

Finding faith at the theater

'The Christians' offers two roads to salvation

Lansing City Pulse Review by
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The church set for “The Christians” is downright authentic. A massive, hanging cross provides a backdrop. A steeple roof towers above an audience seated in chairs, lined up in pew-like fashion. Two sizable, flat-screen TV’s project hymn lyrics.



The setting is not made of flats and constructed imitations. The play is performed inside an actual church.

In partnership with Sycamore Creek Church, the Peppermint Creek Theatre Company is presenting a play that examines traditional Christianity and struggles between faith and spirituality. “The Christians,” by Lucas Hnath, is more about questions than answers. The playwright’s program letter—and Chad Swan-Badgero’s director’s note—both suggest that the theater can be a good place for inquiry and discovery.

With a passionate flare, Blake Bowen plays pastor Paul—a mega-church leader who becomes less obliged to preach a fire and brimstone sermon. The pastor speaks from his heart despite the reaction of his enormous flock.

Zach Riley adds a burning performance as the associate pastor who confronts any deviation of a traditional, Bible-based doctrine. The heated battle between the two pastors—and the beliefs they embody—is the heart of “The Christians” message.

I saw both gifted actors ooze real sweat and drip real tears. When Bowen and Riley convincingly presented their characters’ emotive pleas, it gave me compassion and understanding for each position. “The Christian’s” has a way of making an audience connect and get emotionally attached to what happens on the stage—in very personal ways.

The entire cast suits their roles as church members and all performances seem as real as the building they act in. “The Praise Team”—a shy live band with sometimes-uneven singers—is just right for an amateurish church combo. When timid vocalist and congregant, Jenny—played

with precision by Bethany Jeffery—nervously asks probing questions, her demeanor also seems genuine.

Michael Shalley has the fitting voice and mannerisms for the Elder. Shalley spends most of his stage time silently seated behind the pastors. His wonderful body language and expressions of annoyance and alarm speak volumes. Usually seated next to him is the equally animated Heather Lewis as the wife. When Lewis had a chance to speak her mind, her potent, short speeches made long-lasting impressions on me.

Swan-Badgero's direction keeps the 100-minute, no intermission play moving at appropriate paces through heartbreaking, tender, painful and impassioned moments. I never felt "The Christians" was tedious and I was always engaged in the performance.

I found Matthew Swan-Badgero's sound design and Gretchen Williamss technical operations smoothly executed. Jeff Boerger's set design elements are so proper for a church's interior, it was hard for me to imagine the Sycamore Creek Church adorned any other way.

"The Christian's" presents different sides of faith with an effort to be balanced. Any show attendee can find both support and refutations in dialogue spoken mostly through the same wireless microphones used in real mega-churches.

"The Christians" is an often intense play that inspires self-reflection and civil debate. From its start to the conclusion, its messages are open to interpretation. The play offers more than "food for thought"—it is a banquet for contemplation. "The Christians" examinations about perceptions of Scripture and hell makes for a hell of a show.

"The Christians" Thursday Feb. 8 - 8 p.m.

Friday Feb. 9 - 8 p.m. Saturday Feb. 10 - 8 p.m. Sunday Feb. 11 - 1 p.m. Ticket Prices: General Admission - \$15 Students/Seniors 65+ - \$10 Tickets available at the door or at: peppermintcreek.org Performance Location: Sycamore Creek Church, 1919 S Pennsylvania Ave., Lansing MI, 48910