

Review: Children of Eden

Let's go back to the beginning...the actual beginning, like, where God created the earth, and animals, and the first humans. 'Children of Eden' is filled with awe and wonder as it tells the stories of Adam & Eve and Noah & the Ark. Two classic stories everyone, regardless of belief, has heard of; The musical, directed by **Laura Apelt** and choreographed by **Dana Margulies Cauthen**, is the product of John Caird's book and Stephen Schwartz's music and lyrics. Smithfield Little Theatre takes the classic story of creation and makes it fresh again.

'Children of Eden' originally opened in 1991, in London's West End, to bad reviews and has never played on Broadway, but has been a frequent community and local theater production. This year marks its 30th anniversary and was recently revived at the new Union Theatre in Southwark, London.

Taking the book of Genesis as its inspiration, 'Children of Eden' tells two tales from the Old Testament. The first is the story of the creation as the Father played by **Jeff Joyner** decides to create the universe, galaxy, solar system and the Earth, on which he creates living beings in his own image and so his children Adam played by **Stephen Maney** and Eve played by **Charity Robinson** come alive and inhabit the paradise that is the Garden of Eden. All is well and life is beautiful, but Eve starts to question their life and is especially drawn to the one thing the Father has forbidden her and Adam to touch, a tree bearing succulent apples. One day, whilst Father and Adam are in another part of the garden, Eve gets talking to a snake played by a quintet of seductresses, **Jillian Batchelor, Taraleigh Casteen, Patricia Fielding, Amber Price & Karen Willard** who persuades Eve to taste the fruit. When the Father realises what she has done, he orders Eve out of the garden and makes Adam choose between himself and Eve. I don't think I'm giving away too much to say that Adam chooses Eve and the two of them are expelled into the wilderness where they survive and have a family with their sons, Cain played by **James Clarke**, Abel played by **Colby Cook** and Seth played by **Abraham Treece**; we all know the story right? Nevertheless, this is a story about choices, which the director effectively conveyed by the doubling of the featured actors. Eve chooses knowledge or the "beyond" over obedience, while Adam in Act I chooses Eve over the Garden and God's company.

Act II opens with the song "Generations," a rousing second-act choral opener set to African rhythms. Then we see the beasts and birds entering two by two in "Return of the Animals." Act II moves the story on 10 generations to the time of Noah, a direct descendant of Seth. The Father has been watching the Earth and is appalled by the way the inhabitants – mostly descendants of Cain – have turned out. He resolves to sort out the problem with one final, catastrophic act and instructs Noah to build a massive ark in which he, his wife, his sons – Ham, Shem and Japheth – along with their wives – Aysha and Aphra – will survive. Just as Adam and Eve in Act I, Noah is met with a choice; his son's happiness or God's happiness. He chooses his son's happiness even after his son disobeys God.

Turning to the cast, Mr. **Jeff Joyner**, in the role of Father truly stood out for me as he went through all the stages of parenthood from excitement at the arrival of his children until that final moment when he realized that, despite his phenomenal cosmic power, he must let his

children go off and live their own lives. Equally as good were **Stephen Maney** and **Charity Robinson** (who is my wife, but knows there is no bias coming from her opinionated husband) in their roles of Adam/Noah and Eve/Mama Noah respectively. Ms. Robinson's voice packs a punch, especially when it came to the emotional ballads. She gave you child-like wonderment as Eve & motherly wisdom as Mama Noah. Mr. Maney is completely engaged throughout and his moments of sincerity with his children and his voice adds to his stunning work as an actor. I enjoyed their performance immensely and shed a little tear at the end of Act I as Eve said farewell to her family. That scene and staging was powerful. Kudos to Ms. Apelt. The rebellious son Cain was acted and sung with sturdy vigor by **James Clarke**. I only wish that the other son Abel played by **Colby Cook** continually matched the level of energy and vocal prowess that Cain was putting forth. The large cast of Storytellers were great as unit. Although there were moments of drops in energy. There were a few standouts **Jillian Batchelor**, **Amber Price** & **Taraleigh Casteen** who shined as Storytellers and sang each of their solos effortlessly. I can't go without mentioning **Emily Dempsey** her solo as Yonah was splendid.

The music was beautifully directed by **Trey Gwaltney**. The cast as a whole sounded great. The set was cleverly designed by **Debbie Bradshaw**. As time moved on, scenes changed and the emotional climate changed there were several rotating panels used to communicate these things; it was brilliant.

In the end, this a great show. Not only is it a joy to see and listen to, but it's a show to which everyone can relate. There's happiness when Adam and Eve are first naming the animals, and sadness when Adam, then Abel, then Noah are each forced to choose between things they cannot bear to lose. Smithfield's production makes you feel these things with their use of music, well executed dance and thoughtful acting. They don't rely on your knowledge of the source material which they drew from to make you feel for these characters. We see it's not at all a show just about religion, but about life itself, and what makes that life both wonderful and terrible. It is our relationships to one another (and, if you want to see it that way, to God too) which really matter, and which make the biggest difference, in the end. Smithfield's 'Children of Eden' is one of those transformative musicals that will affect anyone, whether you are a believer or doubter. You will leave the theatre uplifted and may even find the need to call your mom or dad and just say. "I appreciate you," as one member of the audience told me she was compelled to do.

So, go back to the beginning...the actual beginning, like, where God created the earth with Smithfield Little Theatre and see 'Children of Eden' so you too can be uplifted.

