

The Pacific Theatre/Touchstone Theatre co-production of “Prodigal Son,” which opened Friday 15 March, marks a significant step in the maturation and acceptance of PT within the professional theatre community of Vancouver. It also deals honestly and sensitively with the most controversial theological issue facing evangelical Christians today. Both of these would be good enough reasons to see this production. The fact that the play is superbly written (by Shawn Macdonald—a gay Catholic), directed (by Katrina Dunn—one of Vancouver’s best directors), and acted (by a cast of star PT regulars plus some big names from Vancouver theatre and some unbelievably good child actors) makes attendance essential for thoughtful Christian theatre-goers.

The story of Peter (richly interpreted by Craig Erickson) struggles between the two relationships that structure both his life and the shifts of the play in time and space (the third relationship, with a therapist acted with Gina Chiarelli’s usual brilliance, seems a bit extraneous). Growing up as an intensely spiritual child in a conservative Catholic, Anglophone Quebec City family in the 70s, Peter is tragically alienated from God in the person of his father, whose desperate attempts to preserve his faith and his culture result in a macho, homophobic church legalism. Repudiating the God he believes has repudiated him, Peter now lives at the opposite pole as a Vancouver “tree-hugger” with a gay lover who demands a mutual commitment to atheism and the gay community. However, when his father is dying, the spiritually-reactivated prodigal son must go home to seek a blessing from the father and the Father.

This play is one of the most profound, deeply moving, sensitively nuanced productions I have seen—at PT or elsewhere—about what Graham Greene called “the appalling strangeness of the mercy of God.” Peter’s father is neither caricatured nor demonised: he is terrified of death and, like so many of us, clings desperately to the laws and the liturgy as his assurances. For his sudden incarnation of God’s love, just see Matthew 15:32. On the other hand, Peter’s estrangement from his gay lover is as poignantly moving and tragic as the break-up of any marriage.

There will be uncomfortable moments within the play for both the God people and the gay people in the audience (and some who are both), but the intelligence, honesty, and sensitivity in this production should appal no one. If the ultimate theological resolution stresses God’s Immanent Love somewhat more than His Transcendent Judgement, I think there is still ample space for that in our finite understanding of God’s infinite Grace.

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