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Engaging 'To the Orchard' pits tradition against desire

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From left, Michael Regnier (Rabbi Isidore), Robert Branch (Simcha Bergman) and Kelsey Angel Baehrens (Rachael Bergman)

Photo/Dale Heinen

Local playwright Les Hunter's latest contemporary drama is getting its world premiere as the first full-length production of the newly formed Playwrights Local 4181. It is taking place at Waterloo Arts in Collinwood and, later in the run, at Dobama Theatre in Cleveland Hts.

"To the Orchard"– which is about making mistakes, repairing the damage, and reconciling religious traditions with personal desires – was a Top-Ten Finalist in the 2016 Jewish Play Project, received a National Foundation for Jewish Culture New Play Development Grant, as well as a production grant from the Arch and Bruce Brown Foundation.

The play takes place during the thirty days of shloshim – the Jewish ritual of mourning – which happens to coincide with Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, and tracks Brooklyn College student Rachel Bergman's (Kelsey Angel Baehrens) coming to terms with her homosexuality.

Upon the death of her mother, Rachel decides to come out to her estranged Orthodox Jewish father, Simcha Bergman (Robert Branch) – the starting anew associated with the first holiday. We soon learn that Simcha has been battling his own internal demons, and must forgive himself for past indiscretions before he can forgive others – the atonement associated with the latter holiday.

Throughout the play, Rachel seeks the comfort of her Queer Studies professor Tracie Braggs (Andrea Belser) while Simcha seeks the counsel of an addled old family friend, Rabbi Isidore (Michael Regnier). And though the play is set in the here and now, spiritual guidance is also provided through dreamlike visitations by 1970's rocker Robert Plant (Regnier), turn-of-the-century author Virginia Woolf (Belser), and 19th century financier August Belmont (Baehrens).

This touch of magical realism adds some light moments to an otherwise intense work, made even more so by some stiff dialogue early in the play and the intimate confines of the Waterloo Arts performance space.

Despite the tight quarters, director Dale Heinen stages an appealing production using T. Paul Lowry's superb animated projections to establish a sense of place, Jonathan Maag's lighting design to manipulate attention and establish a sense of time, Daniel McNamara's sound design that cleverly merges klezmer with classic rock and roll, and four excellent performers to keep us fully engaged.

During those occasional bouts of stiff prose, the acting comes across as stilted and forced. But the performances soar when Hunter's words seem to fly from the page and are as poetic as they are poignant, which happens often.

Such is the case with the final scene in Act I, when Rabbi Isidore compels Simcha to recite the Al Chet and the two men rhythmically admit their sins while alternating between Hebrew and English. "For all these O God of forgiveness," says the Rabbi as he beats his chest during the confession, "forgive us, pardon us, grant us remission. Simcha, the gates are not closed. This is my gift." This beautifully sets up the healing that takes place in Act II.

The play's many short scenes and frequent set changes can be taxing. And set changes performed by the actors rather than a crew are a distraction and detract from the production's professionalism. But not enough to undermine Hunter's work, which is thoughtful and so very intriguing.

"To the Orchard" is a welcome addition to the homegrown plays that are being supported, developed and produced in Cleveland. And Playwrights Local 4181 is a welcome addition to the companies lending support and doing the development and production.

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