
Theater: *My Name Is Asher Lev* Shines and Actor Brand Makes a Name for Himself

Posted: 11/28/2012 10:38 pm

MY NAME IS ASHER LEV *** 1/2 out of ****
WESTSIDE THEATRE

It would be wrong to say Asher Lev wants to be a painter. No, Asher Lev needs to paint, must paint and in fact *is* a painter. He's also an observant Jew growing up in 1950s New York City in the Hasidic community. Asher has a loving mother and a father who is constantly traveling and working for the Rebbe and doesn't know work from art. Do something practical! It's an age-old story going back to *The Jazz Singer* and much earlier.

Based on the novel by Chaim Potok, this production of the play by Aaron Posner at the Westside Theatre in Manhattan illuminates the struggle between religion and art, between community and the individual and between a closed society and the wide world. In quietly and beautifully telling the story of one imaginary young artist, it presents a string of theatrical veterans at their best and introduces (to me at least) a seriously talented young artist for real in lead actor Ari Brand.

Brand holds center stage for virtually the entire show, depicting Asher as young as six and into manhood, almost always drawing and sketching or trying to explain and defend the burning desire he has to become a painter. Never mind that no observant Jew has ever been a truly great painter. Never mind that religious iconography is central to the European tradition so Asher is constantly sketching crucifixions and asking questions about Jesus. Never mind that when he's not sketching crucifixions he's sketching the nudes in local museums. He's a painter, a talented one, perhaps remarkably talented, and has no choice. Only an animal has no choice over what it does, insists his father Aryeh in one of their endless arguments. Aryeh doesn't understand.

The story is not so surprising, but given the immediacy and truthfulness of this production, it's thrilling and suspenseful. Asher isn't proud of his talent exactly; it's a gift and he knows he must use it. His mother is encouraging and then worried. His uncle is astonished and insists on being the first to purchase "an early Asher Lev." Asher is puzzled by his reaction to this first sale; he's delighted his uncle likes what he is doing and pleased to receive the money. But he wants his artwork back. It's part of him somehow.

And always there's his father, arguing and needling and questioning and fruitlessly demanding that Asher stop playing with crayons. Even as a tiny boy, Asher knows it isn't playing. Asher's passion threatens to split the family apart as his father is urged to move to Vienna and take advantage of the death of Stalin to spread the Rebbe's message while Asher himself is mentored by the great (and non-observant) Jewish artist Jacob Kahn. Torn between them as always is Asher's mother, Rivkeh.

The audience is torn as well: which actor is the best? Jenny Bacon has the most fun with her multiple roles. She is dutiful but nuanced as Rivkeh and then garners laughs as an art dealer who sweeps into the room and later as a mousy model who poses in the nude. In this quiet tense drama, her work is far from flashy but it has an enjoyable soupçon of showboating that lightens the mood nicely.

Mark Nelson on the other hand is subtlety himself in his three roles as Aryeh Lev, the

artist Jacob Kahn and the Rebbe. Nelson inhabits these three roles so completely it's almost an insult to call it acting. Without any fuss, he is the loving but conflicted father at one moment and the worldly but penetrating artist the next. Jacob Kahn knows precisely what Asher is gambling with (in a way, it's his very soul and at least his identity and everything he's ever known) and Nelson captures the anguish in both men very well.

And then there's Brand who is the rock solid center of the entire play. Much of the evening he is simply standing and talking to us. But Brand demonstrates a complete command of his voice and body, pushing the story along, creating tension and humor and anger and sadness with understated ease. Handsome and compelling, he's a genuine find; stumbling upon his talent full-blown makes you know how that art dealer felt when she first saw Asher's work. It doesn't happen often.

This ensemble is supported by the sensitive direction of Gordon Edelstein, the artistic director of the Long Wharf where this production originated (with a different actress alongside Brand and Nelson). He's brought out the best in everyone. The scenic design by Eugene Lee goes hand in hand with the costumes of Ilona Somogyi and wigs of David Bova to give us just enough to see the world these people inhabit without ever getting in the way of the actors onstage. The lighting by James F. Ingalls softens the family battles, lightens the mood for the happier moments and creates a glow around a young man falling in love with art. The original music and sound design by John Gromada deftly handles the changes of scenery and years while rooting us in the traditional community of Hasidic Jews in Brooklyn.

Then in a crucial final moment Gromada knows just when to pull back and leave a moment of silence as Asher touches the mezuzah at the front door while leaving -- perhaps for the last time. (Prior to that, every time Aryeh had left the house and touched the mezuzah a musical note had sounded quietly in the background.) Then Asher walks away and Aryeh heads to the window in an echo of an action we've seen throughout the play. The lighting of Ingalls freezes the moment and breaks your heart as you are shown something essential you've known the entire evening. It's the perfect grace note for what is clearly one of the best shows of the year.

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*

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Note: *Michael Giltz is provided with free tickets to shows with the understanding that he will be writing a review.*

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