

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Fish in the Dark with Larry David Flounders, Hand to God Is Riotous

David Sheward · Wednesday, April 15th, 2015

Two new Broadway comedies feature obnoxious main characters. Ironically, the one made of fabric with sewn-on eyes is more complex than the flesh and blood one. Tyrone, the demonic sock puppet of *Hand to God*, Robert Askins' dark and scary examination of the souls in a tiny Texas town, exhibits a lot more depth than Norman Drexel, the latest iteration of Larry David's misanthropic TV persona in the star-writer's first work for the theater, *Fish in the Dark*.

[divider]Review #1: *Fish in the Dark*[/divider]

Fish, one of the biggest financial hits of the season, is really an extended sitcom. Norman, a grouchy urinal salesman has a lot on his plate: his father is dying, his mother is moving in, his wife is moving out, his brother is putting him down, his daughter is driving everyone crazy practicing her accents for an amateur production of *My Fair Lady*, all his relatives are constantly kvetching, and his housekeeper has just revealed a tremendous secret. That's about it as far as the plot goes. As in David's *Curb Your Enthusiasm* series, the humor derives from his misanthropic character's total lack of self-awareness as he boorishly commits one social faux pas after another. In *Seinfeld* which David co-created, this role of chief schlemiel was taken by the George Costanza role played by Jason Alexander (who will be replacing David as of June 19). If you find this sort of shtick funny for two hours, you'll get plenty of laughs, but it wears a bit thin for me.

This kind of light nonmusical entertainment used to be a staple on Broadway, where you could include the kind of slightly racy antics that were not allowed on network TV. But then small-screen shows like David's broke down these barriers and there was no reason for audiences to spend big bucks on Broadway when they could get the same easy, somewhat spicy laughs for free (or the price of a monthly HBO subscription).

Director Anna D. Shapiro demonstrates that her proficient style works as well with shallow comedy as with the pyrotechnic family confrontations in *August: Osage County*. David gives the audience what it wants: the same character as he played on *Enthusiasm*. Fortunately, Broadway veterans like Marylouise Burke, Lewis J. Stadlen, Ben Shenkman, and Jayne Houdyshell offer a bit more in the way of characterization as Norm's batty extended family. Glenne Headley, filling in for an ailing Rita Wilson, is bubbly and charming as Norm's long-suffering wife, leading us to wonder what such a wonderful woman would be doing with such a schlubby husband.



Michael Oberholtzer, Geneva Carr, Steven Boyer (with Tyrone), Marc Kudisch, and Sarah Stiles in

Hand to God.

Photo: Joan Marcus

[divider]Review #2: *Hand to God*[/divider]

While David delivers a TV retread, Robert Askins dives into the depths of demonic darkness while laughing hysterically on the way down. His *Hand to God* arrives at the Booth Theatre after downtown productions at Ensemble Studio Theatre and MCC Theatre, and brings with it a refreshingly brutal sensibility that rocks tired old Broadway.

Like Norman, shy teenager Jason is beset with problems. His father has just died, his mother Margery is struggling financially and emotionally, he pines after the equally quiet Jessica, and is tormented by the bully Timothy. But, unlike Norman, Jason has an outlet in the form of his raging sock puppet Tyrone, innocently created so the lad can participate in a Christian puppet workshop at the church of Pastor Greg, who has a thing for Margery. Tyrone spews all the repressed emotions Jason conceals as well as revealing the hidden passions swirling within everyone else, challenging the pious hypocrisy of his community.

Directed with a fever-pitch intensity by Moritz von Stuelpnagel, who staged both Off-Broadway runs, the play is both wildly funny and terrifyingly honest. The five-person cast marvelously blends the outrageous with the sincere. Chief among them is Steven Boyer, delivering a double-barreled shotgun of a performance as the tormented Jason and the satanic Tyrone. He somehow manages to simultaneously convey the fear and longing of the puppeteer and the titanic fury of the puppet. Even though we see Boyer's mouth moves as he speaks Tyrone's guttural lines, he's also still convincing as the nerdy Jason. It's a colossal feat of acting. Not quite as dazzling, but equally truthful are Geneva Carr's equally repressed Margery, Sarah Stiles' deadpan Jessica, Michael Oberholtzer's libidinous lunkheaded Timothy, and Marc Kudisch's well-meaning but ineffectual pastor.

Hand to God is dangerously hilarious, forcing us to confront the very real monsters within, while *Fish in the Dark* reduces them to annoying little pests to chuckle over.

Fish in the Dark: March 5—July 19. Cort Theatre, 138 W. 48th St., NYC. Tue., Thu., 7 p.m.; Wed., Fri.—Sat., 8 p.m.; Wed., Sat., 2 p.m.; Sun., 3 p.m. Running time: two hours including one intermission; \$49—\$155. (212) 239-6200 or www.telecharge.com.

Hand to God: Opened April 8 for an open run. Booth Theatre, 222 W. 45th St., NYC. Tue., 7 p.m.; Wed.—Sat., 8 p.m.; Wed., Sat., 2 p.m.; Sun., 3 p.m. Running time: two hours and 20 mins. including one intermission; \$67—\$137. (212) (212) 239-6200 or www.telecharge.com.

This review has previously appeared on ArtsinNY.com and Theaterlife.com.

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