

"Bob" Not to Be Taken Lightly, Not to Be Missed: "Almighty Bob" at Circa '21

Written by Jill Walsh

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Though senior citizens, religion, sex, love, and the timely battle between good and evil are all poked fun at in Circa '21's current show, playgoers should be prepared to see more than just a lighthearted comedy. *Almighty Bob* is quite a funny play, but it also lifts the veil from the element that is our ever-present fear – death – and gives us the playwright's take on how life and death work.

Cunningly written by Tom Mula, *Almighty Bob* follows 84-year-old Bob through his first week at Providence Nursing Home. But good old Bob isn't the average client, and soon begins performing contemporary Biblical miracles, such as turning his fish-sandwich lunch into hundreds of fish sandwiches. Through Bob's interactions with his daughter Karen, his doctor Wally, and his nurse (who is supposedly also a fallen angel) Colleen, we learn his unique secret: He claims to be God.

Unfortunately for Bob and for the nursing home, there are bad guys in the play, too. Bad guy number one is Mr. Carmichael, a wealthy authority who threatens to ruin the future of the nursing home. The second evil is Death, personified by a funny hippie/punk-rocker/surfer/gothic-looking figure named JoeyJoJo. Though we see a smiling JoeyJoJo waltz elderly folks through a lovely blue- and green-colored room as they pass into the afterlife, the presence of Death, however pleasant he might appear, is still disheartening.

What makes *Almighty Bob* unique is its ambiguity. The play's action gives the viewer two different views. The first is that God is actually trapped inside a dying human body and feels the need to do some good deeds before this body expires. The second, more frightening, possibility is that a loving daughter is saddened by the fact that her father is becoming old, forgetful, and strange. In this awkward yet natural circumstance, she brings Bob to the nursing home, where he will live out his last bit of life fearing a future he has no control of. Either option is a reasonable reading, though choosing the first places us at a safer distance from the presence of the real-life certainties of age, time, and death.

Okay, so the script is full of unanswerable questions, but the one I *can* answer is about the performers; all of the actors take their roles and make the most of them.

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Michael Oberfield plays a very charming and sweet Bob (who strangely resembles Richard Dreyfuss). I don't want to give too much away, but his Motown scenes with nursing-home patient are just as hilarious the love scene is endearing. Circa newcomer Barb Engstrom plays Bob's daughter, and goofy veteran Paul Bernier is Wally, the head doctor at the nursing home. They work well together as the tired-of-dating singles who eventually hit it off. And although it required a crazy costume (leather pants included), the direct interaction of Tom Walljasper (JoeyJoJo) with the audience is very natural, and his waltzing scenes are carried out with a pleasant grace.

Almighty Bob will force audiences to do what they probably don't like to do – think about the eventual conclusion of a life on earth. The script raises questions, tells jokes, and includes songs, dances, and lots of surprises, and the *deus es machina* leaves us with a satisfying ending.

Almighty Bob at Circa '21 runs through July 19. Call (309)786-7733 extension 2 for reservations.