

BWW Review: Joshua Harmon's Riveting, Brutally Funny BAD JEWS at American Stage

by



"...[And] then after seder, our parents had all gone to bed, we were watching TV and Liam was like, 'I'm hungry,' even though we'd just had this enormous meal and he went into the kitchen and found these shortbread cookies and even Miyushi was like, 'I thought you weren't supposed to eat that on

Passover,' but Liam just smiled, popped a cookie in his mouth and was like, 'I'm a bad Jew...'" --Daphna about Liam in BAD JEWS

"The most astonishingly offensive thing of all is the fact that she actually believes, in her heart of hearts, she is the only one Poppy meant something to. Because she's like, Super Jew. But you know what? Jonah and I lost our grandfather too. Our grandfather. But to her, she can't even fathom that I have things too that I remember? That I did with Poppy? That I remember..." --Liam about Daphna in BAD JEWS

"I would've slapped both of them [Daphna and Liam] at the back of the head!" --Overheard from an audience member after a performance of BAD JEWS

You can usually tell how good or bad a show is by how much I write in my reviewer's notebook. If a show is dreadful, then I can write quite a bit, filling page after page with quippy putdowns, snarky barbs and different ways to scribe "train wreck." If a show is successful, then I can write quite a bit as well, finding clever ways to laud something that is quite strong. But then

there are the shows where I write next to nothing. This can happen for two clear reasons: 1) A show is so bad that I just give up and drop the notebook to the floor, or 2) A show is so good that I am 100% involved with the action and I don't want to look away. I wrote barely a note during the top shows of the past two years--freeFall's *The Light in the Piazza* and American Stage's *The Royale*. They were sensational entertainments and I sat there, unable to write, my mouth open in awe, knowing I was witnessing greatness in action.

And what does my notebook look like after I was watching the Bay Area premiere of BAD JEWS at American Stage? Next to empty, nary a note. I was too engrossed in the production, the language of a brilliant young playwright, and some of the best performances of the year, to write much. I held my pen, ready to attack the paper at any time with notes, but then was so involved that I forgot that the pen was even in my hand. It's one of the fastest 85 minutes I've ever experienced.

[Joshua Harmon](#)'s BAD JEWS is a title that has caused much controversy. Some Jewish groups were so outraged by that juicy name when the show was first announced that they were wanting to protest outside American Stage. But if they saw the show, which I recommend that they do as soon as possible, then they would realize it is one of the more relevant shows in recent memory. Not just its take on Judaism and its history in the grasp of a generation that may lose that grasp, but for all of audience members or all faiths. Who are the keepers of our histories? Can we trust the Millennials to step up? As one character says, "In a couple of generations, all these kids are running around bearing the hyphenated names of cultures that no longer exist. It'll be just one giant globalized corporate world populated by one kind of people, who all speak one language and show at the same store and all look the same..."

Brothers Jonah and especially Liam are not particularly devout Jews, but the same cannot be said about their "uber-Jewish" cousin, Daphna. After the funeral of their grandfather, a Holocaust survivor they call Poppy, Liam

and Daphna are both wanting to inherit their grandfather's "chai" medallion which survived the Holocaust with him. "It's made of gold," according to Daphna, "it's not very big, and Poppy wore it on a chain around his neck his whole life." Daphna thinks she is entitled to it, being the only real practicing Jew among the grandkids, but Liam wants to use it to propose to his shiksa girlfriend, a blond-haired, blue-eyed Delawarean named Melody. But Daphna won't allow it. "Over my dead Jewish corpse is that going on her," she says. "You wanna marry a non-Jew? Knock yourself out. Have a great time. Shiksa heaven. Best wishes. But Poppy's chai is never going around her neck. Never ever never ever ever."

Set in a single night in a nice New York City studio apartment, we watch the dramedy of Daphna, Liam, Jonah and Melody unfold in real time. The dialogue, chock full of breathtaking monologues, is brilliantly brutal. It's a comedy all right, a whirlwind of sorts, barely pausing for breath. But **BAD JEWS** also offers true, insightful instances of compassion, and one moment at the end that is extraordinarily powerful.

Some fellow reviewers bemoan the number of monologues that Harmon has included, but I couldn't disagree with them more. The monologues here are so well-written, so beautifully delivered, that they appeared to me like arias of sorts, placed like songs in a musical. And they were almost choreographed as such (especially Liam's spectacular pillow-pounding diatribe). I was on the edge of my seat by Harmon's words, by the thought processes of these smart, troubled, and ultimately lost (but hopefully not too lost) young people.

The acting could not be better. [Jenny Lester](#) gives one of the year's standout performances as Daphna. Her monologues are plowed through, like a speed demon at 100 miles per hour, and you can see her looking down upon her cousins and Liam's non-Jewish girlfriend and thinking they are inferior because they do not practice what she preaches. As Liam tells her, "You're the one who sounds like a Nazi. Keeping the race pure? You

sound like a Nazi." But as played by Lester, Daphna will have none of it. This is the type of performance that people discuss afterwards, that we're haunted by. During one of her monologues, I heard the person behind me whisper to her husband (twice), "She's a mess." It's Daphna's voice that was stuck in my head as I exited the theatre, her words of warning to her fellow Millennials. It's not a likable performance, nor is it meant to be, but it's spellbinding; her work should be rightfully honored during awards season.

Jackson Goldberg, as Liam (bespectacled, looking like a young [Grant Shaud](#) as Miles Silverberg), started off almost like he was in a different show-- that's what a memorable entrance will do. But then BAD JEWS catches up to his energy. It's an incredible turn, and one monologue, a heated anti-Daphna rant, is one of the finest things I've seen all year. "He's such a dick," the woman behind me whispered feverishly to her husband. And she's not wrong. He's also incredibly watchable and entertaining, upping the verve whenever he enters the room.

Kate Berg plays the outsider, Melody, and she rightfully fits Harmon's description of the role: "[Extra] cute. Mousy. She looks like someone who would have been abducted when she was nine but returned to her parents unharmed." She performs the part well, clueless but not too air-headed, but you know from one glance that she is not Jewish and that there is a war that she is unknowingly smack dab in the middle of. She does a fine job, and as privileged as the part is, we ultimately feel quite sorry for her.

Matt Acquard plays Liam's brother, and the two look nothing alike, nor do they act very brotherly. But Acquard is solid, listening well in what is mostly a thankless reactive part. But there's one moment at the end that is all his, and it's a bravura turn. I won't give it away, but it was one of the things people discussed the most after the show, a heartbreaking moment that brings it all together, a moment I won't soon forget.

By the way, discussions after this particular show are almost *de rigueur*. This is the type of play that is meant to be argued, to be sorted through, to

be shared.

Director [Amy Resnick](#) has a rightful hit on her hands. She has sharply directed these young actors exquisitely, and no show has had better pacing. Steven Mitchell's cluttered set is perfect, including a realistic closet, bathroom and well-lit hallway. Jerid Fox's props are just right, from littered Frito wrappers, boxes of Sour Patch Kids, Chinese takeout containers, and Daphna's copy of *Sefer Yetzirah: The Book of Creation*. Phillip Franck's lighting is spot on, including the feel of the outdoors when the windows are opened ever so briefly (wonderful, subtle sound effects here by Rachel Harrison). I like how, unlike so many shows, not all the lights are flooded at all times; we really get the feeling we are in a studio apartment illuminated by individual lamps.

BAD JEWS is one of the most produced plays in the county, and after watching it, you'll see why. It's already a huge hit at American Stage, and it's proven so popular that they have extended its run to August 12th (and still might need to extend its run even further). But get your tickets as soon as you finish reading this sentence, because the extension is already 80% sold out. Word of mouth is the main reason; this is one hell of a show. When you leave the theater, you just want to talk about it to anyone you see. And it's a conversation that we must have--who is in charge of our legacies, and will this upcoming generation be up to the task?

BAD JEWS, along with *Rhinoceros* at the Asolo, American Stage's *A Raisin in the Sun*, and Tampa Rep's *A View from the Bridge*, is the best local show I've seen all year.

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