

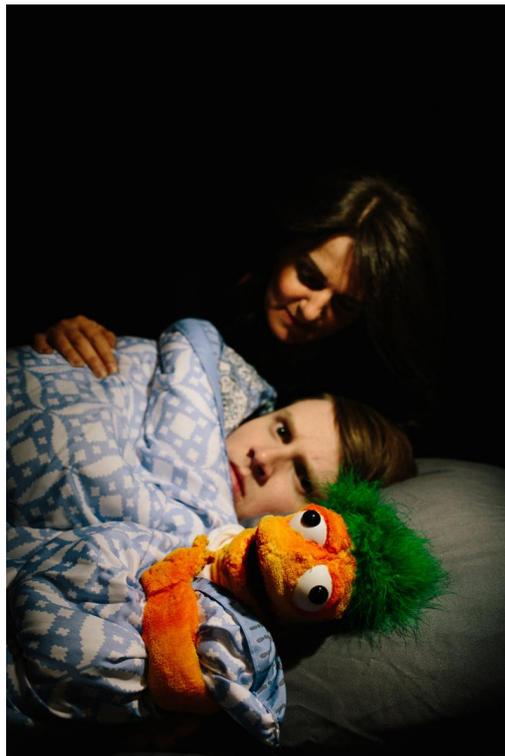
by Jeffrey Ellis (/author/Jeffrey-Ellis) Dec. 10, 2016

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If you've wondered which theater company is Nashville's boldest and most fearless - the one that consistently pushes the envelope and respects its audiences by offering them compelling choices - then look no further than Actors Bridge Ensemble, which this year, in its 21st season, has presented an astounding line-up of shows that have challenged its actors and artists, but perhaps most importantly the people sitting out in the dark, with the brave, clear focus of the company's leaders intent on serving its stated goals and vision. Where *The Ice Treatment* and *Failure: A Love Story* have already taken audiences in 2016 has been nothing short of awe-inspiring, Actors Bridge's current holiday-season offering - Robert Askins (/people/Robert-Askins/) *Hand to God* - goes even further.



Kim Bretton, Blake Holliday and Tyrone in Actors Bridge's HAND TO GOD

Hand to God is a ballsy, brassy and in-your-face consideration of life in a Southern church and its impact on the lives of its congregants, exposing the hypocrisy of small-town convention and social mores that continue to evolve at a glacial pace. You'll be singing hosannas in the show's aftermath, reveling in the knowledge that you've seen some very talented people doing what God - or any other higher power or reverential deity - must have intended from the very beginning, as in "...in the beginning..." Who knew a church's puppet ministry could be so intriguingly facile yet uproariously entertaining?

Directed with finesse and an obvious affection for Askins' fictional characters by Mitch Massaro (/people/Mitch-Massaro/) and featuring an outstanding ensemble of Nashville actors performing at the top of their collective game, *Hand to God* is revelatory. Its storytelling (which, at its very core, is a frank examination of the constant battle of good and evil which has informed the history of humanity from its earliest existence) is almost shockingly in your face, yet the seriousness of it all is leavened by the surefire, quick-witted humor than punctuates scenes designed to make you gasp (*maybe*, this is contemporary theater, after all) and guffaw (*certainly*). You're likely to find yourself doubled over in laughter one moment, then lost in a reflective reverie in

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the next. Yet somehow the story seems almost lighter than air, a fantastical take on a slightly dystopic life that rings true no matter your own background or current perspective

That's due in large part to the presence of puppets (what a year this has been for *Sailors and Maidens*, the creators of the puppets in both this show and *Failure*, as well as their own acclaimed series of productions around town - Cassie Hamilton and Mallory Kimbrell are amazing people) to help propel this wild and woolly, weird and winsome story forward onstage. The circumstances presented by the script might seem a tad unbelievable until you realize you've probably brushed up against every one of these people at some point in your own life.

Clearly, Askins' vision of this particular Southern slice of life is a bit skewed, filled with larger-than-life personalities grounded in realism which makes them far more potent than you might expect on first nodding acquaintance. Set in Cypress, Texas - described as "where the country meets the city" - *Hand to God* focuses on Jason, a young and troubled young man whose strained relationship with his mother provides the context for this ridiculously engaging comic romp that's limned with heartfelt emotion that might seem off-putting when you realize it's happening, but which makes the show's impact all the more pervasive in post-curtain introspection.

You won't leave The Chapel at Darkhorse Theatre - the home of Actors Bridge - feeling all warm and cuddly, basking in some sort of treacly *Afterschool Special* "very special"-ness (although the show has the earmarks of such an offering), but you'll be talking about it long after the five members of Massaro's ensemble have taken their final curtain calls. Or else you'll be offended by the litany of profanity, lewd sexuality and morally ambivalent situations - if you are easily taken aback by such things, that's something you should talk to your minister or therapist about.

My advice? Settle in to your seat and let Massaro and company take you on the wildest theatrical ride of the season.



Tyrone and Blake Holliday

Blake Holliday, the young actor from Murfreesboro, stakes his claim on Nashville theater with his amazing performance as Jason, showing control and confidence throughout his performance. He's an ideal Jason, but when he allows Tyrone - the foul-mouthed, demon-like puppet who is his right-hand man - to make his presence known, he becomes something more. Holliday's is an exciting, transformative

performance that he seems somehow fated to play. But it's far more than a Sh (/people/Shari-Lewis/)Ari Lew (/people/Ari-Lew/)is and Lambchop-inspired duality that we see: rather, it's far deeper and more compelling than that. And no matter how much we write, it won't be enough to convey the impact of his stunning turn.

Tyrone, the hateful and profane puppet who is - for all intents and purposes - the "star" of this offbeat and irreverent comedy that's tinged with drama throughout, is an off-kilter leading character who is likable (and scary) nonetheless. But what else might you expect from a fictional character with a fist shoved up his butt for almost two hours.

Kim Bretton, as Jason's southern slattern of a mama, takes the stage with a sense of uncontrolled rage and vibrant restraint that is breathtaking. One of the region's most versatile actors, she adds another astonishing role to her burgeoning repertoire, taking charge of the theater from her first moments onstage and virtually riveting every soul to his or her seat in the process. Despite the showy, perhaps outlandish (but only so to non-Southerners, let me assure you) aspects of her character's personality and demeanor, Bretton rather miraculously remains circumspect in her bawdiness,

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