

“A Song for my Father” is brilliant, powerful and uncomfortable

by Bethany M. Dunbar

MONTPELIER, Vt. — Don't go to see “A Song for my Father” if you are looking for an evening of light or mindless entertainment. You will leave the theater emotionally drained and yet weirdly hopeful and wanting to talk to your father, or your son, or anyone else in your life remotely resembling a family member.

David Budbill's new play is brilliant and powerful and explores areas within difficult relationships that people often don't want to explore. The play is a tribute in a way, but it's not a comfortable thing to watch. It's about a father and son who try to connect but have trouble despite their best intentions and the fact that they love each other deeply.

Randy Wolf, the son, has a refrain he seems to keep using. He was trapped by circumstance. His father is too. Aren't we all? And yet the circumstances that trap Randy are less severe than those his father, Frank, endured.

Frank is a streetcar driver in Cleveland, Ohio, who gave his son a better life than he had for himself. He made sure his son got a high school and college education. A tea-totaller, Frank spared his son from the rampages of an alcoholic father that he suffered as a child. Young Frank quit school in seventh grade to support his mother and three sisters. And while Frank is proud of his son, he doesn't understand him and resents him. “All that pride and self-esteem floated on a sea of rage,” says Randy.

The most intense scene in the play comes when Randy challenges his father to do some role-playing. He suggests that Frank play the part of his own father, and Randy will play the role of Frank as a child. Frank's father is coming home from a three-day bender. His mother tells young Frank not to say anything, but even so, his father sees the look in his wife's eyes and loses it, taking out his own unhappiness with himself on his wife and son, beating his wife. Young Frank attacks his father, and the two end up on the ground, wrestling. Frank (playing his father) is screaming and crying.

Randy tries to call it off, but it's too late. “I need to hurt somebody. Why do I always have to be the good guy?” Frank does hurt somebody, but not by attacking him physically. He insults his son's decisions in his life. He doesn't like his clothes, wonders what kind of a trade is poetry and what kind of a place to live is Vermont? Precious, smug, clean, and self-righteous, he says. “You know philosophy and poetry, but you don't know a sheet metal screw from a wood screw,” he says. “I keep telling you, I'm no suit,” is Randy's reply.

“A Song for my Father” tackles these serious questions not only with dramatic intensity but with humor as well. Frank is a flirt, and his attempts to get his nurse into bed with him at the end of his life are classic. “Flirting and squirting are not the same thing,” he tells his son. When Randy's mother dies, Frank remarries, a woman named Ivy. Ivy is played by Ruth Wallman, the same actress who played his mother. When Randy first meets her, he is astonished and remarks that she looks just like his mother.

Photographs of Cleveland in the 1940s are projected in the background. Frank reveres the industries there and challenges Randy's idea of the meaning of the word pollution.

The cast of this show is spot-on. Robert Nuner as Frank is perfectly prickly, proud and classy, even when he is suffering dementia. He makes a cheap cigar and a lawn chair look better than a golden throne and caviar. John Alexander plays Randy and doesn't even seem to be playing a part. He seems to be telling a story from his own point of view, including his respect of his father, his frustration, his desire to understand and appreciate his father, and his wish that his father would understand him. Tara Lee Downs is just right as Nurse Betty, putting up with Frank and even becoming his friend. You have the idea Nurse Betty might have been rooting for Frank a little when he peed on the bushes at the nursing home. Ruth Wallman is great as Ruth, Randy's dead mother, and as Ivy, the new wife. Her performance of the scene when we are introduced to Ivy as she telephones a friend describing how the Lord took the steering wheel to guide her through the fog one evening is just fantastic.

Congratulations to David Budbill and Lost Nation Theater. This show runs through May 9.