

World Premiere Offers No Easy Answers: "Altar Call" at the Playcrafters Barn Theatre

Written by Mike Schulz
Tuesday, 10 May 2005 18:00

Melissa McBain's drama *Altar Call*, currently playing at Playcrafters' Barn Theatre, is beautifully unresolved. There are many fine elements in this production – along with some *not*

-so-fine ones – yet I was impressed by McBain's willingness to let the drama linger after its close. She introduces potentially volatile subject matter such as adultery, homosexuality, and the dogmatic elements of scripture, yet doesn't attempt to provide easy answers to the play's complexities.

It's obvious that McBain has strong feelings about the issues in her work, and in some of her dialogue, it gets her in trouble; you can feel the characters lecturing rather than conversing. Yet you sense that McBain truly respects a good *argument*. By Act II, her characters are given no pat solutions to their problems, and their futures are as open-ended at the play's close as they are at its start. It's a terrifically, shrewdly ambiguous choice; McBain leaves her characters as ruminative as her audience.

The drama centers around, and is often narrated by, Maggie Stone (Melissa Scott), a gregarious, jovial woman in conflict with the three most important men in her life: her husband Alan (Nick Hulstrom), who might be cheating on her; her son John (Greg Ball), a talented, and gay, musician; and her father Silas (Michael King), a salt-of-the-earth Baptist reverend whose parish and family are threatened by the presence of Matt Jones (Doug Alderman), the talented tenor whom John loves. As it weaves between present and past, *Altar Call* details a family in crisis, yet it's to McBain's immense credit, and the audience's deep relief, that she also finds numerous ways to make the play comedic. For much of its length, it's a *lighthearted* dysfunctional-family piece.

McBain and director Melissa Coulter often enjoy themselves with the play's theatrical artifice, from an offering being taken in the front rows of the "congregation" to an offstage mop getting tossed toward a house-cleaning Maggie right when she needs it. *Altar Call* is often funnier than you'd expect it to be, and only when the comedy is shoved down our throats – when, for instance, Maggie delivers a long monologue, and her every sentence is accompanied by an obvious, stagy physicalization – that it feels out of place.

McBain writes some smart one-liners and gives her characters enjoyable rants; Maggie's mother (Peggy Freeman) explaining why, when driving, she likes yellow lights is a goofball classic. I wasn't always clear on whether lines were meant to be double-*entendre*-funny or just *read*

that way – Maggie on Matt's piano lessons: "John's going to start him on the organ" – but the lightness of spirit is certainly appreciated by the audience; McBain and Coulter even find room for Alderman to sing a couple of times, and the sweetness of his voice is a refreshing sound.

When the play's dicier moments do come, though, they come *big time*. Among other attributes, *Altar Call*

is surprisingly ballsy; at the performance I attended, there were audible gasps, particularly at some of the show's more overt denunciations (including a truly shocking bit of stage business involving a sword). McBain isn't shy about standing on a soapbox, and after the rather rote

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argument scenes of Act I, her anger comes out in messy bursts, with characters saying the kinds of hateful things you can only say to family. Were McBain's script less impressive than it is, it would still be thrilling to hear stage characters grapple with religion and family and a woman's place in society in a way that's neither histrionic nor jokey. But the playwright's work is commendable, and Coulter serves the material admirably.

Only one element of the show – its gay angle – gets short shrift, yet that lack of attention winds up harming the play in significant ways. John and Matt are given only one lengthy dialogue exchange with one another – we're basically forced to glean everything about their relationship from this one scene – but it's hard to know what to take from it. Most of their discussion centers around the biblical relationship between David and Jonathon, and any adult with even a rudimentary knowledge of scripture or Biblical history can guess *why* McBain chooses to present this *de facto* Sunday-school lesson here.

Yet we don't know why the *characters* are discussing David and Jonathon, and neither, it appears, do they. At first, their leading dialogue suggests that the characters are using the story as a turn-on, but then it seems as if they're telling the story to *deny* their feelings about one another; the tenets of John's and Matt's relationship are always unclear, and it's even unclear if either of them is actually *out* or not. (Hell, if it weren't for the rainbow-colored feather duster that Matt uses during that Act I house-cleaning scene, you'd have no hint that he was even *gay* .)

The actors' discomfort during this scene is palpable, but they aren't done any favors by the vague, timid way their characters' relationship is handled; it suggests a melodrama along the lines of *The Children's Hour*, in which homosexual desires must remain neutered to be palatable. Because of this lack of clarity, much of *Altar Call* no longer makes sense: Why is the parish so upset about Matt's and John's relationship when nothing so much as a coy look has passed between them? Is the reverend really going to lose everything because of a few chaste glances?

Once her ire is up, Melissa Scott comes through with some honest, devastated line readings; Greg Ball (who, by the by, works for the *Reader*) is powerful and quite touching in his confrontational moments; and Michael King gives a very fine performance throughout – pragmatic, yet concealing an inner fire. They all get the kind of juicily written scenes that actors *love* to play, and it reads in their portrayals. This debuting production doesn't feel finished quite yet, but even as is, it's more than worth your while.

Altar Call

is a work that you want to really talk about during the ride home, and that's about as close to "Mission Accomplished" as serious theatre gets.

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For tickets, visit <http://www.playcrafters.com> or call (309)762-0330.