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'Jeffrey' tries to find laughs, love in Philly

By **Larry Nichols**
 PGN Staff Writer

It has been said that the best comedy comes from the darkest subject matter, which is probably why there should be plenty of hearty laughs and maybe a few tears when Represented Theatre Company presents "Jeffrey" through Jan. 20 at Walnut Street Theatre, Studio 5, 825 Walnut St.

Paul Rudnick's award-winning play is a romantic comedy probably best known for its 1995 big-screen adaptation of the same name starring Steven Weber and Patrick Stewart.

This production of "Jeffrey" stars Bill Egan in the title role.

Set in New York City at the height of the AIDS epidemic, the central character has sworn off sex for fear of the disease. Soon after, he is introduced to the man of his dreams, who also happens to be HIV-positive, and he has to reconcile his anxieties about sex and death with his quest for love, with a little help from his friends.

The play's director, Daniel Student, 24, said Rudnick's use of comedy made him a fan of his work.

"I really was drawn to the use of comedy to approach such a tragic issue," he said. "I've always loved the work of Rudnick. 'The Most Fabulous Story Ever Told' is one of my favorite plays. That uses comedy

for a gay and lesbian retelling of the Bible story. It doesn't quite have the ring that 'Jeffrey' does. How do you approach an issue that has such depth to it and do it with humor? I think that's what the show is about — trying to deal with tragedy by having a shared experience that can bring joy to everybody."

Trying to inject comedy into a subject as serious as HIV/AIDS is indeed tricky, especially when trying to put believable faces on the issue. Student said "Jeffrey" uses comedy to make the audience relate to and identify with the characters.

"I always tell people that 'Jeffrey' is basically the funny 'Angels in America,'" he said. "What does work really effectively is that I think you get really drawn into the lives of these characters. You get a chance to really relax and get comfortable with somebody and feel totally at ease. And then there is a death in the middle of the show and it really rocks you hard. It's something that comes completely unexpected. It allows the tragic elements to get a little extra weight. You're in the midst of laughing literally five seconds before something really meaningful happens in the script."

Another challenge for Student and the cast is trying to put their own stamp on a play that is so widely known via Hollywood. Student said the play is closer to its creator's vision than the film.

"When the movie came out, gay culture in America was really just still on the outskirts of the mainstream and some of the casting, particularly Steven Weber in the lead role, seemed to have been done, from my vantage point looking back, to kind of paint

Jeffrey as the everyman," he said. "It could be a friend and neighbor. Interestingly, Rudnick really writes into the script the idea that we do not need to see gay people as the truck driver or the doctor. There can be a gay culture and they can still be part of America and part of our heritage at the same time. So that's a really interesting challenge to paint this character and people around him in today's light and what Rudnick's original intentions were closer to."

Student also said that the play should give audiences some perspective, given the advances that have been made since it was written.

"'Jeffrey' is a play about the New York gay scene in the late 1980s and early 1990s," he said. "It's a very particular time with a very particular generation of men that had to deal with loved ones, friends and family dying very quickly all around them. We don't live in that era anymore. We live in an era where AIDS is in the headlines because of other countries and people do not recognize as much that it is still part of the daily lives of the gay community here in Philadelphia and there are people dying every day. We had to work together to decide how to translate this very-specific-timed piece into a context that would really resonate where people would walk out of the theater and say, 'This is happening to me today in my life and is part of my community as well.'"

For more information, visit www.represented.org or call (215) 965-8289. ■

Larry Nichols can be reached at larry@epgn.com.

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