boldly decided to take this play on and give *Hand to God* a Rhode Island premiere. With a tight-knit, ballsy cast and aptly placed sound effects, this small theater company flawlessly conveys all our fears and hopes about human nature.

Hand to God is about Jason, a shy kid who lives in a small, God-fearing Texas town and whose father has passed away. After his mom Margery takes over the Christain Puppet Ministry, Jason brings in Tyrone, the most irreverent, foul-mouthed hand puppet ever. It seems as if Jason has not only lost his father, but also his mind or even worse, he's lost himself entirely to the horrific yet hilarious Tyrone. The cute girl Jessica, the bad boy Timothy, Jason's mother and Jason's pastor all must deal with Tyrone, who seems to be giving everyone the bird.

Jason (played by Brian Kozak) masters his dual-performance. He plays a tense boy with eyes that glance at the floor often and a voice that seems to come out only when it's forced to. Brian Kozak must also play a puppet who is the exact opposite of Jason. Tyrone has a beaming, cartoonish voice, a narcissistic personality and no filter. The puppet "master" and his puppet have different personalities and voices; yet Brian Kozak handles both individuals (Jason and Tyrone) with sharp acting and emotional conviction.

A classic example of Kozak's duality is when Jason watches Jessica, his crush, on the swingset, and Jason feels awkwardly guarded. He is unable to accept her compliments, curls his upper body into a ball, and asks her to stop. Meanwhile, the puppet is smiling and having fun. Suddenly, something happens that is very embarrassing for a teenage boy and the puppet and Jason have opposite reactions to the situation. For the audience, it's quite the phenomenon to be able to laugh and cringe at the same time.

Because he plays two roles, I consider Brian Kozak to be the main actor though all actors have pivotal roles, scenes, standout performance and are far too important to be called supporting actors. Jessica (played by Maggie Papa) is convincing as a cool adolescent, who's good at sussing things out and able to take matters into her own hands. She introduces an epic plot twist into the play that involves her puppet Jolene, and this elevates her status — she's no longer just a love interest of Jason, she's a hero.

Margery (played by Melissa Penick) is Jason's mother and she does a great job of being a woman so tense, she's about to have a nervous breakdown. In my opinion, she never actually has a nervous breakdown. Instead she churns all her tension into adventurous doings that involve jumping on tables and a beanbag. Kudos to her for doing these acrobatic scenes in high heels.

Pastor Greg (played by Michael Thibeault) balances the marble pedestal of the religious figure and the insecurities of a lonely (and presumably horny) man. Pastor Greg tries to be fearless and perfect, yet hypocritically explain his flaws away. For the audience, his drawn-out speeches incorporated into everyday conversation are fittingly embarrassing, endearing and dogmatic.

Timothy (played by Andrew Iacovelli) is the cliché troubled teen — confused, vulnerable and angry. It's so believable I find myself saying this teen shouldn't be here (in reality, Iacovelli is past his teenage years).

As for the set, it was highly versatile, but fit neatly into the play's linear structure. There was only one set. It included a cheap bookshelf, bright posters with singing cartoonish children in robes, and a calendar filled out with the dates of puppet practice and BINGO. The table doubled as a car and a bed. With simple sound effects, like the shutting of a door and the clicking of a seatbelt, I was able to believe it was a van. And with a blanket and the dimming of lights, I was able to believe it was a bed. A swing by the table made me believe the kids were playing outside in a different scene.

As for costume design, the minimalist choices worked seamlessly with the characters' performances. The wound-up mother had buttoned blouses and heels. Jason's daily wear was composed of a sloppy T-shirt, baggy jeans and running shoe — the classic high school nerd move. In fact, some audience members might recognize Jason's running shoe brand as the same brand worn by unfortunate souls from their own high school days.

The actors had rich accents, which they stuck to 100%, but since I am not from Texas, I couldn't place where they were from. A bit of context for the accents would have been helpful so I knew they were Texan and not generic Southern accents.

Hand to God is an intense play. Because of the small room, the fake blood in the action scenes is as graphic as it gets. I felt like everything was really happening in front of me because I was less than a foot away from the actors. I had to move my feet to keep from tripping them and was, thus, literally sucked into the action.

I liked the discomfort of being so near the drama. The play is about the uncomfortable sides we each

have in ourselves and what we'll do when something (such as a puppet) pushes us. The play's message is about ego and its link to how we as humans are connected. As outrageous things unfolded on stage, I felt deep empathy for all these characters — even the crazy puppet at times. Perhaps people don't have to feel empathy for the devil, but we can feel empathy for people's devilish sides when they come out.

Hand to God runs through Sun, Dec 15. Burbage Theatre Company, 59 Blackstone Boulevard, Pawtucket.