

Theatre Review: The Good, the Bad and the Jewish

By David Raymond

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You don't have to be Jewish, or even particularly bad, to love Joshua Harmon's corrosive comedy "Bad Jews." An Off-Broadway hit last year, it is receiving its first regional theater production at the JCC CenterStage. Artistic Director Ralph Meranto was eager to get the rights for this play, and with good reason: as the title suggests, "Bad Jews" is extremely funny, extremely rude, and extremely thought-provoking. And best of all, it's exceptionally well directed and acted.

"Bad Jews" takes place in an upper West Side apartment occupied by two brothers from a well-to-do Jewish family, Liam (Carl Del Buono) and Jonah (Justin Borak), who are hosting their cousin Daphna (**Janine Mercandetti**) after the funeral of their grandfather. (Most of the claustrophobic set is taken up by fold-up beds.) Liam has missed the funeral -- he dropped the iPhone with the call about his grandfather's death while on a ski lift at Vail -- and is just arriving with his girlfriend Melody (Samantha Buckman), who is not Jewish (when questioned about her ethnic origin by Daphna, she replies "Delaware").

All the above is enough to give Daphna an epic case of shpilkes, but there's more: She is determined to leave with a family heirloom, a gold chai (a Hebrew letter and the word for "life"). The grandfather kept this ornament hidden throughout the Holocaust and gave it to their grandmother instead of an engagement ring. Liam is equally determined to have it as an engagement gift for Melody, and in fact received it from his grandfather just before he died. Daphna, however, thinks that as the family's "good Jew," she has it coming to her. The ensuing struggle for "life" is, to put it mildly, ferocious.

If you find it amusing, or perhaps distressing, that one of the characters in "Bad Jews" is a Jewish man with a Celtic first name, you are probably on this play's wavelength. Harmon pits a so-called "SuperJew", the super-observant, politically abrasive Daphna, against the more easygoing cultural Jewishness of the "bad Jews," Liam and Jonah. Harmon touches on questions about Jewish identity, family relationships and sense of entitlement, a close-knit group's treatment of outsiders, and quite a lot more.

The arguments are fascinating (and occasionally jaw-dropping) to watch and to hear, as the characters pace and circle each other like tigers in the tiny apartment. Ralph Meranto has cast "Bad Jews" astutely, and his direction reflects his enthusiasm for the play; it has a tremendous, focused energy throughout that suits the script perfectly. Harmon has thrown these tigers some tasty red meat, and the actors in the CenterStage cast attack it like they haven't eaten in a week.

Mercandetti almost runs away with the show as Daphna. This character is loudmouthed, ever-grudging, nagging, unendingly self-righteous, and just plain mean, and **Mercandetti** gives it all she's got; yet she also manages to find just a bit of sympathy and understanding for this character, giving a performance that is much more than a caricature. Daphna's spectacular mop of hair (much commented on by Liam) is practically the play's fifth character.

Mercandetti and Carl Del Buono have performed together so often lately that audiences might be forgiven for thinking they're actually one (very talented) performer. They certainly work together as one here, giving full-out, but precisely detailed performances. For example, Del Buono gets a rage-filled aria soon after his entrance, and he nails every laugh in it, but he also subtly echoes Daphna in his body language -- showing that despite their mutual disdain, Liam and Daphna are indeed related. This is impressive acting and directing.

Daphna and Liam have the showy parts in "Bad Jews," but Justin Borak and Samantha Buckman more than hold their own. The character of Melody at first seems brought in simply so Daphna can make some easy jokes about WASPs. Buckman is cute and clueless here, the pussycat in the tigers' den; but as the play gets nastier, Buckman shows Melody's stiffening spine convincingly. In fact, her insistence on hearing Daphna's side of the story leads to the play's violent climax.

As Jonah, Borak brings genuine presence to what at first seems like a non-role, consisting of single-word answers, evasive replies, and frustrated silences. (The opening scene, an endless monologue by Daphna with random replies from Jonah, sounds almost like a parody of the beginning of "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof.") But it turns out this placid character has a genuinely surprising trick up his sleeve, which Harmon reserves for the end.