

Written by Thom White  
Monday, 13 September 2010 06:00

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I have little doubt that many patrons of the Playcrafters Barn Theatre will enjoy its current production of *Hard to Believe*, as there's consistently an audience appetite for shows on themes of faith and God. The opening-night premiere of this locally written musical, however, reminded me too much of church performances of which I've seen or been a part. I'm not sure

*Hard to Believe*

will find a place in community theatres alongside other musicals, but it could very well find its place within many a church's walls.

With a book and lyrics by Timothy Stoller and music by Jonathan Turner, *Hard to Believe* – directed here by Tom Morrow – is the musical account of the Biblical story of Job (

*Reader*

employee Chris Walljasper). In it, Satan (Paul Workman) bets God (Wendy Czekalski) that Job will turn away from his faith if all of his blessings are taken from him; Job is subsequently stripped of his family, farm, and finances early on in the play, and spends the rest of the show lamenting his losses and praising, or denying, God.

Walljasper offers a performance that's much more nuanced than those I've typically seen from him. He manages to maintain an air of sincere faith (with undertones of sorrow) in the first act, which changes into a bitter, almost resentful attitude (with undertones of dwindling trust in God) in the second. And when he's not forcing the notes, his voice has a pleasingly rich timbre to it. Katherine Zerull, meanwhile, is well-paired with Walljasper in her role as Job's wife, Sitis, and matches the earnestness of his depiction.



Workman gives the most delightfully dynamic performance of the cast, creating a Satan that's the most likable, even the most relatable, character on stage. His Satan isn't pure evil, which would be the easier portrayal route to take; instead, he's condescending, with a dismissive attitude toward humans and a respectful decorum in his role as heavenly interloper. Workman also works his way through Satan's songs with gusto, seeming to enjoy every dripping-with-cunning moment.

Czekalski has the task of lending shading to a depiction of the Almighty. It's somewhat expected

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to find God played with lofty wisdom and without much emotion, à la the voice in *The Ten Commandments*,

and that seems to be Czekalski's approach through much of the musical, with the performer adding a slight sense of loving admiration for Job. It isn't until

*Hard to Believe*

's final scene, though, that she works in multiple personality traits – mixing compassion with authority and anger with patience – and as expected, Czekalski sings beautifully throughout, hampered only by some awkward melodies.

Overall, however, the songs are encumbered by their lyrics. Stoller's phrasing is wordy, generally lacking in musicality and poetic flow, and while the lyrics serve their purpose in advancing the storyline, they don't lend themselves easily to melody. Understanding that a musical's success is oftentimes dependent on how memorable its songs are, I made the effort to try to remember some of the show's choruses. But even while walking to my car after the final bows, I couldn't recall a single one, and unfortunately, I think that was due to their lyrics being so forgettable.



I did, however, remember the impressions some numbers were meant to leave us with, thanks mainly to those performing them. Jonathan Schrader is a crowd-pleasingly smarmy televangelist named Phaz, Aaron Doyle is engaging as the awkward and meek Bildad, and Brian Nelson seems to relish his role as the tree-hugging, blogging, New Age follower Zophar; add Workman to the mix, and the four men perform the work's tightest harmonies in delightful barbershop-quartet mode. (Unfortunately, strong harmonies were lacking in the chorus of women made up of Linell Ferguson, Kris Preston, Sara Laufer, and Megan Elliott, who would've likely benefited from more rehearsal time to find their notes together.)

It's worth noting that the *Hard to Believe* program doesn't list a choreographer, and it shows in the performance; the dancing within numbers is typically one move – a basic waltz, for instance – repeated over and over. More interesting choreography would have helped this production, although Morrow, at least, does incorporate some clever elements in his direction, particularly during the characters' interactions while setting God's throne in place. And while Playcrafters' latest just wasn't to my liking, there are many who *will* like it, and those who are usually sitting in a pew on Sunday morning will no doubt appreciate this local effort.

For tickets and information, call (309)764-0330 or visit [Playcrafters.com](http://Playcrafters.com).

## **Bible Versus: "Hard to Believe," at the Playcrafters Barn Theatre through September 19**

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*Thom White covers entertainment news for WQAD Quad Cities News 8.*

*For an interview with Hard to Believe creators Tim Stoller and Jonathan Turner, see "[Leap on Faith](#)."*