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Grace

by Winnie McCroy

EDGE Editor

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The cast of 'Grace' at the Cort Theatre. (Source:Joan Marcus)

Broadway's Cort Theatre stages Craig Wright's "Grace," a dark, depressing play that contains some very deep currents beneath its murky surface.

"I want to go back," screams Steve before shooting his perky young wife Sara (Kate Arrington). "I reorganize my entire life around this idea of universal love I thought I saw, and this is how it ends up."

The play starts at the end; shots ring out and the obligatory dead bodies litter the stage. Ostensibly, the protagonist Steve (Paul Rudd) has shot his wife, his neighbor and the exterminator before turning the gun on himself. The remaining 85 minutes of show time aims to tell the audience why.

Steve and Sara have sold their hotel renovation business in Minnesota and relocated to Florida to chase their dream of running a chain of gospel-themed hotels. While the name is still up in the air (The Son Rise Inn, The New RESTament, the Jew Drop Inn, Crossroads Inn), the funding is secure, via a promise of \$9 million from Mr. Himmelmann, a foreign investor who has given Steve the initial \$10,000 to purchase the property.

"Pray to help us be even more faithful followers, and carry us forward, deeper into our grace," the two pray on bended knee. Steve has been a devout believer since the evening he went out and spoke to the stars, and they answered him. Because of this, his hotel chain is sure to be a success. After all, "Where would Jesus stay?"

"Do you know what I can achieve in the hotel industry, now that I know the Word works like this?" asks Steve, revealing soon and often that his love of the Lord can go hand in hand with his love of money.

Rudd is excellent as a self-involved, egotistical, self-centered, intolerant, anger-prone Jesus freak. He is "Our Idiot Brother" with all the idiocy, but none of the good-natured acceptance that character possessed.

Arrington is fine as Sara, a Lea Michele-esque type who also loves the Lord, loves her husband and wants to begin a family, anxious even to purchase a matching set of baby linens bedecked with little monkeys.

Ed Asner does a nice turn as Karl, an affable exterminator with a heavy heart from a life of pain, but one that is resigned to his fate. Informing Sara that his "wife is sick with cancer of the female parts," she apologizes, to which he stoically replies, "Why, it's not your fault."

It is Karl who suggests that Steve purchase a handgun, after telling them about a story of a family shot on the freeway as they headed to Disneyworld. And it is Karl who tells them about their physically and emotionally scarred neighbor Sam (Michael Shannon), who was seriously maimed when his Miata was overrun by a Tropicana juice tanker, killing his fiancé.

It is also Karl who explains to these "Jesus freaks" that he has not believed in Jesus or God since he was a boy of 13 in Hamburg, hiding Jewish neighbors in their basement and attic. After he saw his mother on fire and his father cut in half by a falling piano, Karl was forced to reveal the hiding place of his girlfriend, who the Nazis raped before forcing him to do the same.

"That is why I know two things for sure: there is no God, no one watching out for us," said Karl. "And worse, I know that my father is a fool, living for a lie, like you."

We see Steve's character in his dense reply; for after Karl's horrific story, he replies, "You don't see God's grace at work in that story?"

Paul Rudd is excellent as a self-involved,

Steve's insistence on a benevolent God (and on being right) is one of his worst qualities, keeping



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egotistical, self-centered, intolerant, anger-prone Jesus freak. He is "Our Idiot Brother" with all the idiocy, but none of the good-natured acceptance that character possessed.

him from attaining his goals.

For example, when Sara strikes up a friendship with Sam, despite him telling her no less than four times to "leave me alone" or "get the fuck out of my house," Steve's nagging insistence on spreading the gospel to his former Unitarian

Universalist neighbor causes him to tear up a \$50,000 check that would have allowed Steve to sidestep bankruptcy (as Steve put up the profits from his own business to pay for the hotels for which his investor never came up with the funds.)

Shannon is brilliant as Sam, a former NASA engineer who is haunted by the death of his fiancée, recalling how he forced her to drive that day, despite the fact that she hated the freeway. His eternal purgatory seems to be the never ending phone calls to Nikon and ScanDisc to figure out why the 700 photos he took of him and his fiancée's Italian vacation won't allow themselves to be transferred to his computer, or viewed on his camera.

But eventually, Sam lets Sara into his heart, and the two fall in love, both damaged goods finding solace in each others arms. Meanwhile, Steve is increasingly angry, plagued by a mysterious rash (later linked to the exterminator chemicals), completely out of funds, unable to pay his workers and unwilling to admit that his investor has pulled out.

On its surface, "Grace" is a story about faith and religion being tested by the unholy machinations of the human condition. But on a symbolic level, it is a play about time and space, and the urge to go backwards despite the fact that our humanity limits us to trudge ever forward.

"Let's go back to Minnesota," Steve begs Sara near the end.

"I don't know if we can, Steve," she replies.

After he reminds her that multiple Bible verses command her to submit to her husband, Sara resolutely replies, "I don't think we should be married anymore."

She goes to Sam, and after a few sweaty attempts at Russian roulette, Steve follows. Had the audience not known the ending, perhaps they too could believe it was still possible for Steve and Sara to "go back" -- to Minnesota, to an earlier time of love, to the promise of a family.

When Karl shows up to finish the extermination and tells them that he ran into his old Hamburg girlfriend Rachel, who forgives him for what happened at the hands of the Nazis, leading Karl to reassess his view that there is no God, we can almost believe that Steve will view this as evidence of God's grace, and alter the future.

But the shots having been fired in the first act, we know these characters' fate. The only thing that remains is for Steve to pull the trigger. And after several disjointed monologues about stars and universal love and not wanting to go back, he does.

The set design by Beowulf Boritt is simple and spare, capturing suburban Florida décor well, with a wicker couch and end table, a plain wooden dining table and chairs, a sturdy door on one side with sliding glass doors on the perpendicular. Initially, it is confusing, as both Steve and Sara and Sam inhabit the same physical place. But one soon gets the message that these neighbors live parallel lives in cookie-cutter apartments, separated only by thin walls that easily let Sara's gospel rock drift into Sam's solitude.

The set pieces are placed on a slowly rotating circular platform, like a giant human Lazy Susan. Above it all, a ceiling fan lazily rotates. In an oval cutaway, projections of drifting clouds and shining stars demark the passage of night and day.

Taken together, the effect is one of ceaseless forward movement, reinforcing the idea of time as always moving forward. Simply put, you cannot go back.



"Grace" runs through January 6, 2013 at Cort Theatre, 138 West 48th St. For info or tickets, call 212-239-6200 or visit <http://www.graceonbroadway.com>

Winnie McCroy is the Women on the EDGE Editor, HIV/Health Editor, and Assistant Entertainment Editor for EDGE Media Network, handling all women's news, HIV health stories and theater reviews throughout the U.S. She has contributed to other publications, including The Village Voice, Gay City News, Chelsea Now and The Advocate, and lives in Brooklyn, New York, where she writes about local restaurants in her food blog,

D. EDGE has the photos.



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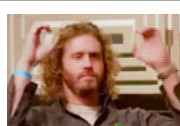
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