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Theatre

Theatre Archives

Prodigal Son

By Colin Thomas
Publish Date: 23-Mar-2006

By Shawn Macdonald. Directed by Katrina Dunn. A Touchstone Theatre and Pacific Theatre coproduction. At Pacific Theatre until April 9

Prodigal Son looks like a first script by a new playwright—a very, very good new playwright.

Shawn Macdonald has cowritten two comedies with Gary Jones (*World's Greatest Guy* and *Fear Knot*), but this is his first drama and his debut solo effort.

In it, he tells the story of Peter, a deeply spiritual guy who grew up in a doctrinaire Catholic family but rejected Catholicism because he felt, with good reason, that the church hated him for being gay.

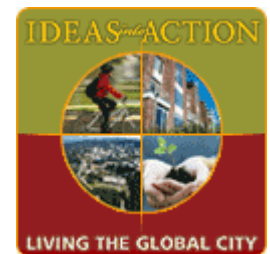
Near the beginning of the play, the adult Peter seeks out a therapist because he's being overwhelmed by episodes of spiritual ecstasy; without the religion of his childhood, he doesn't know how to integrate them. The script moves between present-time scenes—with his counsellor, partner, and family—and flashbacks in which we see him growing up. The present crisis is about whether or not Peter will come out to his conservatively Christian father, who is dying, apparently of emphysema.

The brilliance of the first act is that it makes unbridled transcendence really fucking spooky. "I can feel currents of energy," Peter says, eyes blazing. "I can see through things." Fortunately for Peter, his therapist understands his crisis as an indication of his emotional capacity. Fortunately for the play, the counsellor, Carol, is a complexly flawed character. She's helpful even though she muddles her own messed-up life with Peter's.

Macdonald does fall into freshman traps. He writes too many short scenes in too many locations. Because the play is therapy-based, its themes are right on the surface and the transitions from therapy to flashbacks are sometimes obvious. Barclay, the protagonist's partner, is such a screamer that it's hard to imagine the buttoned-down Peter falling for him. In that sense, Barclay feels like a bit of a comic contrivance. And the play's climactic confrontation is melodramatic.

The script's originality, intelligence, and depth of feeling overcome all of these impediments, however. The scenes in which the adult Peter and the child Peter are on-stage together feel so psychologically potent that they made me ache. Macdonald gives Peter's uptight mother a speech in which she spins variations on a distinctly profane word; it's both hilarious and moving. And the play's resolution had me in tears. It's a dramaturgical truism that you should never write a script that hinges on someone saying, "I'm sorry"—it's too easy; it's what we all want to hear—but it comes from a surprising angle here, and it works.

Under Katrina Dunn's direction, this Touchstone Theatre/Pacific Theatre coproduction is very successful. Craig Erickson delivers a winningly understated





yet intense portrait of Peter. Gina Chiarelli reveals Carol's radiance as well as her fatigue. Double-cast as Barclay and Peter's jock brother, Richard, Bob Frazer has an unerring sense of the humour and heart in both. Alex Pimm, who plays the young Peter, possesses a stillness many older performers would do well to emulate.

For many of us, religion has made it difficult to reconcile sex and spirituality. Prodigal Son provides a cathartic reminder that they spring from the same place.

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