

Cultural Daily

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Big Bang Theory's Jim Parsons and Kunal Nayyar Star on and Off-Broadway

David Sheward · Wednesday, June 3rd, 2015

Stars of the hit TV series *The Big Bang Theory* have just opened on and Off-Broadway in new plays. While both showcase the talents of the individual actors, the productions themselves give off less than a huge explosion. Jim Parsons, four-time Emmy winner as the brilliant but bedeviling physicist Sheldon Cooper, stars as the All-Mighty in David Javerbaum's satiric semi-stand-up routine *An Act of God*, while Kunal Nayyar, the painfully shy Raj Koothrappali of *TBBT*, co-stars with Jesse Eisenberg in the latter's *The Spoils* presented by The New Group at the Signature Center.

God is the first Broadway play inspired by a Twitter account and it shows. Javerbaum, an Emmy-winning writer for *The Daily Show*, curates @TheTweetofGod where he posts 145-character zingers as if he were the Creator of the Universe. This popular account—1.75 million followers—led to a book and now a play. But this *Act* comes across as a collection of jokes rather than a dramatic whole. The conceit here is that God is speaking through a charming TV star in order to lay down ten new, less restrictive commandments. The Lord is accompanied by two archangels, the contrary Michael, who pleads with his boss to have more compassion for mankind, and the solemn Gabriel, who quotes from the Bible to help illustrate God's points.



Tim Kazurinsky, Jim Parsons, and Christopher Fitzgerald in *An Act of God*

Credit: Jeremy Daniel

Not a bad idea for a ten-minute sketch, but Javerbaum stretched it out to an hour and half and the premise hits its comic peak at the fifth commandment. There are several stinging lines, such as God's stern denunciation of sports fans who invoke his name when their team wins. But for every solid witticism, there's an equally leaden one, such as the time-worn jibes about Florida resembling male genitalia and the crack about the rooster coming before the chicken or the egg.

Parsons is brilliantly dry as a humanistic deity, self-aware enough to realize his "mysterious ways" are the product of a deranged mind. He spends most of the evening on a couch in Scott Pask's celestial living room of a set and manages to infuse a stationary performance with conflict and tension, and he's actually tender and moving when Javerbaum attempts pathos as God discusses his "little superstar" Jesus. Joe Mantello performed a similar miracle when he directed Bette Midler in her sedentary solo turn as agent Sue Mengers in *I'll Eat You Last* a few seasons back. Christopher Fitzgerald and Tim Kazurinsky make admirable foils for Parsons' quixotic deity. But

all that comic timing and sharp delivery do not rescue what is basically a lounge *Act*.

Jesse Eisenberg's play is a sturdier venture, but still suffers from shortcomings. The actor-playwright must have real self-esteem and xenophobia issues. In each of his three plays—*Asuncion*, *The Revisionist*, and this latest one, *The Spoils*—he casts himself as a highly intelligent but narcissistic asshole who has difficulties connecting with a foreign character. In this case, Eisenberg is Ben, a rich film-school reject sharing his expensive NYC apartment with Kalyan (Nayyar), a Nepalese economics student. Despite his vulgar manner, Ben appears to be genuinely fond of his roommate, but when Sarah, his grade-school crush re-enters his life, the slacker sets out to destroy her impending marriage and the well-meaning but naïve Kalyan gets caught in the crossfire.



Jesse Eisenberg and Kunal Nayyar in *The Spoils*

Credit: Monique Carboni

Directed with high energy and precision by Scott Elliott, *The Spoils*, like *Act of God*, has more than a little sitcom in its structure. Eisenberg does write snappy dialogue and his characters are well-observed, but it's difficult to care about the destructive Ben and the plot, particularly some of Ben's extreme actions, strains credulity at times. Even though his character is obnoxious, Eisenberg does endow him with a manic intensity and keen wit. Nayyar conveys Kalyan's desperation and anger beneath the friendly veneer. Erin Darke is compassionate but no pushover as Sarah, while Annapurna Sriram makes Reshma, Kalyan's bossy girlfriend, more than just a scold. Michael Zegen is particularly funny as Sarah's nebbishy fiancée Ted.

The title seems to refer to the gains awarded to white Americans of privilege like Ben who squander their wealth and comforts. Eisenberg tries for a measure of redemption for Ben at the end as Sarah relates an admirable act she saw him perform long ago in their schoolyard. But it's too late. Any lofty theme or message is obscured—or spoiled—by the protagonist's vile behavior.

An Act of God: May 28—Aug. 2. Studio 54, 254 W. 54th St., NYC. Tue.—Thu., 7 p.m.; Fri.—Sat., 8 p.m.; Wed., Sat., 2 p.m. Running time: 90 minutes with no intermission. \$55-\$149. (212) 239-6200 or www.telecharge.com.

The Spoils: June 2—28. The New Group at the Pershing Square Signature Center, 480 W. 42nd St. NYC. Tue.—Fri., 7:30 p.m.; Sat., 2 and 8 p.m.; Sun., 2 p.m. Running time: two hours and 20 mins. including one intermission. \$27—\$97. (212) 279-4200 or www.ticketcentral.com.

The review has previously appeared on ArtsinNY.com.

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