

Brothers Play

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REVIEWS



Jeffrey Nordling, Rob Nagle and Jamie Wollrab (Photo by Jeff Lorch Photography)

Reviewed by Martín Hernández

Break With Traditions Productions

Through February 5

RECOMMENDED

It is Christmas in Chicago, and for Irish American brothers Jude (Jeffrey Nordling), Francis (Rob Nagle), and Thomas (Jamie Wollrab) that means some unseemly celebrations, despite their saintly names. Jude, the oldest, is committed to visiting the local gambling boats; middle child Francis is savoring the wares at his favorite strip club; and Thomas, the youngest, tries to burn down their parish church. Their actions speak louder than words — words they have suppressed for decades concerning the childhood trauma that has left them psychologically scarred well into their disjointed adulthood. Refusing to acknowledge the matter and directing their rage at each other instead of the true source has worked so far, but when Thomas tries to finally confront them with their horrific past, his siblings revolt in their standard delusional fashion.

Playwright Matthew Doherty's dramedy balances the intense subject matter with ample dark humor, making the unsettling tale easier to bear under James Eckhouse's steady direction. The siblings constantly berate each other and still play childish pranks on each other, evidence of how earlier events have left them emotionally immature and incapable of intimacy. It also makes for silly slapstick moments and bizarre comic antics, such as the older (and larger) brothers playing "tug of war" with the diminutive Thomas as the rope, or Jude, — an unhinged U.S. Marine vet — scolding his mother's nativity set figurines for leaving a missing wise man behind. And wait till you see Francis try to wrap a Christmas gift. Each brother also delivers impassioned confessional monologues revealing their inner pain, which in real life they mask with sex, substances, and sports. How many other men can relate?

The role of the Catholic Church is deeply ingrained in this fraternal trinity and Doherty's piece is rife with Christian symbolism. At one point a somnambulant Thomas strolls the stage in a bathrobe looking like a monkish Yoda, and Francis, like his namesake from Assisi, seeks to save what he believes is an innocent from perceived harm. Jude, despite his gruffness, has a love for his brothers that has served as a demented safeguard from their collective memory — after all, Saint Jude is the patron of hopeless causes. Unseen but omnipresent are the trio's parents, whose own drunken antics and fervor in their faith are never far from the brothers' minds since they all seem to still live in the same house and with the same secret shame.

Justin Huen's set and lighting design combine to create beatific motifs when the brothers, lit from above by a single pin spot, deliver their haunting speeches, and the colored lights on a foreboding upstage Christmas tree flash intermittently at integral points. Veronica Mullins Bower's sound and video design, with projected images of stained-glass windows, shadows of gyrating strippers, and even a famous superhero's logo, bolster the ambience. Nordling, Nagle, and Wollrab make for a profane yet poignant set of brothers in Doherty's absurdist storyline, with shadows of Samuels — Beckett and Shepard — tinging the script. Despite minor opening night jitters, the three have a chemistry that has gelled well under Eckhouse's fluid hands.

“I try to keep my life pretty empty,” intones one of the brothers at one point, a sad but effective strategy that they all seem to have embraced. It may well have kept them “safe” for years, but was it worth the cost?

Legacy L.A., 1350 San Pablo Street, Los Angeles; Thurs.-Sat., 8 pm.; Sun., 3 pm; through Feb. 5. www.brothersplay23.com. (Running time 80 min. with no intermission.)

