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NEIL SIMON THEATRE

Bryan Cranston should have been showered with Emmys for his hilarious turn as the dim-witted but lovable dad on Malcolm In The Middle. But it took meth to turn this talented, successful actor into a major draw, one big enough to cause a stampede now that he's making his Broadway debut in a sprawling work about the passage of a civil rights bill by President Lyndon Baines Johnson. So thank you, Breaking Bad.

Cranston had a string of theatrical credits to his name but it was still unclear how well he would handle centering a big spectacle in New York. Those questions dissipate right away. He's not the tall, gangling presence that LBJ was, but with canny casting (a number of other key roles are played by actors who are shorter than him) and Cranston's correct decision to play a character rather than imitate a man, LBJ springs to life here in full lapel-grabbing, arm-twisting glory. Can he hold the stage? You bet.

Playwright Robert Schenkkan's Pulitzer Prize winner The Kentucky Cycle was crushed on Broadway by the massive success of Angels In America back in 1993. It ran for barely a month. That won't happen here: LBJ likes to win and All The Way looks set to go as long as Cranston wants to keep it going (it's currently a limited run through June). He'll surely be a front runner for the Tonys.

But is it good? Like almost every other political drama on film or TV recently, the knee-jerk reaction is to compare it to The West Wing, a series that turned politicking (and speechifying) into high drama. Is All The Way about as cogent and entertaining as a typical episode during that show's heyday? Yes. It also has a large, sprawling cast with many actors playing two or three or four roles.

But the push to pass the Civil Rights Act of 1964 is high drama already, one of the titanic struggles in our legislative history. Schenkkan's play manages the difficult trick of presenting the horse-trading and ebb and flow of congressional battle solidly. But what is not captured is the complexity of the people involved. LBJ is a darkly complicated man but here he is sentimentalized and broadly drawn. Everyone, in fact, is presented in stark, simplistic terms from Martin Luther King to J. Edgar Hoover down to Governor George Wallace (ok, Wallace is pretty simplistic back in the 1960s).

It's fun and Cranston is a blast to watch. But it should be far more compelling and challenging.

You know the story. JFK has died, LBJ is taking power and he has about one year before the Presidential elections. For various reasons the show doesn't quite plumb, LBJ tackles the Civil Rights Act and the dance begins. A master of Congress, he navigates and compromises and back-stabs and does whatever he has to in order to win. That leads to his first chance at actually being elected President rather than just being an "accidental" one. His campaign climaxes with a brilliant speech where LBJ somehow turns his pushing for civil rights into a slap at Yankees. They said we were racist and always play on our fears, but I won't let them, he

snarls. It works and doesn't work. Johnson wins the election, of course, but the Democrats essentially lost the South politically for generations to come.

The first and most welcome surprise about *All The Way* is that it doesn't just revolve around LBJ. Sure, we knew it had a large cast. But the efforts of Dr. Martin Luther King (a fine Brandon J. Dirden) and the many activists and leaders of the struggle for equal rights for blacks is given full weight here. LBJ and King's sparring, with each one prodding and pushing the other in order to advance their own agenda is the best part of this show.

The stage may get literally crowded at some points, with LBJ holding forth as the bodies of Chaney, Goodman and Schwerner are dug up behind him. And the multi-media stunts feel mostly unnecessary, with Shawn Sagady offering up clips from the era and running totals of vote counts in the Congress. It's all to little effect, except for the scene of Roslyn Ruff testifying to Congress as Fannie Lou Hamer and LBJ's desperate attempt to upstage her. But at least this is a play where the men and women putting their lives on the line to obtain equal rights don't feel like an afterthought to the story of the white man we are asked to identify with.

Still, even for them the complexity begins and ends with arguments about strategy and a brief moment showing King about to cheat on his wife with a white woman. The payoff -- with LBJ chortling over the audio tapes -- is more telling. He dismisses the info as unimportant, private and angrily insists the head of the FBI not make use of the dirt. Hoover (a fine Michael McKean) is sport for a modest inside joke as LBJ wonders aloud how one can tell if a man is gay and asks Hoover his opinion.

Among the large cast, William Jackson Harper is fine as the impassioned Stokely Carmichael. Rob Campbell is fine in various roles, including Wallace. Indeed, everyone is fine but no more than fine because their parts remain so one-note. An exception is made for John McMartin, who brings shadings to Sen. Dick Russell; it's no surprise some of the show's most gripping moments involve he and Cranston squaring off.

But it's rare that Schenkkan's play cuts deep. The show begins curiously with LBJ retelling a story to the audience about a distant relative hiding from Comanches as if it happened to him. The play later correctly credits who the story happened to (a great grandmother long before he was born) but how this relates is hard to follow. LBJ would recycle any story, whether it was genuinely "his" or not, but it's hard to know why this particular one should be presented as if it held some insight into the man. Later, in a confessional moment also spoken directly to the audience, LBJ tells a true story of spending some time teaching dirt poor children in a border town. It's presented as a heartfelt declaration of why civil rights might be such a defining issue for him.

Well, I'm grateful that the approach of this play prompted me to tackle Robert Caro's brilliant multi-volume biography of LBJ (I'm not done reading it, any more than Caro is done writing it). But the downside is that this soulful pouring out of emotion onstage feels utterly unauthentic to what I've read. If there's one thing that drives LBJ, it's winning -- and principles be damned. As the play makes clear at another point, his father stuck to his principles and it ruined him, making the man a figure of derision in his hometown. LBJ worked for arguably the most conservative Congressman from Texas when he came to Washington and at the same time worked on the campaign of the most radically liberal. He wanted to win! Again and again throughout his life, LBJ played his cards close to the vest, refusing to take a stand on issues even when just an aide. Those closest to him weren't even sure what he believed in as he rose, because LBJ would parrot the beliefs of anyone higher up in power as the consummate brownnose he was.

If Schenkkan wanted to portray this push for civil rights as the one noble act in his career, a principled stand no matter the cost moment -- rather than a political calculation that it could be done and would help him establish himself as his own man outside the shadow of the martyred Kennedy -- he needed to do a lot more work to argue his point. At the very least, it would better reflect the complexities of the man if this story about him teaching the poorest and most vulnerable was told to someone in order to win them over, rather than as a soliloquy to the audience that implied this was "the truth."

Even better, let him use this story as an anecdote to win a vote and then immediately contrast it with a scene where he baldly says the Democrats can't get away with kowtowing to the Dixiecrats any more, just to keep us guessing along with his advisers about what he really thinks. (Mind you, that argument was morally right but politically wrong since LBJ did acknowledge passing the legislation would cripple the Dems for decades. In fact, no Democratic presidential candidate has won a majority of the white male vote since.) This is all to say that All The Way may be broadly entertaining on one viewing but it doesn't remotely begin to offer any shading or nuance to some remarkably nuanced and complex figures.

I'm of two minds about the set of Christopher Acebo. It's dominated by rows of curved seating like in the Congress, with various characters sitting and observing the action or holding forth from their seat. It works just fine, though scenes set in hotel rooms and elsewhere feel a tad awkward and tacked on. The production design becomes even more cluttered when you've got those rows of seats, then a crime scene down south in Mississippi and finally a legislative scene towards the front all crammed onto the stage at the same time. We're meant to feel the cross-currents of history, but it just looks cluttered. What seems at first elegant and simple becomes a little too utilitarian, too all-purpose to make us feel rooted in any particular place and time.

The costumes by Deborah M. Dryden are more specific and convincing, though the wigs and makeup of Paul Huntley sometimes feel the pressure of turning so many actors into so many different figures that the sense of "costume" in those looks remains foremost in the mind. The score by Paul James Prendergast feels just as straightforward as the play itself. With so many moving parts, Bill Rauch's work feels more like traffic cop than director, though he avoids collisions and keeps most changes in setting and mood crystal clear.

To be fair, the LBJ of Schenkkan is not a cartoon. He's just far simpler, more straight-forward, less tortured and driven and fascinatingly contradictory than the real man. But Cranston brings weight and humor to the character he's been given. He tells jokes, strong-arms, barks, wheedles, ignores, sucks up, muses, doubts, blusters and strategizes on and on with gusto until he crosses the finish line. "I'm the President!" he exults at the finale. And you believe him.

HAND TO GOD *** out of ****

MCC THEATRE AT THE LUCILLE LORTEL

Was it really November of 2011 when I last saw this scabrous comedy at the Ensemble Studio Theatre? The show is so fresh in my mind, it might have been last week. Hand To God by Robert Askins has finally made the jump to Off Broadway at MCC and if a show with this strong a hook -- born-again teen tormented by a demonic hand puppet -- and two award-worthy lead performances can't click commercially and enjoy a good run, then we're all going to (theatrical) hell. Certainly any savvy theatergoers will want to check it out. And bold tourists will hopefully venture in to see something they won't find back in Kansas.

Margery (a very good Geneva Carr) is a sad widow trying to find some purpose by dragging her son into a church project: Christian hand puppetry to spread the word. Never mind that she doesn't know the first thing about puppetry; this is what she's decided to do and by gosh Jason (Steven Boyer) is going to support her. The discomfited, awkward Jason feels dumb around the geek-cute Jessica (Sarah Stiles) and the sullen Timothy (Michael Oberholtzer), who is dumped there while his mom attends AA meetings. But that doesn't stop Jason from really getting into the puppetry thing, perhaps because his hand puppet Tyrone lets Jason unleash all the anger, sadness and lust pent up inside him, not to mention asserting himself for a change.

But is Jason that good at puppetry? Or is Tyrone an instrument of the Devil? His puppet mucks up a sweet moment with Jessica, provokes Timothy and gets more and more violent with each passing moment, even refusing to let Jason fall asleep at night by constantly hitting him in the face. But Tyrone and Jason aren't the only ones out of control. Margery firmly rejects a tepid romantic offer from Pastor Greg (Marc Kudisch) but her tamped-down emotions explode when Timothy declares his love. Before he knows what's happening, Timothy is

trashing the church meeting room and on the floor, gobbling up pieces of poster at his mistress's command. "Eat it!" she demands.

Actually, this explosively funny moment happens very early, establishing the over-the-top, anything goes vibe that is soon carried even further by Jason's hand puppet from hell. That let's us know he's not the only unhappy camper here and maybe it's not the Devil but just plain old sadness driving these two to extremes.

Act one is pure hilarity. Act two takes a turn to the serious (with still plenty of humor) as the pain these people are feeling bubbles to the surface.

Hand To God is essentially the same play from before, but everything is tighter, sharper and more in focus. The sets by Beowulf Boritt are spot-on, especially in the second-act reveal where we see the vandalism of Jason and Tyrone, a collection of jokes (a crucified Barbie, references to Slayer and the like that keep the audience tittering for minutes as they discover them). The lighting by Jason Lyons and sound by Jill BC Du Boff work in tandem with Steven Boyer to create the perfect, tone-switching atmosphere that allows us to suspend our disbelief whenever satanic Tyrone holds forth.

Director Moritz von Stuelpnagel has clearly used the time to refine his vision of the work. Three of the cast members are new, with Stiles and Kudisch worthy successors. Anyone who saw Bobby Moreno will miss the unbridled relish in which he unleashed his id, but newcomers will find Oberholtzer's more straightforward take on a dumb kid hot for teacher funny on its own.

Happily, both Carr and Boyer remain excellent, despite living with the show for several years and being showered with accolades. Carr has centered her performance more effectively in pain rather than broad comedy and that makes her journey more of an equal to her son's. Boyer is a marvel; he is if anything even more restrained and honest, playing essentially two roles, doing hand puppetry, fighting with himself in a climactic moment and all of it funny, moving and gripping.

The issues I had with Askins' fresh and funny play remain, but don't seem so serious. Perhaps thanks to Kudisch, the pastor doesn't seem quite the villain but more of a real person -- the mom may feel put upon, but he didn't really do anything outrageous by making his desire for a relationship clear. And the pastor is admirably restrained when dealing with an apparently psychotic kid whose mom would prefer an exorcism to a psych ward.

And have they tweaked the big speeches from Tyrone, especially at the end of the play? Either they've been slightly sharpened or Boyer has simply become more masterful in delivering them because they worked better this time around. I'd still prefer no intermission, cutting way back on a puppet sex scene that is funny but drags on far too long and a finale that is more organic (perhaps revolving around Jessica) rather than the violence that tips the scale towards Grand Guignol rather than grumpy teen.

But anyone would be foolish to miss a very funny play that includes vivid writing and two excellent lead performances that will be talked about for the rest of the year. Hand to god, it's one to see.

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