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Actors Bridge embraces its dark side with 'Hand to God'

Amy Stumpfl, For The Tennessean 12:28 p.m. CT Dec. 10, 2016



(Photo: Kara McLeland)

Once in a while the stars align, pairing the right play with the right company and the right venue. That's certainly how it felt Friday night, as Actors Bridge Ensemble opened its sensational production of the Tony-nominated Broadway hit "Hand to God."

Written by Robert Askins, this outrageous black comedy follows a shy, sensitive teen named Jason, who finds a creative outlet through a Christian Puppet Ministry in the small town of Cypress, Texas. But things get complicated when Jason's puppet, Tyrone, goes rogue with a foul mouth and shocking personality all its own.

It may sound like a recipe for uproarious fun. And no doubt, some audience members will prefer to take the irreverent material at face value — from the uncensored rants to the brilliantly racy puppet sex. But Askins' well-crafted tale goes much deeper than that, providing a dark — yet decidedly tender — exploration of the human condition.

Director Mitch Massaro demonstrates a sharp eye, balancing high-flying comedic elements with great emotional truth. He makes the most of the intimate Darkhorse Chapel, which is ideally suited to the play's church basement setting — complete with Sunday school posters, cotton-ball craft projects and even a split "Dutch door" that leads to the kitchen.

Of course, it doesn't hurt to have the considerable talents of Cassie Hamilton and Nashville puppet troupe Sailors & Maidens in your corner, either. As assistant director, Hamilton ensures the success of this production with superb design and polished technique. I especially enjoyed Tyrone's progressively demented "looks" as the story unfolds.

Blake Holliday makes a sensational Actors Bridge debut in the daunting dual roles of Jason and Tyrone. So successful is Holliday in creating two distinctive characters, that he is able to carry entire scenes, convincingly conversing with his own hand. And as Tyrone's behavior becomes increasingly erratic (and even violent), Holliday amps up Jason's response, transmitting genuine shock and horror through his eyes.

As Jason's recently widowed mother Margery, Kim Bretton offers a tantalizing portrait of grief and emotion, painfully vacillating between Southern fortitude and wild-eyed fury. Likewise, Jordan Ravellette is fantastic as the brooding bully Tim, infusing each scene with a gleeful blend of testosterone and trouble.

Chuck Long steps beyond the potentially cheesy caricature of Pastor Greg, offering a surprisingly layered performance. And Britt Byrd is perfectly charming as Jason's bookish love interest Jessica. The scene in which she and Jason finally "connect" is undoubtedly one of the evening's best.

Admittedly, such bawdy humor isn't for everyone — and it certainly isn't for children. But beyond the unholy exploits, this foul-mouthed fable poses substantial questions about faith, family and the importance of finding your own voice. And I can't think of a better company to spread the good word than Actors Bridge Ensemble.

If you go

What: Actors Bridge Ensemble presents the Nashville premiere of "Hand to God"

When: Through December 19. Performances at 7 p.m., Thursdays-Sundays.

Where: Actors Bridge Studio at Darkhorse Chapel, 4610 Charlotte Ave., Nashville (entrance on 47th Avenue)

Tickets: \$25 (\$30 at the door)

Contact: <https://goo.gl/KMquRw>

Intended for mature audiences.

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