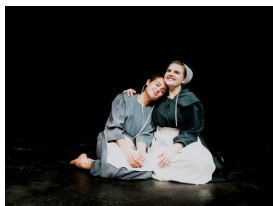


Review: Actors Bridge, Belmont score with 'Amish Project'

Amy Stumpfl, FOR USA TODAY NETWORK – TENNESSEE Published 9:56 a.m. CT April 12, 2017 | Updated 10:15 a.m. CT April 12, 2017



(Photo: Kara McLeland Photography)

Theater review

At a time when gun violence seems to dominate the daily news, the 2006 school shootings in the Amish community of Nickel Mines, Pa., were extraordinary — not only because of where they took place, but because of the community's immediate call for forgiveness. So perhaps it is only fitting that Jessica Dickey's theatrical response would be just as remarkable.

Billed as a “fictional exploration of a real-life tragedy,” “The Amish Project” tackles tough themes of grief and compassion in the face of unspeakable horror. Originally produced as a solo work, Dickey later adapted the piece for an ensemble, making it the perfect vehicle for the 10th annual collaboration between Actors Bridge

Ensemble and the Belmont University Department of Theatre and Dance.

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Director Jaclynn Jutting (head of Belmont's directing program), makes some beautiful choices here, demonstrating a clear vision throughout. More importantly, she helps to showcase the considerable talents of Belmont's BFA performance majors.

Allie Huff is simply mesmerizing as Velda, a 6-year-old Amish girl and one of the gunman's youngest victims. Whether lovingly describing her family or how to write her favorite letter (a lowercase “f”), Huff brings an authentic sense of wonder and joy to each and every moment.

Astrid Rotenberry also impresses as Velda's big sister, Anna, maintaining her character's unshakable light in even the darkest moments of Dickey's drama. And as the girls' father, Josh Kiev draws us in with quiet dignity and strength.

Phaedra McDowell also is excellent as a local store clerk, who observes the unfolding tragedy through the lens of her own complicated situation. Drew Freeman offers a finely tuned, yet surprisingly shaded, portrayal of the gunman, Eddie.

And Belmont professor James Al-Shamma, Actors Bridge favorite CJ Tucker and student Joe Mobley provide ample support along the way, with Tucker almost unrecognizable as a bitter townswoman, incapable of grace.

But it's Belmont student Amanda Bell that anchors this engrossing drama. Her gut-wrenching performance as Eddie's widow Carol is well worth a second viewing, as she balances her character's obvious trauma and anguish with notable honesty and restraint. She makes easy work of the play's often challenging themes and overlapping scenes/dialogue.

The design elements are just as subtle and satisfying, from Robert Helvey's artful scenic and costume design to Richard K. Davis' gorgeous lighting.

A striking meditation on forgiveness and grief, “The Amish Project” offers no easy answers. But the collective synergy of both the story and these actors will stay with you long after you leave the theater.

If you go

What: Actors Bridge Ensemble and the Belmont University Department of Theatre and Dance present the Nashville premiere of “The Amish Project”

When: April 20-23. Performances at 7:30 p.m. Thursday and Friday; 2 p.m. Saturday; 7:30 p.m. Sunday.

Where: Belmont's Black Box Theater, 1575 Compton Ave.

Tickets: \$25; \$30 at the door

Contact: <https://tinyurl.com/AP-Belmont> (<https://tinyurl.com/AP-Belmont>)

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