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Cell Phone Funeral

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If you were to die, who would come to your funeral? This is the basic premise of John Patrick Trapper's Cell Phone Funeral (I'll Text You When I Dead). As the title may well suggest, this is an outright comedy. And not just the kind of mild amusement you would come to expect from other comedies that only employ comedic elements as a way of relieving the tension of the more "serious" subject matter—in this case, death. No, this play takes that subject matter and heightens it to an almost surreal level of consciousness that disturbs because of the honesty of what it is trying to say.

When Patrick's (Miles Nevin, in a solid performance as Patrick Cutout) life is suddenly cut short by an SUV at a local cruising spot, his estranged Mother (Trudy Forbes) and fussy aunt Muriel (Meredith Thomas) must fly across the country to arrange his funeral. Once there, and realizing that she hardly knows her own son, his mother embarks on a journey of discovery (her own and of her dead gay son.) At the advice of her sister Muriel, they send out a message to everyone in Patrick's cell phone inviting all to come to his wake. The resulting parade of mourners that turn up at Salvatore's (Mauricio Sanchez) Six Feet Under Spa, comes as a shock and revelation to both mom and aunt.

At first glance, this play may be cast off as yet another production with minimal design and some very over the top performances reserved for the late night cult shows that are sprinkled throughout Los Angeles' many small theatres. Yet, it wouldn't really work any other way. It works because in its raw unfinished veneer, it is a perfect reflection of how the GLBT community is perceived by outsiders and even by some of its own members. As Patrick's past comes back to haunt the ones he left behind, a pastiche of long standing queer issues are presented: cruising, bathhouses, drag queens, and spirituality are embodied by the company he kept in life. That these things in his life are revealed to his mother is no accident, either. Underneath the never-ending quest for carnal satisfaction lies the basic human need to be understood, appreciated, and respected.

The subtle comedy between Forbes and Thomas contrasts nicely with the broader laughs brought on by Chardonnay (Aaron Barrera), the drag queen and the duo (Gabriel Loup and Jason Frazier) responsible for Patrick's death. Julie Nunis' direction is subtle enough to accommodate the space and allows for the playwright's message to take center stage.

Though some of the dialogue in the play may be a little bit preachy at times, the charm that the actors bring to the roles and the earnest messages of understanding and acceptance more than makes up for it.

Obed Medina is a playwright & director in Los Angeles.

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