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Review: 'How We May Know Him'

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Bob Bows (<http://variety.com/author/bob-bows/>)

Going back to tribal times, theater has been used to examine the pressing issues of the day — weighing in on natural disasters, wars and personal crises — so it has always been essential that audiences be able to interpret what they experience. In Paragon Theater Company's world premiere of Ellen K. Graham's "How We May Know Him," the audience is challenged by discourse and action so symbolically remote that even after reading the director's explanatory notes, viewers are left without a discernable catharsis — despite the well-drawn performances of the principals and chorus.

Graham's metaphysical examination of the female psyche pits Chaos, Reason, Innocence and Disillusionment against each other in a dramatic arc derived from the New Testament. A puritanically-dressed

fundamentalist with an apocalyptic rap, Val (Emily Paton Davies) is Chaos. She surfaces first in the dreams of the Female Chorus and later intervenes directly in the lives of three representative women.

Drawing on an archetype right out of "American Gothic," Paton Davies' Val is chilling in her relentless, flat-line determinism. She gains converts for her movement by having them each copy by hand her own handwritten autobiography.

One of her first disciples is Wren (Barbra Andrews), who reps Innocence. She is the lesbian wife of Nicola (Suzanne Favette), who's away on business.

Like her name, Wren takes flight quickly, flitting about with her newfound *raison d'être*, foisting her copy of Val's saintly memoir on a passerby. Andrews hits all the right notes in characterizing the innocent element of the female psyche, falling naturally into childlike reverie and excitement as she extols Val's message.

When Reason, in the form of Nicola, returns home, she finds her world upside-down and [sets](http://variety411.com/us/los-angeles/sets-stages/) out to discover the cause. Favette brings a fierce, calculating edge to Nicola, whose security-oriented job provides her with some insight into Val's secretive power.

Graham's writing takes a comedic turn with Simone (Gina Wencel), a commercial actress of a certain age who reps Disillusionment. Wencel's larger-than-life portrayal lightens up the proceedings, particularly a hilarious sequence involving her nose job.

The life of Val can be seen as a rough representation of Jesus' story with a feminine twist, including the insinuation of miracles and an alternate reality beyond this life, with parallels to Judas' betrayal and the crucifixion. But it is

also only one aspect of a larger metaphor for a psyche struggling to make sense of a world gone haywire.

For audiences to make sense of this, however, some clarifying scenes – involving Nicola’s relationship with the Male Chorus and Wren’s relationship with the Female Chorus — are needed. This wouldn’t change the lack of personal depth in the archetypal characters; for that, the Greeks and commedia dell’arte used masks.

Cinematic in its short scenes and episodic plot lines, “How We Shall Know Him” also needs to eliminate the excruciating blackouts between scenes to return some emotional continuity to the story and perhaps make the characters matter to us.

How We May Know Him

Phoenix Theater; 100 seats, \$19 top

Production

DENVER A Paragon Theater Company presentation of a play in two acts by Ellen K. Graham. Directed by Wendy Franz.

Creative

Set, Kevin Bautch; costumes, Brynn Starr Copland; lighting, Bautch; sound, Brian Freeland; production stage manager, Sylvia May. Opened, reviewed April 21, 2007. Running time: 2 HOURS.

Cast

Val - Emily Paton
Davies Nicola - Suzanne Favette
Wren - Barbra Andrews
Simone - Gina Wencel
Female Chorus - Laura Norman
Male Chorus - Chris Bleau

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