



TUESDAY, OCTOBER 08, 2019

MICHAEL GILTZ AT WORK

THEATER: Wrestling With Faith in "Heroes Of The Fourth Turning"

HEROES OF THE FOURTH TURNING ** 1/2 out of ****
PLAYWRIGHTS HORIZONS

Wrestling with your faith is a noble and essential effort. You'll find many examples in the Torah, various Christian Bibles and commentary on the Koran, to name just some religious texts. Jacob wrestles with the angel. Moses kvetches with Yahweh. And Abraham argues with G-d about the possible destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. True, that last one didn't turn out so well. But the very act of questioning is the point. Indeed, in the Jewish faith, for some, arguing and challenging and thinking about ethics and morality and whether this rule applies to that situation can seem the *purpose* of religion.

Playwright Will Arbery hastens to assure us he moved far beyond this movement and its politics. "I uncoiled myself from their world," he writes in an author's note to his new play *Heroes Of The Fourth Turning*. And yet, that world informs who Arbery is, as surely as William F. Buckley Jr. and William Safire and Michael Novak informed me, a Catholic conservative turned independent turned progressive.

Like Jacob, Arbery wrestles with the angels of his childhood: the parents who embraced a far-right strain of Catholicism (and hosted a political event for Pat Buchanan), the isolated Wyoming school where they flourished as academics and inspired so many students, and the deeply conservative friends he grew up with and studied with and debated and argued with far into the night. He wants to understand and empathize and humanize the people he loves, but agonizes over whether this might legitimize some of their poisonous beliefs and actions.



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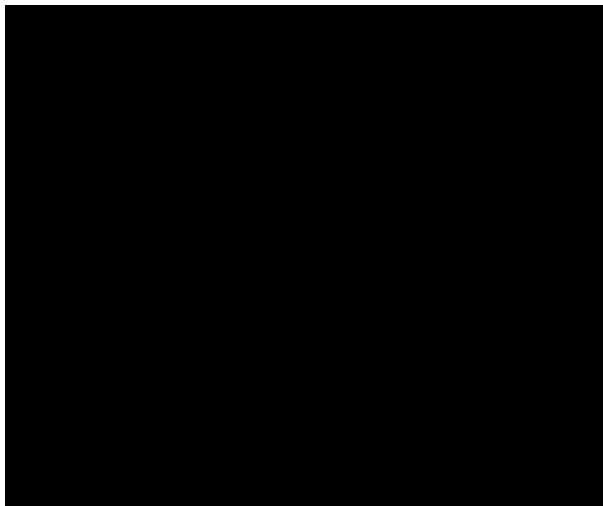
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The result? His play is set in August of 2017 as four friends come together to celebrate Gina, one of their moms and a mentor to them all becoming the head of the Catholic college that has defined their life. Two of them remain true believers. And while two of them are either questioning some of those stances or so fucked up they can't help but question everything, they're far too timid in their tentative steps towards the light (or away from it, depending on your point of view), that they can't really challenge the relentless convictions of the other two.

It's like hanging out with in-laws or old friends. You might hint at a difference of opinion, but just don't have the energy or heart to get into it. Or you think, "What's the point?" And so the apostates, the ones who have realized not all liberals are the devil in disguise, are simply too afraid to righteously speak their minds. The true believers are happy to question themselves, but only when it comes to tactics.

These people are afraid to confront their own doubts and failings because doubt is for nonbelievers. And if someone else tries to open up (which they all do, however tentatively), it's met by an embarrassed silence or an angry closing of the topic. This is a thoughtful, well-acted, sometimes frustrating and ultimately unsatisfying drama worth wrestling with. But one element of the production is spot-on: *Heroes Of The Fourth Turning* takes place in near-total darkness.



The action takes place mostly in real time at the tail end of a party. First we met the quiet, stoic Justin, a burly man of few words who is always carrying a weapon. At the beginning of the show, he shoots a deer from his back porch but then has trouble gutting it. Then during the party, he casually sports a pistol jammed casually into the back of his pants. If the culture wars break into real violence, Justin will be ready.

He's paired in our minds with Emily. She is dealing with a debilitating illness and the fact that everyone around her insists on seeing Emily as

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a paragon of suffering virtue and the illness as a wonderfully ennobling cross to bear. And with a word here and a gesture there, we sense Emily and Justin have an unspoken, un-acted upon bond. Towards the beginning of the show, Justin says he has something to tell Emily and we know precisely what she is hoping for.

Emily is the daughter of Gina, the woman named the new president of the tiny Catholic Transfiguration College of Wyoming. (Picture [Ave Maria University](#), the school founded in Florida by Tom Monaghan of Domino's Pizza. He fondly hoped the nearby town would be free of pre-marital sex, contraception and pornography. In short, Pope Benedict, yes. Pope Francis, not so much.) But she's ever so cautiously the most rebellious of her friends. That amounts to being friends with someone who works for Planned Parenthood while still quickly agreeing abortion is murder full stop, but it's something.

Maybe Emily is simply shaking off the restrictions of being the daughter of two rock star parents, the people everyone around her admired and loved and indeed worshipped. Their friend Kevin, however, is just messed up. Maybe his cloistered childhood where any intimation of sex or desire was painted as ugly and sinful is to blame. Maybe Kevin would have had issues even if he was raised by two lesbian moms of color. But Kevin is a hapless figure, drinking too hard and incapable of going five minutes without mentioning masturbation or his penis or pent-up sexual desires. He's not a train wreck because a train wreck might actually leave some damage in its path. Kevin will only hurt himself.

He shows up unexpectedly for the party, and is thrilled to discover Teresa has popped in as well. She's a fire-breather of a conservative thinker a la Ann Coulter, seemingly making a name for herself delivering diatribes for a Breitbart-style website. Arbery is at his best bringing Teresa to life. He may not agree with her views, but he knows the power and poetry of a steam-rolling monologue and Teresa gets the best of them.

These friends banter and bicker back and forth and it's all rather familiar. Of course, instead of debating the dotcom bubble or Occupy Wall Street's importance, these four debate the culture wars, the incipient violence sure to engulf America (a truism of true believers on the far right and the far left) and various theological ideas. But mostly it amounts to dredging up old issues and new desire. Teresa had pre-marital sex but was allowed to remain in school, for example. And Kevin desperately wishes the engaged Teresa had shared that bit of sinning with him.

Like any party, *Heroes of the Fourth Turning* has an up and down rhythm. Something of interest takes place and then it all settles back down again before something else worth noting happens. It's never boring, but stretches of the show simply happen, a problem when your characters are afraid or uninterested in confronting one another. Oh,

they argue and fight and make up and argue again and Kevin throws up (of course) but the unspoken mostly remains just that.

Director Danya Taymor keeps things on an even keel, though I'm not as sure about the technical side. The costumes by Sarafina Bush are solid. But the setting is *too* solid. A large imposing rock or the intimations of a hill or mountain in the distance turns what might have been the wide open spaces of Wyoming into a constricted suffocating location. Maybe their world is as cramped as their ideas seem, sure, but that vaguely imposing structure is too hard to make out in the too-dark lighting of Isabella Byrd. Instead of a specific setting or a symbolic one, it remains...insubstantial.

Then Gina shows up and the play comes to life. Gina is Emily's mom and the mentor they all admire. She's also the first person ready to tangle. Why would the new President of Transfiguration College of Wyoming hesitate to put these kids in their place? So Teresa has a worthy opponent and they go at it with vigor. Gina also takes Emily, Kevin and Justin down a peg or two, but it's Teresa who cuts the most formidable target and Gina doesn't hesitate. Michele Pawk commands the stage every moment she's on it.

The problem is that these two alpha women are not really challenging each other. Teresa is a firebrand who is convinced the culture wars will soon turn violent. She sees Christians in the US as an oppressed minority, even though most American Christians (even most Catholics) don't agree with her far right stances on abortion, gay rights and the like. She mocks identity politics, sees Hillary Clinton as essentially the anti-Christ and pities the fool who would try and out-debate her on any of this. I'm sure Gina would agree with every word.

Sure, Gina mocks Teresa for admiring the yahoos in the new Trump administration. Teresa responds by questioning Gina's embrace of Pat Buchanan, a stone-cold racist who paved the way for Trump and his ilk. But they're not really hitting at the core of their beliefs. It's all about tactics. Later, when Emily apologizes for her mom's brusqueness, Teresa brushes off their argument as fun. And she means it. We've been waiting all night for someone to either embrace their beliefs in a convincing manner or question them with power and authority. Ultimately, all Arbery can bring his characters to do is hint at the more radical break they might make some day.

The cast is strong, but the writing lets them down at the crucial moment when their masks are dropped. Justin begins the show by killing that deer and then hesitating to gut it. But if there's a connection to that and his character during the rest of the show, I missed it. Indeed, Justin wants the school to add marksmanship to the curriculum. He's a true believer *and* a Christian soldier. (Gina says no to adding weapons training, but purely because of the optics. Again: tactics!)

Kevin blurts out his feelings repeatedly yet they're so entangled with self-loathing it's hard to listen. He could use a lot of therapy, if far right conservatives believed in therapy.

Teresa briefly, shakily confesses she thinks her wedding will be a disaster because she doesn't really have friends, because she keeps everyone at a distance...because she really doesn't know how to love at all.

Emily shakes off the sickly martyr label everyone slaps on her and even insists her Planned Parenthood friend maybe isn't a Nazi. But what she really longs for is someone to care for her like a woman and we just know the monk-like Justin won't be the one. Their moment of openness with each other might have been a strong ending for the show.

Instead, Arbery gives Emily a fit, to the point where she's practically speaking in tongues. For a moment it even seems she might be literally sitting on Justin's face after collapsing, forcing the issue of sexual intimacy. That outrageousness would be preferable to her out-of-character aria about sleeping around, which is both unconvincing and beside the point. Kevin maybe just needs sex; Emily needs love. When a character spends the entire show primly saying "gosh" to this or that bit of profanity, it's too easy to have them curse as a way of insisting they're revealing their authentic selves.

Let's be clear. Jeb Kreager is quietly convincing as Justin and doesn't overplay the gung-ho military aspect at all. Julia McDermott is strong as the pain-wracked Emily, who is more pained perhaps by slowly understanding her faith is misplaced. John Zdrojeski takes an over-the-top loser like Kevin and keeps him rooted in reality, so consistently a loser you accept him rather than tire of him. Zoë Winters dives into the big speeches of Teresa with fervor. And yet none of their big emotional scenes truly work. It's not their fault. Arbery perhaps prefers his characters with their masks on because taking those off -- even for a moment -- feels like a betrayal. They don't want to remove their masks, so how can he do it for them? I'll be very interested to see his next play, a show that doesn't come freighted with so much of his specific childhood.

And a final metaphysical flourish fell utterly flat for me. Is it hinting at the End Times? The coming War? Are the walls of Jericho falling? No thanks, not in a show that strives to be rooted in flawed but sincere people. Arbery wrestles here with the angels of his childhood. But unlike Jacob and Moses and Abraham, I don't think he was playing to win.

THEATER OF 2019

Minor Character: Under The Radar Festival at the Public ***

Ink: Under The Radar Festival at the Public ** 1/2

Choir Boy ** 1/2

White Noise ** 1/2

Kiss Me, Kate ***

Ain't No Mo' *** 1/2

Ain't Too Proud **

The Cradle Will Rock * 1/2

Mrs. Murray's Menagerie *** 1/2

Oklahoma! (on Broadway) ** 1/2

Socrates **

The Pain Of My Belligerence *

Burn This **

Hadestown *** 1/2

All My Sons * 1/2

Tootsie ** 1/2

Ink ***

Beetlejuice **

Estado Vegetal ***

Hans Christian Andersen * 1/2

Cirque du Soleil: Luzia ***

BLKS ** 1/2

Moulin Rouge ** 1/2

Bat Out Of Hell **

Unchilding **

Sea Wall/ A Life ** 1/2

Harry Potter and the Cursed Child ***

Betrayal *** 1/2

Fifty Million Frenchmen ** 1/2

Freestyle Love Supreme ** 1/2

Derren Brown: Secret ***

(A)loft Modulation * 1/2

The Great Society **

I Can't See *

Heroes Of The Fourth Turning ** 1/2

Chasing Rainbows: The Road To Oz ***

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