

# The Puppet-Riddled *Hand to God* Is Irreverent and Thoughtful

Actors Bridge Ensemble presents Robert Askins' play through Dec. 19 at Darkhorse Chapel

BY MARTIN BRADY — DEC 14, 2016 4 PM



Just when the theatrical holiday season threatened to be overwhelmed by maybe too much tradition — warmed-over annual favorites, TV-special schmaltz, etc. — along comes Actors Bridge Ensemble with a surprisingly edgy antidote. The company's area-premiere

production of Robert Askins' *Hand to God* serves up a slam-dunk hit of an adult-themed black comedy — innocent on the outside, devilish on the inside, and with the immediate rewards that come with refreshingly sophisticated wit.

Playwright and Texas native Askins' strangely alluring opus travels in the same generally subversive world as the zany 2003 puppet musical *Avenue Q* — both shows were presented in New York by the same producer — but Askins has his own dark vision, with the puppet gimmick working as the “harmless” vehicle that serves to sanction a lot of spicy language and racy situations.

The playwright draws on his Lone Star State background, his work set at a fundamental Christian church in the devout small town of Cypress, where newly widowed Margery is in charge of the puppet club, whose teenage members include her son Jason; Jessica, whom Jason has a crush on; and Tim, a precocious bad-boy.

While the puppet club prepares for an upcoming performance, the forces of dysfunction and overactive libido evoke some questionable behavior in the group, mainly an explosive sexual liaison between Margery and Tim, a situation that shocks Pastor Greg, who himself has designs on the vulnerable, still-grieving widow. Meanwhile, hiding almost exclusively behind his hand puppet Tyrone, there's the wounded Jason, still confused over his dad's sudden passing from a heart attack, and a virtual powder keg of unresolved youthful emotions. Those become channeled through the foul-mouthed Tyrone, whose serial blasphemies and scattershot verbal attacks are aimed at church members and address many taboo subjects.

Actors Bridge doesn't bother with a disclaimer in their program, but *Hand to God* definitely contains explicit language, profanity and sexual situations — all of it guaranteed to intrigue mature theatergoers. Mitch Massaro, in his ABE directorial debut, gains high marks for the playful yet tightly specific staging that speeds us through Askins' oh-so-smart, rapid-fire dialogue and the darkly humorous bits of puppet business that elicit minor shock and major laughter.

Leading the well-cast ensemble is young Blake Holliday, who portrays the fragile, sensitive Jason with an appealingly broken kind of charm yet also especially impresses with his dramatic characterization, voicing and physical manipulation of the sharp-tongued, at-times-wicked Tyrone. Kim Bretton, one of Nashville's finest actors, isn't seen nearly often enough on local stages. But when she comes out to play, satisfaction is guaranteed. Her Margery is a complex figure, bundling motherly anguish with pent-up sexual energy and inspiring our sympathy within the boundaries of her personal challenges. The other well-focused performances are turned in by Jordan Ravellette as the coarse, hypersexual Tim, Chuck Long as the proprietary pastor and Britt Byrd as Jessica, who displays her own adept puppetry skills in an extended Act 2 scene that catches Jason unawares — and where foreplay proves both hot and hilarious.

Massaro also serves as technical director, and he oversees the creative puppetry

designs provided by Sailors & Maidens, plus Amanda Creech's production design, which simply and amiably fills the Darkhorse Chapel space with the things that bespeak the church ministry's youthful activities, but end up spawning more adult-oriented realities.

For all its wildly imaginative entertainment value, *Hand to God* nevertheless provides a thoughtful exploration of the nature of faith, morality and the human condition, and these uniquely blended qualities well qualify it for seasonally appropriate — if decidedly different — viewing.

*Hand to God*

Presented by Actors Bridge Ensemble through Dec. 19 at Darkhorse Chapel



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