

7th & Jordan

notes about IU Theatre + the
Department of Theatre and Drama

The search for God in Prospect Hill

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By **Rinjisha Roy**



Jacob (Christopher J. Handley) talks with his father on FaceTime trying to convince him to visit.

IU Theatre's ongoing production *Prospect Hill* presents an intriguing and intricate sketch of the Christian religion in modern society. In the play, each of the three characters has come to realize and appreciate the power of God through his life experiences.

Jacob has been raised a faithful Christian by his father, who continues to impart spiritual teachings to his son even though he disapproves of Jacob's marriage with Rex. Rex, on the other hand, does not have a religious background like his husband but is very willing and open to accepting Christ as part of his now retired life. As we see early in the play, Rex's attempts to explore his faith is manifested in the way he puts up portraits of figures that he associates with religion (Emperor Akbar as representative of Islam and the Trinity symbolizing Christianity). Such attempts are not unnoticed by the other two, especially Ethan, who is innately seeking redemption through devotion to Christ that will ultimately allow him to create a better future for his yet unborn child.



Joshua Robinson (Rex)

In an attempt to better understand how each character in the play comes to love God, I spoke with playwright Bruce Walsh who shared many interesting details on the inspiration behind creating such characters.

One thing that particularly influenced him while writing the play was a religious text by renowned inspirational speaker and ecumenical teacher Richard Rohr called *The Divine Dance: The Trinity and Your Transformation*, a



Andrei Rublev [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons

book that explores perichoresis, or a circle dance, which is an early Christian image of the Trinity, represented in the play through a painting. According to Bruce, the triune God (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) was, in a way, sought to be represented through the diverse nature of the three characters.

“Ethan, for instance, is in God the Father mode. He understands God as this brutish father figure who can be cruel but ultimately wants what is best for you, which is kind of an immature relationship with God that we sometimes have,” observes Bruce. This perspective is also shared by Jacob, who bonds well with his father, wanting to please him and transferring that into his relationship with Rex. At the same time, unlike Jacob and Ethan, Rex’s view of God is distinctly his own. “I think Rex is more open to seeing God as the Holy Spirit, sensing the presence of God everywhere, which is a very Rohrian way of seeing it: If truth is true, then it’s true everywhere. So we don’t have to fear other religions.”

Such an intricate presentation of spirituality in the play stems not only from Bruce’s readings and research, but also from his personal experiences that allowed him to portray religion the way it is shown in the play. In this regard, he mentions one transformative period in his personal life. “At one point, I was suffering from anxieties that caused me great distress physically. Suddenly, certain spiritual teachings made sense on a deeply physical level and I was able to get some distance on my thoughts.”

Bruce’s personal experience is, in a certain way, reflected in *Prospect Hill*. “In the play, the characters are constantly in search of peace. They seek to achieve peace by adding things- relationships, mind-altering or mind-numbing substances, etc., and for a while these things work. But not for long, because you cannot have peace through simply adding things, it has to come from within you.”



Josh Smith (Ethan)

“I think we know God best in our failures, in tough times when we have completely messed ourselves up. That’s often when we come into contact with God, and for me that happens through Ethan, because he loses everything he’s been fighting for.” – Bruce Walsh

Bruce’s representation of religion in the play, then, is arguably a modern take on spirituality as we see and understand it in the 21st century. When asked about his thoughts on audience’s reception of God as shown in the play, he acknowledges that there might be conflicting opinions among people. “It’s a new thing in our society that you can be both gay and fervently Christian,” he says, adding, “at the beginning of the play, the characters say – ‘God is not a mental construct!’, as in he is not someone that can be thought through with rationally. Realization of God happens on a deeply personal level, and usually through our failures.”



Playwright Bruce Walsh

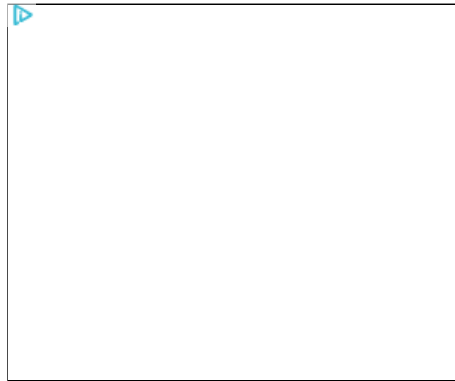
As a theatre lover, I could not appreciate Bruce enough for sharing such intuitive thoughts, and wish him the very best for his play *Prospect Hill*, running in the Wells-Metz Theatre from March 24 to April 1 at 7.30 pm, also featuring a matinee at 2 pm on April 1st.

The Department of Theatre, Drama, and Contemporary Dance appreciates the valuable contributions of IU's SPEA arts administrators to the cultural life of Indiana University and the Bloomington community. We look forward to seeing how they continue to be powerful advocates for the arts, here and abroad.



Rinjisha Roy is graduate student in the Arts Administration program at SPEA and a graduate assistant for IU Theatre's marketing department. She is from Calcutta, India and was a literature major as an undergraduate at St. Xaviers College in Calcutta. Her interests include writing, poetry, Shakespearean theatre and classical music. This is her second semester at IU and she is very excited to be a part of the IU Department of Theatre, Drama and Contemporary Dance.

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