

Theater

'Sons of the Prophet,' a tragicomedy about family's suffering, starts strong but fades at Dobama Theatre

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The dark Douaihs: From left, Charles (Christopher Sanders), Joseph (Chris Richards) and Uncle Bill (Bernard Canepari) in "Sons of the Prophet," now onstage at Dobama Theatre.



By [Andrea Simakis, The Plain Dealer](#)

REVIEW

Sons of the Prophet

What: Dobama Theatre presents the play by Stephen Karam. Directed by Scott Miller.

When: Through Sunday, March 17.

Where: 2340 Lee Road, Cleveland Heights.

Tickets: \$10-\$26. Go to dobama.org or call 216-932-3396.

Playwright Stephen Karam begins "Sons of the Prophet," a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize for drama in 2012 and now urgently alive at Dobama Theatre, with three epigraphs, this one from "Three Sisters" by Anton Chekhov, theater's king of pain:

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"... it seems that in a little while we shall know why we are living, why we are suffering ... If only we could know, if only we could know!"

It's a cry that could be echoed by Karam's unlucky protagonists the Douaihys, a clan of Lebanese-Americans trying to get by in postindustrial eastern Pennsylvania. When the play opens, the family has already been hobbled by loss.

Mom is dead, Dad in the hospital following a freak accident ripped from the pages of



Charles, the youngest (Christopher Sanders, a delightful ringer for "Glee's" Chris Colfer), was born without an ear; and Joseph (a marvelous Chris Richards), once a promising runner training for the Olympics, wears braces on his knees. Oh yes, and to make life a little more challenging in blue-collar Nazareth, Pa., both Charles and Joseph are gay.

"Did you even *have* to come out?" Joseph asks his brother, whose tastes run toward chartreuse scarves.

"I don't dress like a lumberjack, if that's what you mean," Charles replies. "If people in Nazareth think you're gay, it's because they think you're a lesbian."

With "Sons," a play about suffering and its many bruise hues -- the way pain attaches itself to some like a jealous lover and passes others by without a second look -- Karam reveals himself to be the spiritual sibling of Chekhov -- and Tony Kushner, too. He's also kin to Edward Albee, thanks to his taste for the absurd.

Karam's last epigraph is a quote attributed to Ohio Judge Gary F. McKinley. "I shouldn't be doing this, but I'm going to . . .," the judge said, before he delayed sentencing two "standout Kenton High School athletes" to 60 days in juvenile detention -- until after football season.



Their crime? The jocks stole a decoy deer, "painted it with obscenities and then placed it in the middle of a darkened rural road to see what would happen when drivers approached," reported the Columbus Dispatch in 2006. The prank nearly cost one man his leg and left his passenger, 17-year-old Dustin Zachariah, with "the cognitive ability of a sixth-grader."

Karam moves the senseless accident from Ohio to Nazareth: Now, it is Joseph and Charles' father who has crashed his car to avoid the faux deer, and a black high school football star named Vin (a well-muscled Johnathon Jackson) who receives lenient treatment so he can continue to throw passes.

Joseph's father dies, leaving him in charge. Riddled with undiagnosed aches and pains, he needs health insurance, so he works for Gloria (Anne McEvoy, nailing flighty and frazzled), a batty publisher. When she learns Joseph is distantly related to Kahlil Gibran, author of the hugely influential tome "The Prophet," she sees an opportunity to make a quick buck. All Joseph and his relations have to do is share their bad-luck stories with the world.

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Despite a dark history of her own, Gloria gets off on anguish porn in the form of dispatches from the Middle East, even though she doesn't know Hamas from Hezbollah. She's especially pleased to learn that Joseph's father used to teach his children geography by describing the shapes of countries, and that Lebanon looks like "a man's face, in pain, screaming . . ."

Karam layers themes like baklava through his often brilliant, tragicomic script; along with the adoration of suffering, there are the thorny concepts of sexual and cultural identity. Not only is Joseph barely out of the closet, he is also divorced from his culture -- he's never been to Beirut, or anywhere else for that matter -- yet is defined by it.

The play is divided into seven scenes, and, under the direction of Scott Miller, the first four are gripping and provocative. As Joseph, Richards is superb (he really should be famous already). Beneath his responsible facade, he is a coil of suppressed rage and desire. When he meets Timothy (a very good Aaron Mucciolo), a cute reporter who also wants to tell (or is it exploit?) his family's sorrowful tale, he feels himself ignite. Will this Lebanese Job catch a break and find true love among the ruins of a burned-out steel town?

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All that wondering is for naught, because following an ill-conceived intermission that throws the brakes on the propulsive, forward motion of the production, the final three scenes resolve little, then sputter and stall out.

Part of the problem lies with a script that thunders out of the gate and then flags, but



As school board members presiding over a public hearing where Vin apologizes to the surviving Douaihys, they wear fright wigs (or frightfully bad wigs) and chew through their lines as though trying to free themselves from leg-hold traps.

Why Miller allowed the duo to go so broad is anybody's guess, given the playwright's explicit instructions to the contrary. The result doesn't feel funny so much as fraudulent, and it changes the black comedy to bleak sitcom. Ouch.

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