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ENTERTAINMENT

## Theater: "Great God Pan" Makes Some Sweet Music

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**THE GREAT GOD PAN** \*\* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*  
**PLAYWRIGHTS HORIZON**

Amy Herzog's play has opened to strong reviews and an immediate extension and no wonder: she's a distinctive talent. I just seem to be a step behind others in where I think her work has developed. *4000 Miles* was a less ambitious play that didn't quite add up, but which was given an excellent production at Lincoln Center. Now Playwrights Horizon has given her more ambitious new play a flawed but sympathetic staging that reflects the weaknesses in the work.

Our hero is Jamie (Jeremy Strong) who is meeting with a childhood acquaintance named Frank (Keith Nobbs) -- "friend" seems too strong a word for two men who haven't seen each other since they were seven years old. But it's not too strong a word for Frank who has reached out to Jamie and clearly has some momentous news. Frank is taking legal action against his father for molestation and thinks perhaps that Jamie was molested by Frank's father as well. What? No. Jamie is polite but firm: he doesn't have any story to tell, any repressed memory to dredge up. But Jamie is too restrained, too tamped down and we soon realize he's been more disturbed by Frank's revelation than he let on.

Jamie has a beautiful girlfriend Paige (Sarah Goldberg), a former dancer who now provides counseling and is working towards an advanced degree. They've been together for years and yet never married. Paige's good news that she's pregnant freaks him out and he doesn't know what to do. Needless to say, she's upset and angry while Jamie keeps asking for more time. He hasn't even told her about Frank's implication that Jamie was molested himself. Could he forget such a thing? And why, wonders Paige, isn't he closer to his parents? Why is he so closed off to everyone?

*The Great God Pan* isn't really about whether Jamie was molested (it seems certain he was) but more about how that might have a ripple effect throughout his life and the lives of those around him. It's about memory and what we hold onto and what we forget. Moment to moment it has some compelling scenes and the acting is solid throughout. But there are too many loose ends, too many dramatic cul de sacs in a short play like this; they don't feel like a messy reflection of life but rather the result of a first draft of a sharper, better work.

The scenic design by Mark Wendland is striking on first view: it echoes the play's repeated references to a childhood memory about Jamie and Frank going down to a small creek to play, led by their favorite babysitter Polly (Joyce Van Patten), who would recite **the Elizabeth Barrett Browning poem "A Musical Instrument"** to them time and again. So the set is dominated by a leafy, green expanse that's beautiful but a bit dense and smothering. A giant wall of sorts dominates the middle of the stage with slabs of set sliding in and out to become a park bench, a couch at home and so on. The greenery becomes a bit monotonous despite the work of lighting designer Japhy Weideman and sound designer Darron I. West to create different moods.

Goldberg is not terribly sympathetic as Jamie's girlfriend, reacting with one of those annoying "that explains everything" riffs to his confession that Frank suggested Jamie might have been molested too. Even if it does explain everything, no one wants to hear they've been "figured out." Goldberg is better in her scenes counseling an anorexic teenager (Erin Wilhelmi, excellent in a small turn). Indeed, those scenes are some of the most interesting in the show. But it's unclear whether we're supposed to understand that Paige is doing a poor job of counseling (you're not supposed to break down in front of your clients). More to the point, what do these scenes have to do with the play? Perhaps we're meant to see the anorexia as a symptom of some deeper issue (maybe sexual fears or -- though it's not hinted at -- molestation) the same way Jamie's alleged emotional walls are now seen as a symptom of his possible childhood trauma. Other than a banal connection like that, I'm not sure why this subplot was included.

As for Jamie's "distance" from his parents, we have to take Paige's word on it; I'm not sure what Herzog intended here either. He seems to get along well with both. Sure they wish he'd visit more but so does every parent in the world. Jamie meets with both his mom and dad at different times and their interactions are not awkward or cold. His mom Cathy (the always rock solid Becky Ann Baker who looks exactly the same as she did 13 years ago on TV's *Freaks & Geeks* but prettier and thinner) has a weird reaction to Jamie's first tentative revelation that Frank was molested. Her reaction -- in which she lashes out at Megan's Law over registering sex offenders -- is later explained by her feeling defensive over possibly endangering Jamie. (He spent a week or so at Frank's house when his parents were having marital issues.) She might have reacted in a dozen different ways to express her defensiveness, but this one was confusing.

Another anecdote that leads us down the wrong path appears when Jamie visits that now-aged babysitter Polly in a nursing home and they talk about the time she fell into the river and was covered in mud. For Jamie, it's a painful memory -- at the time he covered his eyes as Frank cried and Polly came out of the creek looking a mess; Jamie couldn't bear to look at her. Why? I have no idea. How does it relate to the story at hand? Who knows.

Jamie is constantly wrestling with memory. Is he suppressing the time Frank's dad molested him at the age of five or did it never happen? Maybe Frank's dad only fantasized about doing so and now it's a memory he believes in. Always bad with details and the like, Jamie fixates on one clear memory: the scratchy sofa in Polly's home. When Polly insists she didn't have a scratchy sofa, naturally we think that perhaps Jamie is finally remembering a scratchy sofa at Frank's house, a sofa where perhaps Frank's dad did some horrible thing. But no, later Jamie's mom says she remembers that scratchy sofa too. Oh well. Peter Friedman as Jamie's dad is given a clearer scene with his son and scores well, explaining to Jamie about their marital troubles way back when and why Jamie's mom

acted so weirdly. It's honest, straightforward and clear, something most scenes do not offer.

Even [that poem by Elizabeth Barrett Browning](#) seems poorly used despite being quoted at key moments. The problem is that they never quote the most germane passage, the one that takes the great god Pan to task for hacking down a reed to make a flute for his musical pleasure. Pan enjoys himself but the true gods know the price of despoiling the reed is too high. It's indicative of Herzog's talent: she creates vivid characters and intriguing premises but as of yet is circling around the real issue without quite getting to the heart of the matter, without sucking out the pith of her characters and playing them with the mastery she evinces in fits and starts. Director Carolyn Cantor directs the cast smoothly but she or the dramaturg (if any) should work harder to ask questions and challenge and force Herzog to become the better playwright her talent deserves.

#### **THE THEATER SEASON 2012-2013** (on a four star scale)

*As You Like it* (Shakespeare in the Park with Lily Rabe) \*\*\*\*

*Chimichangas And Zoloff* \*

*Closer Than Ever* \*\*\*

*Cock* \*\* 1/2

*Harvey* with Jim Parsons \*

*My Children! My Africa!* \*\*\*\*

*Once On This Island* \*\*\*

*Potted Potter* \*

*Storefront Church* \*\* 1/2

*Title And Deed* \*\*\*

*Picture Incomplete* (NYMF) \*\*

*Flambe Dreams* (NYMF) \*\*

*Rio* (NYMF) \*\*

*The Two Month Rule* (NYMF) \*

*Trouble* (NYMF) \*\* 1/2

*Stealing Time* (NYMF) \*\*

*Requiem For A Lost Girl* (NYMF) \*\* 1/2

*Re-Animator The Musical* (NYMF) \*\*\*

*Baby Case* (NYMF) \*\* 1/2

*How Deep Is The Ocean* (NYMF) \*\* 1/2

*Central Avenue Breakdown* (NYMF) \*\*\*

*Foreverman* (NYMF) \* 1/2

*Swing State* (NYMF) \* 1/2

*Stand Tall: A Rock Musical* (NYMF) \* 1/2

*Living With Henry* (NYMF) \*

*A Letter To Harvey Milk* (NYMF) \*\* 1/2

*The Last Smoker In America* \*\*

*Gore Vidal's The Best Man* (w new cast) \*\*\*

*Into The Woods at Delacorte* \*\* 1/2

*Bring It On: The Musical* \*\*

*Bullet For Adolf* \*

*Summer Shorts Series B: Paul Rudnick, Neil LaBute, etc.* \*\*

*Harrison, TX* \*\*\*

*Dark Hollow: An Appalachian "Woyzeck"* (FringeNYC) \* 1/2

*Pink Milk* (FringeNYC) \* 1/2

*Who Murdered Love* (FringeNYC) no stars

*Storytime With Mr. Buttermen* (FringeNYC) \*\*

*#MormonInChief* (FringeNYC) \*\*

*An Interrogation Primer* (FringeNYC) \*\*\*

*An Evening With Kirk Douglas* (FringeNYC) \*

*Sheherizade* (FringeNYC) \*\*

*The Great Pie Robbery* (FringeNYC) \*\* 1/2

*Independents* (FringeNYC) \*\*\* 1/2

*The Dick and The Rose* (FringeNYC) \*\*  
*Magdalen* (FringeNYC) \*\*\*  
*Bombsheltered* (FringeNYC) \*\* 1/2  
*Paper Plane* (FringeNYC) \*\* 1/2  
*Rated M For Murder* (FringeNYC) \*\* 1/2  
*Mallory/Valerie* (FringeNYC) \*  
*Non-Equity: The Musical!* (FringeNYC) \*  
*Blanche: The Bittersweet Life Of A Prairie Dame* (FringeNYC) \*\*\* 1/2  
*City Of Shadows* (FringeNYC) \*\*\*  
*Forbidden Broadway: Alive & Kicking* \*\*\*  
*Salamander Starts Over* (FringeNYC) \*\*\*  
*Pieces* (FringeNYC) \*  
*The Train Driver* \*\*\*  
*Chaplin The Musical* \* 1/2  
*Detroit* \*\* 1/2  
*Heartless at Signature* \*\*  
*Einstein On The Beach* at BAM \*\*\*\*  
*Red-Handed Otter* \*\* 1/2  
*Marry Me A Little* \*\*  
*An Enemy Of The People* \*\* 1/2  
*The Old Man And The Old Moon* \*\*\* 1/2  
*A Chorus Line at Papermill* \*\*\*  
*Helen & Edgar* \*\*\*  
*Grace* \* 1/2  
*Cyrano de Bergerac* \*\*  
*Who's Afraid Of Virginia Woolf?* \*\*\*  
*Disgraced* \*\*  
*Annie* \*\* 1/2  
*The Heiress* \*\*  
*Checkers* \*\* 1/2  
*Ivanov* \*\*\*  
*Golden Child* at Signature \*\* 1/2  
*Giant* at the Public \*\*\* 1/2  
*Scandalous* \* 1/2  
*Forever Dusty* \*\*  
*The Performers* \*\*  
*The Piano Lesson* at Signature \*\*\* 1/2  
*Un Ballo In Maschera* at the Met \*\*\* 1/2 (singing) \* (production) so call it \*\* 1/2  
*A Christmas Story: The Musical* \*\*  
*The Sound Of Music* at Papermill \*\*\*  
*My Name Is Asher Lev* \*\*\* 1/2  
*Golden Boy* \*\*  
*A Civil War Christmas* \*\* 1/2  
*Dead Accounts* \*\*  
*The Anarchist* \*  
*Glengarry Glen Ross* \*\*  
*Bare* \*\*  
*The Mystery Of Edwin Drood* \*\* 1/2  
*The Great God Pan* \*\* 1/2

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**Note:** Michael Giltz is provided with free tickets to shows with the understanding that he will be writing a review. All productions are in New York City unless otherwise

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