

There is power in Re:Union

Thought-provoking play asks tough questions about God and sacrifice

BY JO LEDINGHAM, CONTRIBUTING WRITER OCTOBER 27, 2011



Alexa Devine and Evan Frayne appear in Re:Union at Pacific Theatre until Nov. 12.

Photograph by: submitted, for Vancouver Courier

Re:Union

At Pacific Theatre until Nov. 12

Tickets: 604-731-5518, pacifictheatre.org

The Biblical story of Abraham and Isaac is a troubling one for Christians and non-Christians alike. The Old Testament God just seems to be messing with Abraham's head when he demands the sacrifice of his son Isaac and then—after Abraham has shown his willingness to obey—lets him off the hook. Abraham proves his devotion to God, but what of young Isaac? Did anyone ask him if he wanted to be part of God's experiment?

This is the point at which playwright Sean Devine sees—or creates—a parallel between Abraham and Norman Morrison, who on Nov. 2, 1965, doused himself with kerosene, lit a match and immolated

himself outside the office of Robert S. McNamara, then U.S. Minister of Defense. Morrison, a Quaker and academic, was appalled by the bombing of North Vietnam and could see no better way to show his outrage. He took along his one-year-old daughter Emily, but, unlike Abraham who was excused by God, Morrison appears to have had a change of heart and handed her off to a bystander before lighting the match.

Directed by John Langs with set and lights by John Webber and sound by Noah Drew, this is a powerful and striking piece of theatre. Huge projections, including real-time video of the characters and black-and-white film clips of the Vietnam War, are thrown up against one wall. A sacrificial “altar” dominates centre stage—a constant visual reminder of the link the playwright implies between Abraham and Morrison.

Re-Union is set between Oct. 30 and Nov. 2, 2001 when Emily, now an adult, comes to the Pentagon to confront McNamara, now in his 80s. She plans to make her own political statement against the pending war in Iraq and she needs McNamara’s help. That’s not likely, although it’s clear McNamara had been losing his resolve when he either resigned or was asked to step down as defense minister in 1967. He could see the war was un-winnable.

This is challenging ground playwright Devine plows and he raises profound questions. Did Morrison stop the war? No. Did he make a difference? Maybe, maybe not. Was his self-immolation “that horribly selfish thing,” in McNamara’s words, or was it selfless? Are the consequences of inaction more dire than the consequences of action?

These are huge ethical questions, and Devine addresses them head-on. Cutting in and out of the action in 2001—with the clock ticking towards Emily’s own intended act of terrorism—are flashbacks to Morrison’s college lectures prior to his suicide. He compares Hegel and Kierkegaard, the ethical man and the man of God. There’s some heavy intellectual lifting here, but it’s well worth putting your metaphorical shoulder to the metaphorical wheel. In a play like Re:Union, there are no easy answers.

Andrew Wheeler is McNamara who was, for a while, convinced that “data” and “acceptable kill ratios” would prove his strategy right. Wheeler portrays him as a highly complex man, a man caught in a moment in history where, according to Emily, he could have made a difference but failed to do so. Will he now make up for it?

Evan Frayne is Morrison, a God-fearing man ready to sacrifice himself for a principle; “Let my life speak,” Morrison declares. Frayne shows us a man desperately torn between his love for his family, country and God.

Alexa Devine is Emily, and she presents the character as an intelligent, articulate and determined woman who comes to question the wisdom of what she is about to do.

These are three gripping performances that guide us through the intellectual and philosophical deep waters of this play. Co-produced by Horseshoes and Hand Grenades and Pacific Theatre, Re:Union fulfills the mandate of both companies—to produce tough, compelling, thought-provoking theatre.

joled@telus.net

© Copyright (c) Vancouver Courier