

### **In the Beginning was the Word . . .**

*A sensational play by The Drama Circle ponders life's deepest questions with a deft comedic touch worthy of any theatre buff's undying attention*

*On the Roof Top*, a play by Mark Perry, takes the written word of 1950's television and radio personality Bill Sears and transforms it into an incredibly moving one-man homage to the universal quest for meaning and purpose.

Perry, who is also the play's lone actor, and director Julian Chachula have created a stirring production primarily based on Sears' book *God Loves Laughter*, a short, poignant and hilarious tale of one boy's desire for answers to questions posed by the universe and, in particular, by a recurring dream--one featuring an elderly white-bearded man dressed in white robes who appears in the glow of white light.

As a fan of the book, I have to admit my skepticism toward the idea of a one-man play based on a story spanning a few decades. Moreover, having met Perry, I wondered how such a soft-spoken, mindful, wise-worded individual such as he could command the stage for 75 minutes of dialogue. These preconceived and ill-conceived notions were tossed out the window as soon as Perry strode on stage in full Bill Sears regalia, dripping with charisma and youthful exuberance.

He rarely let the audience escape the character's personality, which it must be said, is one of ultimate attraction. You like him, immediately. You root for him, though you are purposefully not exactly sure with whom or what he's competing. You want resolution for his sake, yet you don't want the play to end because it's all so very entertaining. Along the way you are moved, if you are at all human, by the genuineness of the story and its main character's struggle, though hilarious it may be.

Perry, who converses with the audience like a storyteller throughout the performance, begins with an introduction to who exactly Bill Sears is at a crucial time in his life—a "successful" and secure TV and radio pioneer about to strike it rich with a new contract. With brilliant writing and directing, present conversation with the audience is linked to Sears' early childhood and strained relationship with his father, who wished he had a normal son--one who played ball instead of playing philosopher.

"Why is the sky blue, father?"

"Who is God exactly, and where does he live? What sort of house does he have?"

"How big is the universe and why exactly are we here?"

His father, one of several characters Perry emulates, wants no part of this sort of inquiry. Perry's comic timing coupled with the writing tug at the heart of anyone who has had a difference of opinion with a parental figure.

During one skit, Perry plays the role of a rambunctious childhood version of Sears determined to read the Bible for himself despite the protestations and whoopins from his traditional father. This Biblical battle between father and son is insanely funny but is ultimately won by the younger Sears who finds the mysterious "white-light" man of his dreams in *The Book of Revelations*. This was as a child and merely half the answer he was looking for.

Sears was a master storyteller for CBS and later as an author and beloved friend for members of the Baha'i Faith the world over. Perry does this man justice, tracing Sears' childhood experiences and professional life to create the necessary tension for the play's

climax. Perry and Chachula create space for immediate reflection and the appropriate ending for further reflection during the drive home.

Flashbacks are intense but spaced properly and magically written, leaving just the right amount of curiosity in the air. So when the audience is returned to another flashback sequence, you feel as if answers are coming. The brilliance of the play, however, lies in the asking of questions and the constant reflection on one's life. When the answers do come, and they do, a real sense of completion fills the room. Then, you realize Sears' adventure is just beginning and want to delve into the untold story of his life after CBS.

There are many details specific to Sears' life but although they certainly create the backdrop to this play's personal and biographical significance, the real message is in the universality of trying to find meaning in one's life. Do I take the money and run or do I take the road less traveled? It's a message of the heart and the curious mind. It's really a tale about finding the significance of your dream and going for it.

Yet, Perry and Chachula don't merely tell a story, though touching it certainly is. They cast characters and re-embrace the past with remarkable clarity. The writing is well mapped out, considering the intricate weaving of Sears' life and the incredible revelation at the heart of the story. The directing was a chore, no doubt. But Chachula pieces everything together properly, giving the audience time to breathe when it needs to breathe. He lets us get lost in the moment never forgetting that each moment serves a greater purpose.

The acting is tremendous and perhaps the most amazing thing about the performance, aside from the essence of the tale, is Perry's ability to rival Sears as a yarn spinner. He brought words and lives to life again. This is no small task and Perry was more than up to the challenge.

--mark derewicz