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Jeffrey

by Jim Rutter

Contributor

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Jon Mason, Dominick Romeo, Scott Franco, Michelle Horman, Walter DeShields, Roy A. Wilbur

As any statistician will remind, "have sex often enough and something horrible is bound to happen." And while the spectrum of "horrible" can range from waking up next to someone barely worth noticing while drunk to a condom break, everyone has a limit that once reached, at least causes a moment to stop and reflect about their own behavior.

In Paul Rudnick's **Jeffrey**, that moment comes early in the play, where the opening monologue

introduces us to the title character (played by Andrew Gorell), the self-described "pushover-whore of Manhattan." After sleeping with enough partners to make the tabloid pages on a regular basis (5000 and counting), he's tired of dealing with his own fear of AIDS (and more so, that of everyone else who either wants to "just cuddle" when the condom breaks, or at the opposite extreme, insist that a week-old blood test isn't far from being up-to-date).

(Editor's note: Jeffrey was written in 1995 immediately prior to the use of the 'cocktail drugs' that dramatically altered the treatment of the HIV-infected. At the time it was considered daring for being a comedy set amidst the gay community in New York City, which was devastated by the epidemic.)

But unlike almost everyone else in Manhattan, Jeffrey argues that "sex is too sacred to be treated in this way," and swears off sex forever. Soon after his momentous decision, he meets Steve (Bill Egan), "the man of his dreams" who reminds him that some people are worth the risks. That is, until Steve casually remarks (while they're setting up their first date, no less) that he's HIV positive.

Jeffrey freaks-and who can blame him? In his job as a catering waiter he works the rounds of gay memorial services, tired both of seeing one "more 25 year old with a cane," and "serving hors d'œuvres in a graveyard." He can barely resist his attraction to Steve, yet he can't get over his biggest fear, which isn't catching the disease himself, but his selfish refusal to risk loss in caring for someone he loves while they waste away.

Plagued by guilt and haunted by confusion (not to mention hallucinations of Mother Theresa), he searches everywhere for answers, appearing on the talk show of the nation's hottest post-modern evangelist (the fantastic Michelle Horman), to group therapy for the sexually compulsive, and even seeking advice from his unaccepting Mid-Western parents, before coming face to face with the death of a friend in order to reach a resolution that allows him to live in the world again, no matter how dangerous it may now be.

Punctuated by direct address monologues in hilarious freeze-moment interludes, this highly episodic play shows that while AIDS is no longer a death sentence, in Represented Theatre's production, it's an outlandish subject for comedy. Daniel Student's direction focuses largely on the humor, crafting blisteringly funny moments, whether slapstick ridiculous (a masturbation society meeting breaks down into an orgy of groping), insult-laden (while shopping, a salesman reminds that "even trolls can get laid in New York"), or filled with sheer camp (with costumes from *Cats*, no less).

Yet the result almost dampens the play's more serious undertones. The main subplot concerns Jeffrey's closest friends, the HIV-discordant couple Sterling (Jon Mason) and much younger Darius (Dominick Romeo). Though Sterling insists that Darius "won't get sick," the chorus-dancer's young and tragic death reminds that even "wholesome gay couples" suffer.

Without Gorell's charming earnestness and vulnerability, and Mason's delicate performance (it's fascinating to watch him nearly relax in his own confident portrayal), the production would lose this aspect of the play's message entirely. And though admittedly episodic (there are at least two-dozen scenes), a few awkward transitions need better lighting or more even direction to enact a smoother feel.

Jamie Grace-Duff's costumes remind of a happily-forgotten era (the mid-1990s) when men wore long-sleeved rugby pullovers (though Darius' *Cats* outfit is a piece of hilarity by itself), and the parallels in Brian Grace-Duff's set between the "gift box of a bed" and the similar hospital death bed curtains is especially poignant, reminding that AIDS can still be a death sentence for many.

Subtly shining through all the comedy, is the sheer unapologetic pride of all of these different individuals and lifestyles coupled with their willingness to live life in spite of the risks. The remainder is nearly all laughs, a journey filled with hilarity from start to finish, thankfully coating Jeffrey's bitter realization that when faced by the reality of HIV, no gay man can consider himself an innocent bystander anymore.

Jeffrey, by Paul Rudnick, now in production at Represented Theatre until Jan. 20 at Studio 5 of the Walnut Street Theatre. Tickets available at the box office, by calling 215.965.8289, or online at www.represented.org

I'm a former university philosophy lecturer, trained in economics and philosophy. Now I devote most of my free time to pursuing my interests in theater and opera, writing plays and criticism; while still researching and writing in the field of political economy. Currently, and for the past five years, I have competed in the sport of Olympic weightlifting. I live in Center City Philadelphia, where I take in every production or performance that my schedule allows.

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