

Simonized: "God's Favorite" at St. Ambrose University

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Before attending St. Ambrose University's production of *God's Favorite*, I had neither seen nor read Neil Simon's 1974 comedy - based on the Biblical book of Job - in which a wealthy, devout husband and father is tempted into renouncing God, refuses to do so, and subsequently suffers the loss of home, health, and family. I now consider the 34 years between the play's debut and Saturday's presentation the happiest years of my life, as I never had to endure what might be the single most irritating and unfunny comedy I've ever sat through.

Let me be clear: I'm referring to the play itself, not St. Ambrose's production of it. The show (which closed its run on February 17) was actually quite well-done; director Michael P. Kennedy's offering gave student actors the chance to experiment with broad physical and verbal slapstick, which they did skillfully, and the evening featured more of the extraordinarily detailed scenic design we've come to expect from Kristofer Eitheim. (Audience members gasped at the reveal to Act II's debris-filled playing area, and were right to do so.)

Yet in theatre, there's nothing quite so awful as watching talented participants debase themselves in the service of wretched material, and despite the considerable appeal of the actors and the design, there wasn't a single scene in *God's Favorite* that I wasn't aching to see end.

Granted, this is how I *usually* feel at one of Simon's works, but *God's Favorite* seems to me even worse than the rest of his typically plasticized fare. For sheer laziness, this piece would be tough to rival. Simon dutifully rehashes the story of Job - told here as the story of *Joe*

, played by a hard-working Matt Mercer - but lends it no insight or intellect; he merely recasts Job, his family and friends, and his chief tormentor as wisecracking stooges, excises the tale's more troubling elements (painful boils, funny; dead children, not so funny), and calls it a day.

This wouldn't be so intolerable, though, if *God's Favorite* weren't also so damned dawdling. But, *man*, does it take a long time for

nothing much to happen. The opening scene, in which Joe's panicked family reacts to a possible intruder, goes on for several minutes, and all Simon can think for his characters to do is race about the stage like ninnies and incessantly repeat their braying directives. (The rather unseemly "close your robe" routine gets an especially noxious workout.) Yet *every*

scene here seems to last far longer than necessary - Simon doesn't impart information in any one sentence when it could be delivered in three - and you sense that's because the playwright is so bewitched by his own cleverness that he can't bear to part with a single line; the sequences between Joe and the "angelic" Sidney (Seth Kaltwasser, doing a Woody Allen) are nightmarishly over-written, and Act I's most credible moment finds Joe reciting a lengthy monologue about God's will to his son - who promptly falls asleep.

