

Theater: 'Absolute Brightness' Great Actor, So-So Script

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THE ABSOLUTE BRIGHTNESS OF LEONARD PELKEY ** 1/2 out of ****
WESTSIDE THEATRE

Performer [James Lecesne's](#) latest one-man show confirms what everyone has known for two decades or more: he's a terrific performer. Lecesne creates clearly defined characters with a shrug of his shoulders and a change in his voice. Minimal props help him populate the stage with everyone from an awkward teen girl to a regular guy cop to a seen-it-all old lady puffing away on a cigarette with the raspy bark to show for it.

As a showcase for Lecesne, *The Absolute Brightness Of Leonard Pelkey* succeeds. But Lecesne doesn't need showcasing anymore; we know what he's capable of from past successes. As a piece of theater, unfortunately, it fails. The story is cliched, the characters thin and literally nothing that happens truly comes alive or surprises. Only Lecesne's innate talent and considerable gifts (not to mention some crowd-pleasing jokes of the too-easy variety) make it a diverting affair.

The story is simple: the flamboyantly gay teenager Leonard Pelkey is missing and his guardian -- Aunt Ellen -- fears the worst. The owner of a beauty salon, she barges into the police station and demands a detective take her information and do something about it. He does and what we learn is that Leonard was quite the kid. He never fit in and never tried. Advice to elderly ladies about hair color, finding a creative outlet with community theater (natch) and crafting his own fabulous rainbow-colored sneakers: that was Leonard.

The detective pieces this together while tracing Leonard's steps on what appear to be the kid's final, fateful day. Everyone he talks to remembers Leonard but the teen remains so vaguely fabulous and ill-defined that what we remember are the people. A mob wife, an old immigrant watch repairer, a sullen boy who plays video games while talking to the police -- none of them are original, but at least Lecesne brings them to life in quick brushstrokes.

When a body is dredged up from the lake, the worst fears of Leonard's friends and family are confirmed and now the only question is whether justice will be done and a killer found.

Lecesne achieved immortality with the character of Trevor, another confidently out gay teenager. I said confident even though Trevor attempts suicide in the Oscar-winning short Lecesne crafted about him. That film ends with an amusing kicker about a gay teen volunteer at the hospital. Audiences might have accepted one musical theater loving boy -- especially one driven to attempt suicide -- but two confident gay teens was a revelation long before *Kurt* and *Glee*.

Lecesne took his moment in the spotlight and launched [The Trevor Project](#), a national hotline for teens. He also seized other opportunities, namely to write a novel for young adults. The result was his 2008 debut as an author: *The Absolute Brightness Of Leonard Pelkey*.

Now he's turned that book into a show. Perhaps condensing it down is the reason for some of its weakness. Maybe I missed it, but when Leonard's Aunt Ellen came into the police station, I kept waiting for the police to ask what her relationship was with the boy. And what about his parents? If they ever explained how she came to

shelter Leonard, I missed it.

Further, we're told repeatedly how Leonard has changed everyone around him. I certainly didn't want an Anne-of-Green-Gables series of episodes where we hear how Leonard solved this problem or brought that couple together. And it's enough for a kid to be themselves, a proud role model for others. Still, if you're going to insist he changed everyone's lives for the better, it would be nice to argue exactly how. (Only the old watch maker offers a good if passive example; out of fear he tried to force his own gay son to "change" and Leonard is a chance for him to see gay kids could be loved.)

Finally, it's little surprise who killed Leonard or why. So some false drama is inserted by Lechesne. Leonard's Aunt Ellen -- that brassy hair dresser that speaks her mind and everyone claims bulldozes her way through life? -- suddenly, out of nowhere this force of nature decides she WON'T speak at the trial when the family of victims is allowed to voice their feelings. Really? You couldn't shut her up and now for no good reason and against everything we know about her this tiger woman is staying meekly quiet? So the suspense about whether she'll actually speak out is somewhat less than nil.

The story is set in 2005, so we can more easily accept that the bullying (and worse) Leonard faces wouldn't raise so many red flags or have the adults in his life raising hell at the school. Of course bullying exists today and always will for kids who are different. But in a way, it's a pleasure to report how stereotypical, so unremarkable Absolute Brightness seems to us now. Out gay teen? Bullying? These are still flashpoints, but at least their stories don't seem hard to believe or utterly unreal anymore. That's progress.

Director Tony Speciale oversees the work with a fine eye, helping Lechesne to craft some vivid moments thanks to the lighting of Matt Richards and especially the effective but unobtrusive sound design of Christian Frederickson. (Frederickson has fun at one moment with a squeaky door but it's an earned one.) Duncan Sheik offers some modest original music that keeps the sad nature of what's being investigated front and center even as the parade of characters amuse and entertain. [Lechesne](#) the actor of course is excellent. He lets himself down with the script but one never questions that his heart is in the right place and on full display every night.

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