

Theater Review: BROTHERS PLAY (Legacy LA)

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A LOST TRIBE OF BROTHERS

Because a child who has been sexually abused often knew and trusted the perpetrator, only about a third of the cases are reported. Many remain silent. As if the act itself wasn't traumatic enough, childhood abuse often has a wide range of effects in adulthood — drug use, impulsive risky behavior, bad choices, and trust issues, to name a few. Now, how does that sound for a world premiere comedy?



Over at Legacy L.A., playwright **Matthew Doherty** offers an absurdist phantasmagoria — almost the love child of Ionesco and Shepard — about three such abused brothers, now in middle age, who are about to deal with a long-ago perpetrator right around Christmastime. Three of L.A.'s most game actors have been given a yeoman's task with dialogue that goes from straightforward to splintered and distorted as the 80-minute dramatic funhouse one-act progresses.



There's Catholic symbolism strewn throughout, and hints of reality weaving its way around delusion, so it's up to the audience to decide what actually happened, or is happening, to the pathetic brothers. Cleverly, we are asked to view the play the way the brothers view life — through a gauze of trauma. While the confusing dreamlike fantasy reality blur is fascinating, the results are more bemusing than amusing.



The night belongs to the set & light designer and the actors. **Jeffrey Nordling** plays the gruff and confrontational oldest brother Jude, who comes off like a harmless duck hunter on a mission to kill more than ducks. As memories from childhood begin bubbling to the surface for all three brothers — displayed in monologues — Jude just wants to go to a gambling boat as they do every Christmas. **Rob Nagle** is delusional Francis, who thinks a stripper who

gives him a lap dance will marry him; it's heartbreaking to watch Francis buy plastic flowers and cheap candy for a date with the stripper Raven ... at the bank! As younger brother Thomas, **Jamie Wollrab** has the biggest arc; this recovering alcoholic sets events in motion when he damages a church window with a rock; as pain bubbles to the surface, he begins stuttering and sleepwalking. My favorite scene is the first, when Jude picks Thomas up from jail, and we watch love and disillusionment turn to disconnection, despair and confrontation. (And despair is a common theme in **Myllette Nora**'s well-used costumes.)



The set and lights by **Justin Huen** are masterful. All of the scenes — in a strip club, a car, or at home — take place under a pergola that is shaped like so many Nativity scenes we see lining the roads during the holidays. Used hearty mid-western furniture reminds us that this is a household that doesn't change. A thick-wood rectangular dining table has "THIS DO IN REMEMBRANCE OF ME" scratched on it. (Is this something Thomas scrawled in his sleep?). Different playing levels, all beautifully lit, help us keep focus, which isn't easy here.



That's because the script, while thrillingly original, is all over the place. It's clear that Doherty is a smart-as-hell writer, but in this case his recipe is overstuffed with too many ingredients. Plus, I've never been a fan of scenes with dialogue rife with unfinished sentences and seemingly non-sequitur thoughts. Some may love this, but audience members must be as attentive one would be learning quantum physics for the first time. It's like Wagner's beautiful music with those damn chords that rarely resolve. So, my gripe is that it is simply too much for one short sitting. It almost needs a break from the brothers. You know, we never meet Mom and Dad, with whom I'm rather certain the boys live with still. What if they came out of dust bins like Beckett's Nagg and Nell? I almost expected — *wanted* — something like that to happen.



Woof, but this must be a BEAST to direct. **James Eckhouse** keeps the brothers moving and is clearly great with actors and stage business. Missing are the kind of rich beats that Pinter adds to his scripts — much of the show needs to breath and land better. As Beckett said, “Don’t look for meaning in the words. Listen to the silences.” It’s only a three-weekend run, but there are five performances per weekend through February 5 only.

photos by **Jeff Lorch Photography**

Brothers Play

Breaking With Tradition Productions

Legacy LA, 1350 San Pablo Street in Los Angeles

Mon, Thurs, Fri and Sat at 8; Sun at 3

ends on February 5, 2023

for tickets, visit [Brothers Play 23](#)