

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Choosing Fairness in The Chosen

Sylvie · Wednesday, January 24th, 2018

Speaking as a secular Jew, one of the things that I have always treasured about Jewish values is their ubiquitous quest for justice and balance. Not that this quest always succeeds, nor is it always easily identifiable as the thing to pursue. What's important is that the *desire for it* exists. What we never know when we begin to seek is how complicated and how painful such a quest can be.

Andrew Posner's revised stage adaptation of Chaim Potok's signature novel, *The Chosen*, currently playing at The Fountain Theatre, is an inspired illustration of that conundrum, the internal conflicts it engenders and the external difficulties it encounters.

A great deal of well-deserved praise was heaped on this 1967 Potok novel. It was his first and it put him on the map. Posner and Potok collaborated on the original stage adaptation, of which the current one is a Posner revision that was launched last year at Yale. In it, the conflicted scions of two conservative Jewish households in Brooklyn — one Hassidic and the other Orthodox — collide as rivals in that altogether secular American event called a baseball game. I mean seriously collide, when the Hassid Danny Saunders (Dor Gvirtzman) accidentally bats the ball straight into the eye of the Orthodox pitcher Reuven Malter (Sam Mandel).

The incident unites the two as friends for life.

That's the first surprise. What we soon learn is that these teenagers are not so different after all. Both are struggling, each in his own way, to become the men their fathers wish them to be. That means dealing with strong filial bonds vs. a natural desire to explore the wider world. How to satisfy a thirst for independence vs. the powerful commitment to parental visions of what they should become as they grow up.



l-r, Sam Mandel, Dor Gvirtzman & Alan Blumenfeld in *The Chosen* at The Fountain Theatre.

The play is set in the half-dozen years between 1944 and 1950, which cover the death of President Roosevelt, the end of World War II and the horrific revelations of the Holocaust, as well — significantly — as the establishment of the state of Israel. The fathers' divergent views of that political event have profound implications for the sons.

It's an intriguing premise that is not well served by such a superficial summary, because it's the interior ramifications in the lives of the four characters that make Posner's lively revision of the play so absorbing.



Alan Blumenfeld in *The Chosen* at The Fountain Theatre.

Reuven is close to his scholarly and loving father, the widowed David Malter (Jonathan Arkin) who hopes to see his son become a professor, while the Hassidic Danny is mostly intimidated by his father, the Reb Saunders (Alan Blumenfeld), a formidable *tzaddik*, or kind of supreme rabbi, who barely speaks to him yet fully and unconditionally expects his son to follow in his footsteps.



l-r, Sam Mandel & Jonathan Arkin in *The Chosen* at the Fountain Theatre.

Since behaviors and beliefs among the four differ so widely, things develop in ways neither expected nor always what they seem. The fathers' opposite perspectives affect the sons. The sons' wandering ambitions must eventually affect the fathers. It is the beauty of the script that, like life, its unpredictability delivers delicacy and depth and eventually redemption. It is as much a treatise about fathers and sons as it is about Talmudic wisdom, seeking understanding and acceptance, communicating through others and seeing things for what they are while becoming your own person. In short, growing up. But in the case of these restive young adults, growing up in such structured closed communities is never simple. And Potok eloquently shows us why.

As is so often the case at The Fountain, the production is rewarding. While possessing one of the smallest stages in town, it is most frequently home to large ideas and strong emotions. This company thrives on them. The Fountain's Producing Director Simon Levy staged *The Chosen* with the kind of attention to pacing, energy and detail (including religious detail) displayed in his previous efforts (notably, a memorable revival of *The Normal Heart* and the Athol Fugard premieres).

The acting is equally balanced, as are the production values. It's another win for this little engine that can.

Top image: Sam Mandel as Reuven in The Chosen at The Fountain Theatre.

Photos by Ed Krieger.

WHAT: *The Chosen*

WHERE: The Fountain Theatre, 5060 Fountain Ave., Los Angeles, CA 90029.

WHEN: Saturdays, 8pm, Jan 27, Feb 3, 10, 17, 24, March 3, 10, 17 & 24; Sundays, 2pm, Jan 28, Feb 4, 11, 18, 25, March 4, 11, 18 & 25; Mondays, 8pm, Jan 29, Feb 5, 12, 19, 26, March 5, 12 & 19. Ends March 25.

HOW: Tickets \$29-\$40, at www.FountainTheatre.com or by phone at 323.663.1525. Seniors \$27. Students \$20 w/ID. Mondays, pay-what-you-can.

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Sally Edwards & Philip Whitchurch in *Shakespeare, His Wife and the Dog* at the Edye.

A WISPY BIT OF PSEUDO SHAKESPEAREAN BADINAGE is currently taking place at the Edye at The Broad Stage in Santa Monica where two performers are bantering. It's the curious incident of the dog in the nighttime — oops, sorry, wrong play. It's about *Shakespeare, The Wife and the Dog*. The Wife (Sally Edwards) is worried about the dog that seems to have disappeared in the night (do we care?) and her Husband, none other than Will Shakespeare (Philip Whitchurch), who seems terminally tormented by writers' block.

It is nighttime and neither of them can sleep, so what to do but try to entertain us with circular conversations that barely keep *us* awake. Now and then, out pops a familiar quote from one Shakespearean play or other, and even a reference to something that sounds an awful lot like, um, waiting for Samuel Beckett...?

All in fun? That's the intention. Whitchurch penned it and Julia St. John directed. It's short, it's light, it's thin, it's bland and it ends Sunday. Is it worth the pricey ticket? No. (What were they thinking?) I will add this: it's hard to get mad at something that ends with a graceful little jig, even if it is a cheap touring show designed chiefly to make money.

Honestly now...

Photo by Bated Breath.

WHAT: *Shakespeare, His Wife and the Dog*

WHERE: The Edye at The Broad Stage, 1310 11th St., Santa Monica, CA 90401. Limited free parking.

WHEN: today, Friday & Saturday, 8 pm. Sunday, 4pm. Ends Sunday.

HOW: General admission tickets: \$45, available at www.thebroadstage.org or at 310.434.3200 or in person at the box office three hours before the performance.

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