

September 15, 2010

Wednesday, September 15, 2010

Can I Get an Amen?

'The Revival' refuses to simply preach to the choir of NYC audiences

By Mark Peikert



Raymond McAnally and Trent Dawson in *The Revival*. Photo by Jim Ryan Photography.

Every now and then, an "issue" play comes along that's so well-written, so tightly directed and so well-cast that the issues can't elbow their way to center stage. And Samuel Brett Williams' *The Revival*, the rare play to take a clear-eyed look at Christianity without resorting to satire, manages to balance clarity of vision with crackling good theater.

Golden boy pastor Eli (Trent Dawson, as good on stage as he was on *As The World Turns*) has inherited from his father a congregation of fire-and-brimstone seeking Christians. His sermons, cerebral and well reasoned, can't ignite the latent spark of crazed faith that ranting can. "I know it's in vogue for preachers to have this amazing testimony about how they were snorting coke off of a hooker's butt in a Holiday Inn Express one night, and God took them right then and

there," he observes drily in a sermon. But all his congregants want is a fiery sermon every Sunday to fan the flames of blind devotion.

But Eli is, paradoxically for a preacher, a pragmatist. Forced with the threat of being voted out by the church's board (despite the church having been built by his father), Eli allows himself to be bullied by the church's accountant Trevor (Raymond McAnally) into applying to join the Southern Baptist Board of Churches as the first step to becoming a mega church. Eli's wife June (a heartbreaking Aidan Sullivan), however, is a no-frills Christian. She's furious about the possibility of becoming a mega church, and that Eli complains about something missing from his life. God will fill in what's missing after death, she says firmly. But Eli still yearns for something else.

That something else turns out to be 18-year-old drifter Daniel (David Darrow), who punches a cow to death but goes to libraries every day to read Proust, because he was once told that only the smartest people read him. His encounter with Eli sets into motion a chain of events both gut wrenching and unavoidable, as all four characters fight to preserve what happiness they've managed to eek out.

Impossible to single out one of the actors for praise over the rest, this is one of the best casts assembled for an Off-Off-Broadway show in a long time, perfectly directed by Michole Bioscino. Dawson nails the charisma of a Southern preacher while still nervously conveying his interior double life that soon spills over into real life. McAnally's Trevor is immediately recognizable to anyone who grew up as a Southern Baptist, a good ol' boy who thinks God personally takes an interest in his life.

As the catalyst for everything that happens, Darrow skillfully avoids any and all clichés that might cling to Daniel. Neither a stereotypical twink nor a *Hee-Haw* hick who happens to like men, Daniel is just a lonely teenager who doesn't want to leave the only place he's ever felt safe. But June won't allow him to wreck the only place she's ever felt safe, either.

Sullivan is never better than when June sheds her genteel Southern nature to fight for her home. She delivers a late-in-the-show monologue about snow owls so beautifully that it isn't until the show ends that one realizes how out-of-place the speech was. What does it matter, though, when Sullivan brings audiences to tears with it, then turns around and spits venom? That's the thing about the most vocal Christians: Too often, they're venomous snakes masquerading as snow owls. And Samuel Brett Williams clearly knows it. *The Revival* might not convert many down South, but it's certain to win over fans of good theater.

>The Revival. Through Sept. 25, Theatre Row, 410 W. 42nd St. (betw. 9th & 10th Aves.), 212-239-6200; \$18.