



Paradoxical 'Prodigal Son' provokes thought at Redwood Curtain

EVAN WISH PHOTOGRAPHY

Tushar Mathew, William English III and Gary Sommers are pictured in Redwood Curtain's "Prodigal Son."

BY BETI WEBB TRAUTH
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Never backing away from staging outside-of-the-box plays that challenge its audiences, Redwood Curtain's 2019 season-opening production is "Prodigal Son," a semi-autobiographical script created by acclaimed playwright John Patrick Stanley.

Stanley, who was honored with both a Pulitzer Prize and Tony Award in 2016 for his drama, "Doubt: A Parable," is no stranger to the RC stage, where another of his insightful works, the sly comedy "Outside Mullingar," impressively launched the company's 2016 season.

Although "Prodigal Son" does have flashes of ironic humor that unexpectedly surface during the script's uninterrupted 95 minutes of running time, Stanley's artistic vision/version of "himself" as a defiant teenager is not meant to be a laughing matter. Instead, he gives "glimpses" (rarely flattering) into his brash but brilliant alter ego's formative years at the ages of 15 and 16 years old.

But, before we are officially introduced to that younger self, the actor (already a "young man") — who directly engages with the audience as the play begins — identifies himself as coming from the viewpoint of "60's-something Jim Quinn." He invites the audience to accompany him into his personal rear-view mirror as he "morphs" back into his teenage Jim.

Luckily, the remarkable Redwood Curtain actor who takes us on that turbulent, memory journey is himself a soon-to-be graduate from HSU — a performer who has artistically evolved over the past few years into one of the best and brightest who ever shone on local stages: William English III. And this excruciatingly demanding role requires him to delve into every nuance that he is now (in the ongoing process of) capable of mastering before he embarks on his own personal artistic pilgrimage.

But, for now, audiences can experience him as he completely immerses himself into the role of a prickly, middle-class kid from the Bronx (in the 1960's past) whose promising, dazzling intellect has somehow gained him entrance to an exclusive, Catholic-based, boys prep school in New Hampshire — in spite of volatile behavior that earns him a description as "this year's most interesting mess."

And, that's the ongoing challenge faced by everyone he comes in contact with: Is this powder keg of a poetry-spouting young punk worth the risk he poses in the midst of his constant, personal disruption of the school's rigid behavioral and academic rules? No easy answers for anyone who is asking them (even himself).

The other impressive members of the Redwood Curtain cast more than flesh out their intriguing roles in every way. There's

Gary Sommers in a brilliant, brittle, poignant portrayal as the founder and head master of the school, Carl Schmitt; Lexy Cann as Louise, his charming, usually supportive wife (who believes in Jim's "worth" no matter what he has done, or may do).

There's also Micah Scheff as Schmitt's endearingly vulnerable nephew and Jim's long-suffering roommate, Austin Lord Schmitt. He is both impressed and fascinated by Jim's capacity to quote lines from famous poets and authors, but has good reason to be physically frightened as well. Although the pair do occasionally bond as "nerdy teen boys" with unrequited girl crushes, that's all they seem to have in common to share.

Completing the terrific, ensemble cast is Tushar Mathew as Alan Hoffman — a concerned and "caring" instructor at the school who is another of Jim's believers. Hoffman and Louise have their work cut out for them in convincing his boss (and her husband) to allow Jim to graduate, especially after countless, head-to-head confrontations over his grades, forbidden behavior and much more.

Here is what Schmitt must take into consideration before he makes the decision that will forever impact the erratic teen's life — the interwoven pluses and minuses: Jim is: ravenously curious; insecure; beligerent; self-destructive; funny; often surprisingly lovable; generally untrustworthy;

and could be a physical danger to himself or others.

In addition, he's an admirer of (and can quote at length) great poets and authors; an avowed non-believer of religious icons; has an obsession with Nazis; is a chronic liar; an unapologetic thief; a bully; a sometimes drunk; and (most frustrating of all), a constant questioner of authority figures with unanswerable questions to help him define "who" he is (by finding out "who he isn't").

But, "who" are the rest of the characters surrounding Jim in his past memories? They each have some poignant, secret layers in their lives that are also slowly uncovered as the play progresses, while the focus shifts in and out from the enigmatic past and present Jim. And the natural feel of their dialogue together can be stunning in both its conversational flow amid believable bursts of emotional conflict.

Directed with an insightful, understated hand by Roman Sanchez (assisted by directing fellow, Cosmo Bernstein), the technical aspects of the show also serve it well. They include the well-conceived, "academic-inspired" scenic design by Robert Pickering (constructed by Pickering, Sommers and scenic charge artist Jordan Goad; painted by Pickering, Goad and Todd Hoberecht), with mood-supporting lighting by Percy Ferrugia and sound design by Kai Lassen (run by Cheyenne

