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Madonna and Child and Other Divas

reviewed by Robert Attenweiler

Aug 14, 2007

The idea, found in the Bible, that the sins of the father will be visited upon the son is a sound base for an examination of internal conflict. And fittingly, Tom Johnson's play *Madonna and Child and Other Divas*, presented by Boy Howdy Productions as part of the 2007 New York International Fringe Festival, leads us simultaneously through the tortured struggle of David Smith, a gay man growing up in the devoutly religious South in the 1960s and 70s, and his son who, in present day, also struggles to accept his homosexuality.

We watch David Smith from when he first tells his father that he is accepting a music scholarship to Oklahoma Baptist University. Everyone in town has already branded David after his molestation by a choir instructor and, it seems, they hate David by proxy. But, hoping to eventually win his father's approval and because he is so steeped in his religious upbringing, David denies who he knows himself to be and marries Marilee. Johnson depicts, slowly and methodically, David's breakdown from a bright, cheery young man who seems to believe in his own self-denial to a tortured wreck, bitter for never being able to fully live in his own life. And it is all witnessed on stage by Smith's grown-up son. As a character called The Waiter, Smith's son drinks and drugs his way on the periphery of the stage watching his own father's story—which we are meant to see as, to a degree, his own story—unfolds before him. While The Waiter has not married and had children, like Smith, he is still plagued by the Church's teachings that label him "an abomination."

Madonna and Child and Other Divas is served by a wonderfully strong cast. Joe Pindelski, as David Smith, never loses the sweet, boyish quality we first see him with, which makes watching Smith's deterioration even more difficult; and Christopher Illing, as The Waiter, creates a chilling frame when watching on the periphery and does a great job when pulled into his father's story in various roles. Kay Wilson, as Marilee, is heartbreaking as a woman who chooses her unhappy life because she believes it is God's will. And Samantha Desz is gorgeously full of life in multiple roles. The director, Julie Hamberg, should be credited for creating great spacing and stage pictures—and for getting very effective performances from her actors.

While it felt like, toward the end, the audience could anticipate Smith's fate and, therefore, the script could move more rapidly toward that end, overall, Johnson's play is a careful, thoughtful character study portrayed amidst some of Madonna's clubbier tunes and an avalanche of Bibles—some of which actually fall from the sky.

Written/created by: Tom Johnson
Directed by Julie Hamberg
Presented by Boy Howdy Productions

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