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Gorell and friends: *Stuck in the '80s*?

## 'Jeffrey' at Walnut St. Studio 5

BY: **Anne R. Fabbri** 01.15.2008

Paul Rudnick's *Jeffrey* is a play about taking a chance on love, something we all do. In this case the risk could be fatal. A compelling first act and a dynamic cast are undermined by a clichéd second half.

*Jeffrey*. Drama by Paul Rudnick; directed by Daniel Student.

Represented Theatre Co. production through January 20, 2008 at Walnut Street Theatre Studio 5, 825 Walnut Street. (215) 965-8289 or

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## The man of your dreams (with one slight problem)

ANNE R. FABBRI

Paul Rudnick's *Jeffrey* is a play about taking a chance on love, something we all do. In this case the risk could be fatal, and that's where the bittersweet aspect enters. Do we embrace love regardless of the consequences, or do we calculate the plus and minus aspects of any relationship? Isn't this what women have done since the beginning of time? Well, now it can be acknowledged that the same thing holds true for all relationships: Gay, lesbian, transgender, heterosexual— it doesn't matter. Love is one thing; survival is something else.

Be forewarned: This is a play about sex. But, as the script mentions early on, what else consumes most people's thoughts? (Where does food fit in?)

Jeffrey, ably played by Andrew Gorell, is a handsome gay guy in his early 30s from Wisconsin, now cruising around Manhattan. He's an actor by choice (usually at liberty) and a waiter for a high-end caterer. Six years and 5,000 sexual encounters with no lasting relationship have left him weary and wary. He is still HIV negative and wants to stay that way, so he decides to become celibate.

"I'm not promiscuous," he declares. "It's such an ugly word. I'm cheap." (I wondered: Could any woman get away with saying the same thing? You know the answer.)

While working a socialite's benefit party for AIDS, Jeffrey meets the man of his dreams: the bartender, Steve, who has been HIV positive for five years. Jeffrey's

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friend Sterling speaks glowingly of *his* long-term relationship with Darius, who is also HIV positive. Jeffrey sees the whole world moving along in pairs while he is outside the current. Nevertheless, Jeffrey vows to choose life, albeit a lonely and solitary existence. In a poignant scene, he decides to break up with Steve in the face of these dire odds, despite his sense of isolation.

### Been there, done that

And that's the end of the first act. If it had stopped there, I would have awarded *Jeffrey* four stars. Unfortunately this promising beginning was followed by a second act of cliché situations: a lecherous priest with roamin' hands in St. Patrick's Cathedral, an attack by hoodlums on gay guys, a female psychic guru encounter modeled after AA group meetings, a ghostly apparition, a transgender son with his devoted mother, and Jeffrey's Wisconsin parents trying too hard to be non-judgmental and supportive. It felt "Been there; done that," too '80s for the 21st Century.

Why didn't Rudnick quit while he was ahead? Is it possible that in 1992, when *Jeffrey* was written, all these stereotypical situations were still news to the general public?

The actors delivered their *bon mots* with seeming effortlessness, accompanied with sexy dancing and gyrations. Andrew Gorell, as Jeffrey, was dynamic and engaging. His timing was right on the mark, and he seemed to propel the whole show with grace and abandon. Dominick Romeo, as Darius, was fabulous, engaging and fun. I loved every minute he was on stage. Jon Mason as Sterling added a touch of real-life cynicism that seasoned the production.

### A gay self-parody

Roy Wilbur ably played many roles, including the father in Wisconsin— an intellectual trying to find the correct words to keep open the path of communication with his gay son. Michelle Horman also capably filled many roles: the seductive entertainer, the well-meaning socialite whose naiveté becomes ludicrous in the face of reality, and the pseudo-group psychologist whose mission is an unwritten Calvinism where success is a sign of God's approval. Under Daniel Student's direction, the imaginative staging suggests everything you need to know about the gay milieu. *Jeffrey* is fast paced and fun, with quotable lines that you want to remember. Gays' self-parodying renders their lines funny rather than malicious. I regard *Jeffrey* as a coming of age for a whole community.

But have we come so far that the threat of AIDS is just one more of life's problems? Yes— and that is why *Jeffrey* is a play for everyone. Since all comedy is rooted in tragedy, meeting the mate of your dreams and learning that he is HIV positive is just one more of life's obstacles. If we reject this relationship, are we rejecting life? If we embrace it, does that represent a death wish? Paul Rudnick, born 1957, posed the question in 1992. Are we any closer to an answer?

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