

HOW WE MAY KNOW HIM

BY JULIET WITTMAN

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Emily Paton Davies and Laura Norman in Ellen K. Graham's *How We May Know Him*.

I always get a little worried when I hear that a theater is premiering the work of a local playwright. On principle, I applaud it -- absolutely. How's a writer to learn stagecraft and dramaturgy without collaborating with actors, directors and tech people? And how can a city have a vital, exciting theater scene without the work of these writers? But applauding the concept in principle isn't the same as actually wanting to experience the results. There are some serious local talents here, but given the choice of an evening with an untried Colorado playwright or...oh, I don't know...Tony Kushner, the always skilled and entertaining Alan Ayckbourn, Caryl Churchill, Harold Pinter or Tom Stoppard, my preference is clear. Besides, early plays are much too often about the playwright's voyage of self-discovery, and unless that playwright's a mafioso, an Angolan child soldier, an Irish kid from the projects, a poet or a profoundly original thinker -- in other words, someone uniquely interesting -- these ruminations are best saved for the therapist's office.

But every now and then, among these breathlessly touted world premieres, I discover something I'm glad to have seen, perhaps even something that gets me excited and dizzy and requires me to stretch my mind a bit. This is the case with Ellen K. Graham's *How We May Know Him*, which she describes in a subtitle as: "An Absurd Comedy With a Rapturous Soul." Please pay attention to the wording. Graham isn't one to use words carelessly.

This is a story about four women: Val, a Christian zealot who stalks the stage in a stifling, fustian dress; Simone, a new-agey television host, desperately concerned with her appearance; Nicola, a soldier of fortune who works for a shadowy Blackwater-type corporation; and Nicola's partner, the sometimes waspish but usually lost and bemused Wren. Although all of these women are beautifully portrayed in Paragon Theatre's production, you're not called on to empathize with any of them; this brain-tease of a play acts on your cerebral cortex, not your guts.

The plot raises more questions than it answers. You can follow it -- that is, you're shown how and

why each moment follows the preceding moment -- but the action is surreal. Did you catch the word "absurd" in the subtitle? This play is a little reminiscent of the absurdists. In Ionesco's *Rhinoceros*, for example, everything that happens is fairly logical once you've accepted the premise that human beings can turn into rhinoceroses. (Come to think of it, with fascist elements threatening America, this would be a good time to revive *Rhinoceros*.) But the logic in *How We May Know Him* is gnomic and elliptical throughout. There are a lot of odd moments that don't quite add up, and then you think, oh, yes, I've got it, and then you realize that you don't have it at all, because whatever interpretation you've come up with doesn't account for the next thing you see.

This is without question a play about evil, and Val, superbly and implacably played by Emily Paton Davies, is its apotheosis. She's a truly loathsome creature, ignorant and cunning, small-minded yet immensely powerful. Val is a twisted parody of a god figure. She claims she can perform miracles and also rise from the dead -- which, before the play is over, she's actually done. She gains power over both Simone and Wren through a mix of wheedling and bullying. But though Val has an antagonist -- in the form of Nicola -- this is not a straightforward battle between good and evil. Nicola is hardly a shining, avenging angel. She's a paid mercenary, and we never know if the role she's played in her unnamed war is ethical (we do know she served as a decoy to protect a Dutch politician visiting the war zone) or murderous. "You killed people by the truckload," Wren accuses her.

There are other motifs. The tense scenes between Wren and Nicola mirror the difficulties faced by returning soldiers and their families. There's a lot of talk about flaws, both spiritual and physical. Also about meat, violence and death. Among an evocative array of sounds, designer Brian Freeland has inserted a repeated rhythm that sounds sometimes like a jackhammer, sometimes like the thudding of a human heart. "Your carotid artery throbs like a fist," her enigmatic employer tells Nicola.

The phrase "how we may know Him" usually refers to God or Jesus Christ. And as for the word "rapturous" in that hardworking title, it has more to do with the final cataclysm some Christians foretell -- and even desire -- than with everyday human joy.

Despite all the metaphoric stuff, the script is anything but murky. It's razor-sharp, and often funny in completely unexpected ways. And the rest of the cast is terrific. Laura Norman's human and compelling performance in an array of smaller roles is a potent reminder of just what a fine actress she is. A company that hires Norman and doesn't use her in a leading role is either blind or very rich in acting talent -- fortunately, Paragon is the latter. Barbra Andrews as Wren, Gina Wencel as Simone and Suzanne Favette as Nicola all give original and fully rounded interpretations. And there's strong support from Chris Bleau as the sole male.

How We May Know Him is seamlessly riveting, and I'm sure one of the reasons for this is that playwright Graham was able to work so closely with Paragon's actors and with director Wendy Franz. On every level, her play and this production affirm the power and possibility of going local.

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