

Theater: 'God' Comes to Broadway; Sinners Still Prefer Patti LuPone

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AN ACT OF GOD ** out of ****
STUDIO 54

In the last 40 years or so, we've seen the Almighty embodied by a nice old man (George Burns), an authoritative black man (Morgan Freeman) and now a gay man (Jim Parsons). This is progress. The stand-up act/sketch comedy that is An Act Of God is proving a hit thanks to the pull of Parsons. If they decide to extend the run, perhaps Caitlyn Jenner will be next?

As a sketch on Saturday Night Live et al, God would have been low-hanging fruit. Surely he'd always have something to say about current events on "Weekend Update?" As a persona for a comedian called over for a chat on talk shows, God might have been an inspired career move. As the main attraction of a full blown Broadway show, God proves very mild entertainment.

Written by David Javerbaum, this is essentially a one-man show. But since God can be seen as embodied in three persons, here we have Jim Parsons as God; Tim Kazurinsky as the archangel Gabriel, a sort of narrator who reads out certain passages from the Bible when called upon; and Christopher Fitzgerald as a kvetchy, questioning archangel Michael. While Michael's desire to get answers to burning questions like "Why do people suffer" are meant to drive the evening forward, it's not really what this show is about.

What An Act Of God is really about is God's act, the routine he might offer up in Las Vegas: a splashy entrance, a monologue and then questions from the audience. Like Carol Burnett with less Tarzan yelling. Happily, Parsons makes this mild conceit sort of work. He's genial, pointed, sharp-tongued and sassy in the way you hope God might really be, if your God is the kind of god embodied by Jesus (tells good stories, always open to a teaching moment) and shares the values of liberal New Yorkers. If you prefer the Old Testament God of wrath and judgment and smiting of enemies (like the older man in front of me who sat stone-faced throughout the entire evening and bristled when God cursed about Sarah Palin), well, you might want to stick to televangelists.

As for what God actually says here, it's just riffs on what you might expect: the silliness of Noah's ark if you try to take it seriously, how he feels about gays (spoiler alert: he's a fan) and the fact that, no, God is NOT rooting for your football team to win the Super Bowl. And stop telling him to bless America. America has been blessed enough!

So, harmless but not very engaging. At two points, An Act Of God reaches for more. First, Parsons does an excellent job threading the needle when discussing how God ordered Abraham to sacrifice his only son Isaac. Here, the text by Javerbaum looks to go a little deeper, a little more serious, without ever losing the fun or needlessly offending. Parsons explains that God chooses to keep himself in the dark sometimes (it's more fun that way) so God really isn't sure if Abraham will go through with it. His genuine fascination when realizing that Abraham is really going to do it -- really going to kill his own son -- proves a compelling, dramatic moment. It's actually a rather touching passage and hints at how a better show might have done so much more, especially with Parsons in the lead.

The other, less successful attempt to be bold involves Michael's increasingly agitated concerns about the

presence of evil, why suffering, why hunger, why pain and so on. He tries to confront God and while Moses and others have gotten away with this on occasion, it ain't easy and Michael doesn't get very far. Then, rather abruptly, the show is over.

While Fitzgerald and Kazurinsky were perhaps welcome faces for Parsons to play off, Kazurinsky in particular has virtually nothing of note to do. They seem more distraction than anything else. Joe Mantello's direction can't make them seem essential and his talents aren't stretched here. As modest as this effort feels, it would certainly seem far more tepid if Parsons weren't holding it together with his charm and presence.

The scenic design by Scott Pask combined with the lighting of Hugh Vanstone and sound design of Fitz Patton proves ultimately a disappointment. It looks sort of Vegas flashy at first. But the dark clouds and thunder when God gets moody feel cliché and the finale -- scraps of paper started whirling around for no apparent reason -- is bizarre and pointless in its staging. Actually, the finale kind of feels like the Book Of Revelations: you've got some flashy imagery but once it's over you sit back and think, "Huh?"

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