

LOSING MY RELIGION

Puppets wreak hell on a fundamentalist ministry in OCT's Hand to God

I have to say that when it comes to art, I categorically reject the idea of “trigger warnings,” which is simply another term for censorship. I prefer my art nasty and impolitic, like a middle finger flown at Queen Victoria. Art does not thrive in a safe space, and it isn't supposed to be innocuously pleasing, like eggshell paint. Art, as Kafka said, should be “an axe for the frozen sea within us.”

Which brings me, of course, directly to the subject of puppets — or, rather, puppets and religious hypocrisy and emotional blockage, and what happens when repressed desires and stifled grief are granted vicarious expression through an evil sock-monster named Tyrone.

Penned by playwright Robert Askins, *Hand to God* — now at Oregon Contemporary Theatre under the direction of Brian Haimbach — is a satire in the scathing tradition of Jonathan Swift and Martin McDonagh. Instead of Lilliput or Ebbing, however, the play is set in a small Texas town, among a handful of wildly unhappy members of a conservative Christian ministry.

Recently widowed, Margery (Kari Boldon Welch) has been tapped by Pastor Greg (Tom Wilson) to run the puppet club, a ploy sometimes used by fundamentalist congregations to teach Biblical principles to the kids. Among the am-



BEN LAWRENCE (LEFT)
AND CONNOR FRENCH IN
OCT'S HAND TO GOD

ateur puppeteers are Margery's sheepish son, Jason (Connor French); Jessica (Meg Schenk), Jason's silent crush; and bad boy Timothy (Ben Lawrence), who has the hots for teacher — as does pastor. Everyone, it seems, is pretty salty here; you could cut the sexual tension with a sock puppet.

The tone is set from the get-go, as Jason's puppet, Tyrone, opens the play with a monologue that subverts the Old Testament creation story, substituting original sin with an anthropological view of the “devil” as a convenient excuse for people's bad behavior. In Tyrone's vision of social control, man is born free and is everywhere in chains, thanks to the brute politics of group cohesion.

From here, all hell breaks loose. As Tyrone gets increasingly lippy and confrontational, he begins to take possession of Jason, spewing profanity-laced blasphemies that sound a lot like the truth. Margery, unhinged by her husband's death and Timothy's advances, gives up all pretense of being a proper Christian woman. Eventually, ears get bitten off and puppets rut with abandon, as their human handlers stand by awkwardly.

It is, in short, absolutely thrilling, and OCT does Askins' play the ultimate honor by assembling a cast that is across-the-board excellent. From conception to execution, this is a difficult production, requiring an admirable level of courage and, oddly, tasteful confidence; in lesser hands, such outré comedy might come off as merely crude, and OCT should be applauded for having the sophistication to pull this off, and to pull it off so well.

A special nod should go out to occasional *EW* contributor Rachael Carnes, who trained the first-time puppeteers, and whose expert guidance puts the show over the top. The puppet sex scene might be my favorite local-theater moment of the year so far (one poor gentleman in the front row averted his eyes the entire time — yes, it's that good or bad, depending on your temperament).

It should go without saying that there is nothing gratuitous about all this bad behavior on stage. Quite the opposite. As with all great satires, *Hand to God* functions as a kind of necessary emetic, a purging of hypocrisy and repression through a chaotic application of unadorned and unfiltered outrage. And beneath all this grotesquery beats the heart of an angry moralist, as Askins gleefully trashes the niceties that hold us hostage and pervert our complicated hearts.

It's telling that it takes a shitheel like Tyrone, the evil puppet, to shake up the play's moral foundation, what with his sexual bravado and foul-mouthed rants and generally abusive behavior revealing the undercurrent of hypocrisy in that conservative Texas town. Unchecked, however, Tyrone threatens to swamp the works in a bacchanal of lust, bigotry and violence.

A new balance, in the end, must be established, because the sad, impotent boy and the malignant bully puppet are, indeed, one and the same. ■

Hand to God runs through June 9 at Oregon Contemporary Theatre; tickets and info at 541-465-1506 or octheatre.org.

VISUAL ARTS

BY ANNA GRACE

'THE BLIND ILLUSTRATRIX'

Portland artist M. Sabine Rear focuses her vision on comics

When you fall down the rabbit hole of zines, comics, social commentary and stickers that make up the work of M. Sabine Rear, prepare for a long, beautiful, black-and-white journey that will alter the way you understand the world.

Illustration and comics are a natural voice for the Portland artist, who is cheeky, smart and political. Rear's work runs from feminist educational tracts to whimsical illustrations of pro wrestlers. “My subject matter is predominantly my own experience, filtered through disability studies and the politics of public space,” Rear says.

She calls herself “the Blind Illustratrix.”

“I am a blind babe with limited distance vision and no color vision. I am easily overwhelmed in bright light, all light, and I navigate the outdoors with sunglasses and a cane,” she says.

“As a blind person making visual art, I am very aware of the perception that this is somehow oxymoronic,” Rear says. “I find that instead of hindering my engagement with visual culture, blindness narrows it in a way that allows me to interact with focus and precision when engaging with the specific elements of visual culture and visual art making in which I am interested.”

Expressive black-and-white line drawings and bold text dominate her work.

“I am aggressively disinterested in things with which I cannot engage,” Rear says. “I love comics as a medium because they have a history as a complex visual language in black and white which is legible to me without the use of color or distance vision.”

Rear drew passionately as a child, but backed away from art as she entered middle school. “The way that I draw, and how I look while I draw, was a marker of my



PORTRAIT OF
WWE SUPERSTAR
NIA JAX
BY M. SABINE REAR

blindness that I struggled with,” she says. “And teens are great at pointing out visible markers of struggle or anxiety to each other, so I pursued other creative outlets that did not mark me so obviously as disabled.”

Now, 26 years old and sporting a degree in women, gender and sexuality studies from Portland State University, Rear is ready to dive into any and all aesthetic interests.

With her dark hair and petite, curvy figure, she looks like she popped out of a piece of Dutch realism and raided the closet of a Portland hipster. Rear can be seen out and about in Portland, following the gentle tap of her cane as she indulges her passions for drawing, art museums, patterns and fabulous clothing.

“When I returned to art most recently, I was glad to re-engage a familiar mode of expression to work out all of

the thoughts and feelings I had accumulated in academia,” Rear says. “My current work blends my initial interest in a variety of styles of comics with my excitement around disability studies in academia, community care and personal narrative.”

Rear's first zine was inspired by attending the Pacific and Western Disability Studies Symposium at the University of Washington.

“It was my first experience being a part of a vibrant disabled community,” she says. “We shared personal, transformative, imaginative academic work, activism, porn and many lovely meals ... this continues to be one of my most precious, supportive and generative communities.”

There she was introduced to other disabled zinesters, and returning home she created *Bending Spoons*, “a mini-zine about ableist microaggressions that combines simple illustrations of the types of microaggressions perpetrated against me in public with crip theory analysis of where these intrusions come from and why they are harmful.”

With the help of a photocopier and glue stick, Rear cobbled together a powerful little book that should be required reading for any sighted person.

Over time, Rear's work has grown, but it retains the sense of freedom generally associated with glue-stick projects. A set of “I Don't Care About Dude Culture” stickers pokes fun at the reverence in which some society members hold *Taxi Driver* and Jack Kerouac. The *Teen Sabine* paper doll is ready for class, fun with friends and roller derby.

A particularly powerful piece is *Reverse Flâneur*, Rear's reflection on a Christmas spent in Vienna with her family. She describes the piece as “somewhere between a travelogue and a disability studies/art history essay.”

Rear uses a trip to Vienna as a platform to explore disabled identity, public space and public presentation, particularly while alone in a strange place and while engaging with fine art. This work was nominated for a 2017 Ignatz Award in the category of Outstanding Self-Published Minicomic. ■

See more at her website, michaelsabine.com.