

THE BLOG

Theater: Don't Kill the Fatted Calf for 'Prodigal Son'

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PRODIGAL SON ** out of **** **MANHATTAN THEATRE CLUB AT NY CITY CENTER STAGE 1**

Most artists do their peak work in a feverish period of activity that I call the 10-15 phenomenon. Whether film director or novelist or rock band, you can often see the decade or so where they accomplish the work that matters. They're always capable of doing substantial --even important -- work after that time, but still, the really bold and original stuff usually comes in a rush of work lasting a decade or two. Sure, you'll get your Picasso, your Dylan, your Shakespeare, but it's hardly surprising that many artists have a fertile period where their creativity flourishes.

Not John Patrick Shanley. This Tony and Pulitzer and Oscar-winning writer hits the heights albeit spottily. You can't point to any one stretch of greatness but he can pull it off almost any time. In the 1980s, he wrote the film *Moonstruck* (and directed a cult favorite of mine, *Joe Versus The Volcano*), in the 1990s he delivered the play *Psychopathia Sexualis* and of course in the 2000s he reached the mountaintop with *Doubt* in 2004. I enjoyed the modest but charming *Outside Mollingar* in 2014, but we're still waiting for whatever he's got in store for this decade.

It's not, I fear, to be found in *Prodigal Son*. It's a rather placid, familiar play, directly auto-biographical down to the names of many characters but really not concerned with much of anything until an explosion of plot in the last few minutes that comes too little too late. (Shanley says it's modeled on his time at Thomas More Prep in New Hampshire.) It stars Timothée Chalamet as Jim Quinn, a hyper-articulate kid from a tough neighborhood in NYC. He's interviewing with the headmaster (Chris

McGarry) of a private Catholic boys school and desperately needs a second chance. Jim gets a scholarship but of course he has trouble fitting in. (It doesn't help when he pilfers the LPs of fellow students and knocks around the freshmen.)

It's the mid-1960s and the times have kids questioning everything, but Jim takes the cake. Devouring philosophy and poetry and adventure tales (by the likes of Raphael Sabatini), Jim questions *everything* including existence and the divine nature of Jesus. Oh he's trouble, but charming and handsome as hell and yeah, he's a poor fit for the well-off kids the school caters to but you can't help rooting for him. Neither can the headmaster nor the headmaster's wife (Annika Boras) who tutors him in honors English nor the teacher (Robert Sean Leonard) assigned to keep an eye on the lad and mentor him. Really, that's about it, with the modest tension of the audience wondering when something unexpected or surprising is actually going to happen.

In the scene above, that's David Potters as Jim's roommate. Shanley wrote and directed the play, which he has cast with care and structured with intent. Most scenes (indeed, all of them until the climax) include just two people at a time. Jim and his roommate, Jim and the headmaster, the headmaster and the teacher, Jim and the headmaster's wife and so on. It gives the story a rather odd rhythm on first seeing it. Not having looked at the cast list, I was constantly surprised that a new character was being introduced so late in the tale. And the advertising does it no favors, since Leonard is a huge draw but it should be made clear he has a very secondary turn here. (He is of course excellent in it.)

I anticipated two events and both of them happened but without any real impact for me. I'll avoid the one so as not to spoil. The other? The play has Jim wrestle with the fate of Socrates, who died rather than betray his

beliefs. Jim makes repeated jibes about God and is warned off doing so in front of the headmaster. Since he's always skating on thin ice, it's no leap to imagine a crucial moment where Jim -- always on probation and in fear of being expelled -- will have to choose between asserting his personal philosophy or parroting the Catholic tenets to stay in good graces. Boys might get drunk, but calling into question the divinity of Jesus is beyond the pale. The moment comes but it passes so quickly and has so little impact on Jim as a crisis of conscience that it seemed a lot of bother for nothing.

The other hits harder but it would spoil the play to reveal various details. Not that the play builds to these final events; they come out of nowhere, aren't really justified by what we see before and certainly don't register for us the way they do for Jim. By far, the main arc of *Prodigal Son* is of a very smart kid given a second chance who manages ultimately to make the most of it, thanks to the support of others. If the real story is more complicated than that, you won't learn that by watching this play. Also, the climax brings all the actors onstage in a non-realistic flourish that doesn't set off sparks and in fact muddies the final action. (And as for what the title of the play has to do with Jim and his story, I remain at a loss to guess.)

For whatever reason, I didn't care for Santo Loquasto's set design, which kept the outline of the school in the background (and was it a mistake not to have every light in every window come on or was it intended?). It allowed our hero to peer in at the school, which somehow evoked his future as a playwright, though even that seemed unsupported by the text.

However, the cast Shanley has assembled is impeccable. Leonard retains his easy charm and command of the stage; hopefully he'll return in a bigger part soon. Boras is very good, Potters a good foil and McGarry radiates decency which lets his character's modest rigidity register as a desire to do what's right rather than just annoying.

Above all, there is Chalamet, who is acting with gusto in the part of Jim. It's a showy role with all sorts of verbal fireworks and by god he makes the most of it. Somehow, he manages to do it without precisely showboating; he's setting off cherry bombs and bottle rockets but in a restrained manner that's very appealing. The last time I remember an actor acting his ass off like this in a show was an unknown Jude Law's Broadway debut in *Indiscretions*. I couldn't quite make up my mind if he was way too out there and just charming rather than good or in fact the real deal. I decided on the later. Here again, it seems likely that Chalamet is the real deal. You can see the tremendous potential in him, just as the (mostly) well-intentioned people at Thomas More did with Shanley all

those years ago.

THEATER OF 2016

[*Employee Of The Year*](#) (Under The Radar at Public) ***

[*Germinal*](#) (Under The Radar At Public) *** 1/2

[*Fiddler On The Roof*](#) 2015 Broadway revival with Danny Burstein ** 1/2

[*Skeleton Crew*](#) ***

[*Noises Off*](#) (2016 Broadway revival) ** but *** if you've never seen it before

[*The Grand Paradise*](#) ***

[*Our Mother's Brief Affair*](#) * 1/2

[*Something Rotten*](#) ***

[*Sense & Sensibility*](#) (Bedlam revival) *** 1/2

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