

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

The Power of Unintended Consequences

Sylvie · Wednesday, April 22nd, 2015

Certain subjects are off limits. Religion. Prayer. To each his own. There must be others, but those two are uppermost in my mind at the moment because I recently saw *The Power of Duff* at The Geffen Playhouse. And it stayed with me.

What's a Duff, you ask? A he, not an it. Charlie Duff is the lead news anchor at 6 and 11pm for Channel 10, a local TV station in Rochester, NY. On a good day, the weather makes the top of the news, or the count of dead cows after a farm fire, or — whoo-hoo — the Nude Cherry Ball Charitable Ice Dance. You get my drift.

Charlie is not a happy man. He lives alone, divorced from Lisa (his infidelities are part of that equation) and his teenage son Ricky wants nothing to do with a dad who has not set much of a good example. One day, Charlie gets news that his own father has died in Oregon. It gives him pause. A long pause. Back at his anchor desk after the funeral, Charlie decides to offer a public prayer for his father. On the air. Without telling or asking anyone. He just does it. And all hell breaks loose.

Hell may not be the right word to use here because after stunning his co-anchors and infuriating his boss, Charlie's spontaneous action unleashes an unexpected — you guessed it — *favorable* public response from listeners. It also unleashes a passel of moral issues, including the one that Charlie's boss wants answered, which is: what is an evening news anchor doing dispensing prayers on the air?

Charlie's prayer appears to have sparked the pent up emotions of everyone within broadcasting earshot of Channel 10. Worse, the people *liked* what they heard. And as Charlie's boss is too quick to concede, "The power of prayer is deep — and the power of ratings profound."

Fortunately, playwright Stephen Belber is not content with merely leaving it at that. Complications of a more intricate nature arise when other opinions are voiced that clash with the early ones, and there are one or three unintended consequences to Charlie's impulsive behavior. Does an impromptu prayer suddenly make the world *better*? Are people as a whole suddenly *good*? Or does the effect of an accidental act of piousness from a clearly impious man have a dark side that is bound to emerge? A *corrupting* side perhaps?

Those are the bigger issues that Belber goes after, head on for the most part. Plotwise, no more spoilers from me. But the production of this intriguing piece at The Geffen, along with the dilemmas it exposes, is dealt with truthfully as staged by Peter DuBois and, above all, as

performed by a well-knit company.



1-r, Josh Stemberg, Brenda Griffin and Tanner Buchanan *The Power of Duff*.

It takes more than a little skill to portray Charlie Duff, the classically neutral, slightly hollow anchorman who has made a mess of his personal life and is suddenly plunged into a forced re-examination of everything he has done or is doing. Josh Stemberg in the role is able to straddle that delicate balance between playing blank and becoming blank — reserved and enigmatic to the point of absent-mindedness, sometimes seemingly indolent, but never blank. It is a much harder thing to deliver than you might imagine — and it only gets harder as the complexities of the play's outcomes multiply.

Charlie's co-workers also have fine lines to straddle between the casual camaraderie of the workplace and the something-more that is triggered by Charlie's shenanigans — particularly when Charlie's lightweight boss Scott Zoellner (an appropriately waffling Eric Ladin) decides to go-with-the-flow instead of sticking to convictions he mostly doesn't have. Or when sportscaster John Ebbs, ever-the-good-guy-prankster, acknowledges that there may be an ebbing tide of sadness to all his frantic clowning that no "prayer" can adequately assuage (the excellent Brendan Griffin in the show's most touching performance). Or when Charlie's co-anchor, Sue (Elizabeth Rodriguez), reveals the depths of her own personal crisis to Charlie and uses him to get through it (more chemistry between her and Stemberg would have been welcome once her professional *façade* breaks down).

Notable in this cast as well are Joe Paulik in a variety of on air roles, Tanner Buchanan as Charlie's rebellious son Ricky, and Maurice Williams as the young prison inmate, Casey Simmons, whose prison fate becomes pivotal to events that eventually unfold.



1-r, Brendan Griffin, Josh Stemberg and Maurice Williams in *The Power of Duff*.

If you want to know what those are, see the production. In the end, it's the totality of the experience that hits hard. This is the kind of theatre that makes you think as well as feel. And not just until the house lights come back on, but well into the brooding of the deeper night.

FOOTNOTE: A word here about parking. Unless you're lucky enough to find street parking in Westwood, you'll need to use a parking lot where you pay upon *entering* so you can exit at will. The underground parking closest to The Geffen oddly offers the reverse: you enter for free and pay when you exit. Not only does this cause a bottleneck when everyone is exiting at once, but there appeared to be just one pay station for all to use, which created plenty of grumbling and people congestion on opening night. *That needs to change*. Either you go to a system where you pay as you enter or you place pay stations on each of the parking levels. The people standing in that long line waiting to pay after the performance of *The Power of Duff* were not amused. It's not neuroscience, folks; someone just needs to switch to smart.

Top image: Josh Stemberg in The Power of Duff

All photos by Michael Lamont.

WHAT: *The Power of Duff*

WHERE: Gil Cates Theatre at The Geffen Playhouse, 10886 Le Conte Avenue, Los Angeles, CA 90024.

WHEN: Tuesdays-Fridays, 8pm; Saturdays, 3 & 8pm; Sundays, 2 & 7pm. Ends May 17.

HOW: Tickets \$39 – \$79 (subject to change), available in-person at the Geffen box office, online at www.geffenplayhouse.com or by phone at 310.208.5454. Fees may apply.

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