

Theater in Delaware: Jesus of Selbyville

Play puts a modern, provocative twist on religion, politics and family
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Patrick Henry (Andy Nagra) is a guest on Simon West's (Mic Matarrese) talk show, while Lennie (Ben Charles) and his mom, Linda (Elizabeth Heflin), discuss school, in "O Beautiful." / UD Resident Ensemble Players



The history class discusses Thomas Jefferson. / Nadine Howatt



"O Beautiful" playwright Theresa Rebeck talks during a reading of the play in its early stages. / NADINE HOWATT



In the opening scene of "O Beautiful," Jesus (Michael Gotch) listens as Alice (Sara J. Griffin) talks about how she doesn't want to have a baby. / NADINE HOWATT



Benjamin Franklin (Drew Bihel) is an unsympathetic guest for Simon West (Mic Matarrese) on his right-wing talk show. / NADINE HOWATT

IF YOU GO

What: "O Beautiful," a world premiere play by Theresa Rebeck for the University of Delaware Resident Ensemble Players
Where: Roselle Center for the Arts, 110 Orchard Road, Newark
When: 7:30 p.m. Wednesday, Thursday, Saturday, May 12-13; 2 p.m. May 15
Tickets: \$20-\$24 (going fast)
Information: 831-2204; www.udel.edu/theatre

Of note: "O Beautiful" is playing in rotation with "The Good Doctor" by Neil Simon and "Way to Heaven (Himmelweg)" by Juan Mayorga

It's the first scene in "O Beautiful" that will make audience jaws drop, and then the world-premiere satire by the University of Delaware's professional acting troupe picks up steam.

When the lights come up in Thompson Theatre in the Roselle Center for the Arts, Jesus -- yes, that Jesus -- is sitting behind Alice listening to her.

"Did you ever say, 'I'm Jesus and I say that stupid girls who let guys talk them into going to the back seat of their cars have to have babies?' Did you ever say that?" she asks.

"No," he says.

"All you talk about is to be nice to each other! You never said nobody's allowed to have an abortion," she says.

"No," Jesus says.

"So can I? Can I? Can I?" she continues.

"Honestly," he says, "I -- I don't really have an issue with it."

Even with that in-your-face start, the University of Delaware's professional acting troupe is back with another blockbuster, only months after its "Midsummer Night's Dream" sold out the house.

Set in Selbyville High School -- yes, that Selbyville -- instead of a Greek forest, "O Beautiful" by Theresa Rebeck deals with much more modern topics than finding true love.

Woven into the tale of a teenage girl (Alice, played by Sara J. Griffin) dealing with an unwanted pregnancy as a result of date rape, and a teenage boy (Lennie, played by Ben Charles) facing soul-crushing bullying are a near-dizzying soup of modern issues: abortion, gun rights, sexual rights of teenagers, the politics of classrooms, marriage and the PTA, and the distortion of both religious and historical figures and ideals.

And not only does Jesus appear as a character in many of the scenes, leading to some gut-busting sight jokes, Thomas Jefferson, Patrick Henry, John Adams and Benjamin Franklin appear as talk-show host guests sparring with the right-winger host, and St. Paul and Joan of Arc show up, too.

It sounds like a recipe for disaster, but it's not. The first act is brilliant, fast-paced theater laced with laughter, pathos and stunning juxtapositions, one involving words and weapons as elements of destruction, another involving people imposing their own meanings on the words of Jesus or the foundation fathers. The second act, not as sharp as the first and occasionally veering into preachiness -- but never by Jesus -- packs an emotional wallop that left more than a few audience members sobbing.

Subtle, "O Beautiful" is not.

And that's the way playwright Rebeck wanted it.

"I think it's a moral play," Rebeck says after a recent preview performance. "I think it's asking the question, are we creating a world in which our children cannot live? Are we as a people looking to the morality of creation?"

She wrote the play after the university used \$50,000 in foundation money to commission a work from her that deals with modern issues for its Resident Ensemble Players, a group of professional actors who double as instructors in its master theater program.

Sanford Robbins, director of the program, knew Rebeck casually because he had once directed a play by her. He suggested she might want to take advantage of UD's ability to put 30 or 40 people on stage, an increasingly unheard-of thing in the theater world because of the expenses involved.

That suggestion alarmed Rebeck at first.

"I thought, don't take this unless you have a good idea," she says.

But she did. As a television writer, the Brooklyn, N.Y., native wanted to let an "NYPD Blue" character have an abortion, but that was nixed. Later, she pitched an abortion-themed project to Lifetime, but it was turned down.

Then she came to UD to visit in spring of 2010 to see a couple of shows, including "Dancing at Lughnasa," just as congressional campaigns were heating up and political mud was flying, propelling Christine O'Donnell to national attention on a tea party platform spewing anger at everyone who wasn't them.

"Why this rage?" Rebeck says. "Why this feeling that we're all being cheated?"

"There is a great fear out there that people cannot name. And we are not being led to a place where we can calm it and come together to build a community that will sustain it. It's a dangerous world that's been created."

Rebeck also warmed up to the idea of a large cast.

"I think it was because I was offered the opportunity to think this way," she says. "I realized you can have a crowd scene and you should have a crowd scene."

The final production had 27 roles played by 10 Equity actors and 10 master's of fine arts students, who graduate in two weeks. Twenty-one extras are played by undergraduate students between the ages of 18 and 61.

Rebeck says she can't really say where she got the idea to make Jesus, played by Michael Gotch, and the founding fathers characters. It started when she was imagining the pregnant girl talking to Jesus, because she couldn't talk to anyone else, and went from there.

"There's a wall of silence around these kids for sexual issues," she says.

A mother of two, Rebeck says she's sometimes asked how being a mother influences her writing for television ("NYPD Blue," "Law & Order: Criminal Intent"), in novels ("Three Girls and their Brother," "Twelve Rooms with a View"), films ("Harriet the Spy," "Gossip") and plays ("Bad Dates," "Omnium Gatherum," a finalist for the 2003 Pulitzer Prize).

"I think it deeply influenced this play," she says. "All the questions and the concerns that face a mom. How do we parent? How do we protect them in this environment?"

She voices those concerns through the character of Linda, who demands to know why her husband, Brian, keeps bringing home guns, supposedly to protect his family.

"I can't even say," says Brian, played by Matt Loney. "It doesn't matter even what it is. It's like everybody knows something is wrong, and it might just suddenly be wrong for you. That's the feeling. That the world is about to explode. That everything we worked for will vanish. Not vanish. Be stolen or burned. Our cities will burn."

Linda, played by Elizabeth Heflin, counters: "I just don't think anything is going to happen to us, and even if it did, I wouldn't care because we have each other. The only thing that scares me is losing you or Lennie."

A huge segment of society seems determined to continue handing power to oligarchs, the few people at the top of the totem pole, "and less and less in people," she says.

The haves end up in gated communities, armed with guns, she says. She's not sure where have-nots -- who won't have weapons -- will go.

"I think this is a formula for civil war," she says. "I hope it doesn't come to that."

She set her tale in Selbyville, partly because Sussex County gave the most votes to O'Donnell and partly because she wanted to honor Delaware as the setting of her play, since the commission was coming from here.

Rebeck worked on the play for about a year, coming to UD for readings and making changes as little as a week ago.

"I have to say, some plays work better as readings," Rebeck says. "I think this one works better as a play."

It's a play that's drawn notice in The New York Times, and it's bringing artistic directors from major theaters around the country to see it, meaning it's likely to be restaged across the country -- and when it is, the playbills also will note it premiered at UD.

The university's ability to commission a new play for its theater program, ranked among the top 10 in the country by U.S. News and World Report, raises its visibility and prestige both in the academic and theater world, Robbins says.

"Even among universities that do have professional theater companies, there's very few who have done what we have done," Robbins says. "Very few have commissioned plays that are as apt to become major works."

Having a professional troupe that works in repertory -- meaning running several plays at the same time -- added a real community feel to the show, Rebeck says. When those characters gather on stage, they feel like they've known each other a long time, she says.

While the play can be characterized as controversial on many levels, Robbins says that was never the point.

The university simply asked Rebeck for a play that reflected modern times, with no other instructions or expectations.

"We commissioned this play not knowing what the topic would be or what the theme would be," Robbins says. "We didn't set out to be controversial. We did set out to have a play that was thought-provoking and would speak to this moment in time. It could have been anything. When you commission a play, you don't saddle the author with a whole lot. You are enabling the writer to tell the story they want to tell. I just admired her work as a playwright and wanted her to write for our company, and this is what we ended up with."

Just like the audiences for "A Midsummer Night's Dream," those for "O Beautiful," which takes its name from the song "America the Beautiful," are mixed in age.

Just like "A Midsummer Night's Dream," the dead-on costumes and inventive set are done by the same people: costumer Martha Hally and scenic designer Takeshi Kata.

And just like "A Midsummer Night's Dream," "O Beautiful" ultimately is an experience.

"It's really a terrific evening in the theater that is thought-provoking and exciting, but also a wonderful emotional experience both from the comic point of view and the traditional view of theater," Robbins says. "It gets you at both ends, and not a lot out there does that."