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Theater: Jake Epstein Makes the Closet Sexy Again in 'Straight'



By Michael Giltz



WALTER MCBRIDE VIA GETTY IMAGES

STRAIGHT ** 1/2 out of ****

ACORN THEATRE ON THEATRE ROW

Let's start with the marketing. The poster and tagline for the new drama *Straight* is misleading and banal. Misleading because despite my being a big fan of actor Jake Epstein, it didn't even register with me that he was in the show at first. (A new short hair cut for the poster just didn't look like him. And he's a Tony nominee for *Beautiful: The Carole King Musical*. For heaven's sake, that's a big deal and this tiny show should have touted him more.) Banal because it's called *Straight* and the tagline is: "Meet Ben. Ben is a 26-year-old investment banker. Ben likes beer, sports, and Emily. And Chris." This feels eye-rollingly tepid for the 21st century. A guy who likes sports AND is attracted to women and men? Good heavens!

In fact, all of this is deeply misleading and while it does no service to marketing the show, it did lower my expectations so much that I was happily surprised on several levels. The play by Scott Elmegreen and Drew Fornarola isn't great, but it's certainly more interesting and quirky than that tagline suggests. And the three

member cast elevates it considerably with their charm and chemistry, led by Epstein's increasingly substantial stage chops.

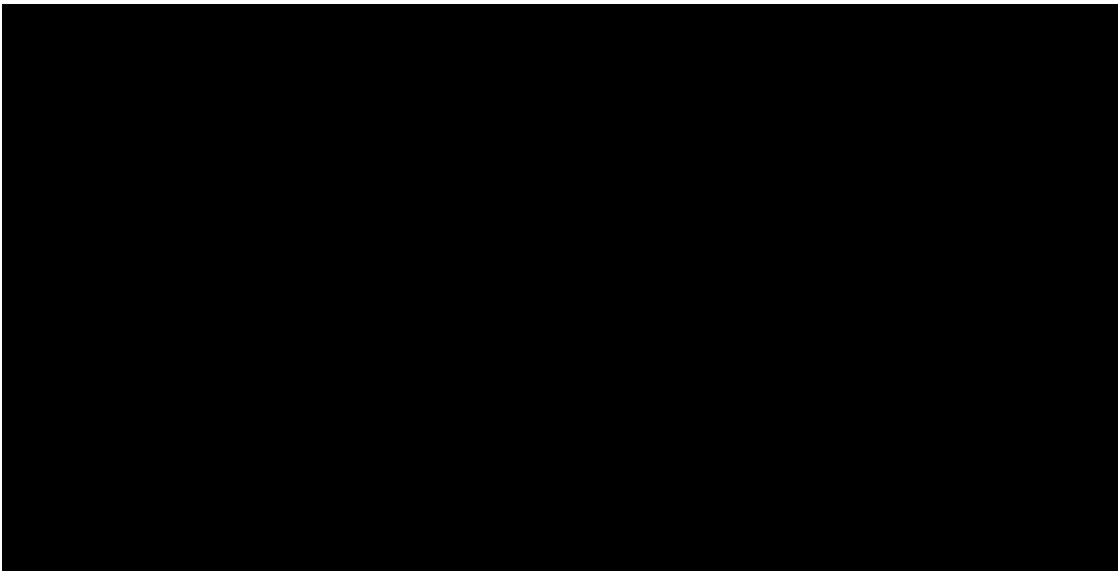
So *Straight* is *not* about a straight guy who realizes he's bisexual. In fact, it's about a closeted gay man of today (Jake Epstein) who is freaked out about that fact and seeks solace in the long-term, *almost* satisfying relationship with his girlfriend Emily (Jenna Gavigan). Sure he refuses to move in with her. Sure she wants kids and the whole kit and kaboodle and he wants to keep things the way they are...after FIVE years. Sure he's had some casual hook-ups with guys on the side that wrack him with guilt but feel "right" in the way his girlfriend never will. But gay? He can't say it.


In fact, in one of the play's interesting choices, the word "bisexual" is never even used, I believe. A better name might be *Closeted*, but perhaps that was considered less titillating than the bi-trendy title and tagline for *Straight*. It begins with Epstein and an online date named Chris (Thomas E. Sullivan) sitting on a couch nervously watching football on TV while eying each other. They're sitting in Ben's apartment, which is far straighter-seeming than Ben will ever be. While Ben comes across as a classic metrosexual, his apartment is steel grey walls with comic books and football jerseys proudly mounted as trophies. It's a total dude's apartment while Ben is anything but a knuckle-headed fellow, despite working on Wall Street and insisting he's more comfortable tossing back beers and hanging with the guys.

Chris isn't buying it and neither are we and since they soon start making out, Chris is right. Ben is clearly torn. He likes his girlfriend, "like" being the key word there to their complacent, safe friendship. She's doing interesting research while Ben rakes in the bucks and her occasional requests to *finally* get to the next stage of their romance are good-naturedly ignored by Ben.

Then he's pretending to work late or she's away for the weekend and Chris is back in his apartment, their sex growing more and more hot and the return of Emily less and less welcome. When will Ben admit he's not attracted to girls the way he is to guys? When will Chris demand more than brief flings? When will Emily stop settling for less? When will they all start dealing straight with one another?

NOTE: This video has nothing to do with the show, actually. It's just the three leads competing to see who can match a song to the Disney movie it came from. But it's silly fun and gives you a sense of their on-stage chemistry.





Director Andy Sandberg directs with fluid, compact efficiency, keeping the show at a brisk 90 minutes that actually feels longer in a good substantial way without ever wearing out its modest welcome. The script only glancingly tackles some of the complicated issues it raises, but a series of choices keep your interest. First, Ben admits that after having sex with Chris he later got nauseous. That certainly pushes back against the "sexy, closeted straight guy" dynamic one might expect. He's of course worried Chris will be weirded out by this admission. But the younger Chris (he's still in college) in fact admits he too has felt a little self-loathing.

I wasn't expecting *two* closeted guys deeply unhappy about being gay. Yet that's where the real interest and tension of *Straight* lies. Sure, society has made huge strides and gay men in the Boston of today -- where the show is nominally set -- have a lot fewer reasons to fear coming out. But guys will still have to come out to themselves first and it doesn't always mean they'll be thrilled about telling family and friends and abandoning what they might see as the safe and happy road to married bliss and kids.

If Chris had been comfortable with his sexuality, this show would have been too pat. But in the play's most vivid dialogue, Chris describes a dream he's had for years where young guys in jeans and white t-shirts are smoking cigarettes and Chris just knows they're coming to drag him down to hell. Yikes! In another interesting detail, when Chris prances around mocking some stereotypes of what one might expect of a gay man, Ben repeatedly asks him to stop and then violently grabs him and calls him a faggot...and then they have their most satisfying sex yet. The play never digs deeper into all these possibilities of darkness, but at least they're raised.

If Emily had seemed a patsy or too self-deluding, the show might have also lost some tension. But she's a smart, work-focused person who has a good relationship with Ben that is physically satisfying to both of them. (In director Andy Sandberg's best work, scene changes are handled fluidly in the dark, for example with Ben transitioning from kissing Chris to kissing Emily without blinking an eye.) We soon believe that Ben is essentially gay as opposed to bisexual or straight. If he chooses to dump Chris and stick with Emily out of the fear of coming out, we know he's going to have an unhappy life. But it's to the production's credit that Emily doesn't seem like a fool for enjoying the relationship they do have and Ben doesn't seem a fool for considering sticking with the safety of what he knows as opposed to what he wants.

Ultimately, *Straight* feels too superficial to really deliver. It has some amusing repartee but the story they've hinted at needs a darker, more nuanced script to mine all of its possibilities. Two scenes are too blunt in their staging: the sex scene that ends with Ben "dramatically" pulling down Chris's underwear is unintentionally amusing (male nudity is hardly a shocker anymore) and the final image is too heavy-handed when subtlety would have been more welcome.

Still, it's blessed with a trio of strong actors who make the most of the material they're given. Gavigan is very appealing as Emily; we can easily understand Ben enjoying her love and not wanting to let her down. Sullivan has a coltish appeal as the younger Chris, suggesting his own conflicted feelings that don't run as deep as

Ben's (he's soon coming out to a friend or two) but are just as painful.

And Jake Epstein is immensely appealing as Ben. His good work as the bi-polar Craig on the TV show *Degrassi* was memorable. I thought he was great in the musical *Beautiful* but the self-destructive role of Gerry Goffin seemed like a natural extension of what Epstein had already shown he could do. Here he grows even further. Ben is also troubled but in a far more tamped-down, hidden manner than those two other parts. Epstein's natural charisma shines through, making Ben such a charmer even when most conflicted. It easily allows us to understand why Emily is still hanging around hoping for more and Chris will remain on standby, settling for less. Half a loaf? Sure, but what a loaf! Here's hoping Epstein will stick with theater and get more and more substantial parts soon.

THEATER OF 2016

Employee Of The Year (Under The Radar at Public) ***
Germinal (Under The Radar At Public) *** 1/2
Fiddler On The Roof 2015 Broadway revival with Danny Burstein ** 1/2
Skeleton Crew ***
Noises Off (2016 Broadway revival) ** but *** if you've never seen it before
The Grand Paradise ***
Our Mother's Brief Affair * 1/2
Something Rotten ***
Sense & Sensibility (Bedlam revival) *** 1/2
Broadway & The Bard * 1/2
Prodigal Son **
A Bronx Tale: The Musical **
Buried Child (2016 revival w Ed Harris) **
Nice Fish ***
Broadway By The Year: The 1930s at Town Hall ***
Hughie **
Pericles (w Christian Camargo) * 1/2
Straight ** 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 indicated.

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