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Theater review: Dobama Theatre's 'Sons of the Prophet' delivers pleasure with pain

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Courtesy of Nathan Motta/Dobama Theatre<p>Christopher Sanders, left, Chris Richards and Bernard Canepari share a scene in the Dobama Theatre production of "Sons of the Prophet."

If -- as the saying goes -- misery loves company,

Stephen Karam

's "Sons of the Prophet" should play to full houses. This dark, Pulitzer Prize-nominated comedy, on stage at the

Dobama Theatre

, offers a close look at bad karma, where unfortunate things happen to the miserable Lebanese-American Douaihy family. How miserable? The father, who is alive at the start of this play, dies shortly thereafter from a heart attack following a car crash that resulted from a high school prank now threatening the football career of the young prankster (Johnathon Jackson). And, given this playwright's playful proclivity for pathos, the father's demise is the catalyst for the family's escalating state of decline. Old Uncle Bill (a delightfully cantankerous Bernard Canepari) is an incontinent racist who regresses from a walker to a wheelchair and oxygen tank as his rants and random religious references grow increasingly irrational. Youngest son Charles (the charming Christopher Sanders) grows skeptical of the family's Maronite Catholic faith and becomes progressively critical of his older brother Joseph's clandestine homosexuality ("You look like a lesbian!"), though his own flamboyance is never rewarded. His confinement to small-town Nazareth, Pa., is made all the more miserable by an encyclopedic knowledge of the names and shapes of the nations of the world. At the epicenter of this domestic natural disaster, and a misery magnet in his own right, is Joseph (Chris Richards). A former running champ, Joseph is being betrayed by his 29-year-old body. Despite his chronic pain, an endless string of inconclusive diagnoses, the outrageous behavior of his highly unstable employer (a gloriously passive-aggressive Anne McEvoy), and an unsatisfying romance (a tender Aaron Mucciolo), Joseph is trying desperately and unsuccessfully to keep things in check. Even the Eastern Pennsylvania steel mill town that claims this family is hurting. If the title "Les Miserables" weren't already taken, it would find a home here. Fortunately, "Sons of the Prophet" is written with a great sense of humanity and a wonderful sense of humor, which keeps the play's audience from becoming as miserable as its characters. Richards' brilliant depiction of Joseph's constant discomfort -- both physical and emotional -- and his quiet resolve is the glue that holds this play and this production together. This is not easy, because so much of the humor leans heavily toward the ironic. We are told, for example, that the Douaihys are distant relatives of Kahlil Gibran, the author of the best-selling book "The Prophet" -- a collection of inspirational essays. To reinforce the connection, each of the play's scenes is given a title, projected on the stage, reflective of the book's chapter headings. We are also told that the Douaihys are an important Lebanese family of noble French origin that can be traced to the 7th century. Yet no family could be less noble or further removed from the poetic truths presented in Gibran's book, particularly its key message: "You are far greater than you know, and all is well." All is most certainly not well for the sons of the prophet. Adding to the irony is the portrait of Rafka -- a Lebanese Patron Saint -- hanging on a wall in the Douaihy home. She is the Patron Saint of Sufferers. Pleasure can be derived from watching these people's pain because of the comedic casualness written into the script and nicely enacted by the featured players. On the few occasions when the play demands more, Scott Miller's stage direction gets in the way.

Case in point is an 11th-hour scene where every miserable soul happens to be in the same room at the same time to vent about the death of the Douaihy patriarch. As written, tension mounts as one absurdity builds upon another, reaches a crescendo, and combusts like the stateroom scene in the Marx Brothers' "A Night at the Opera." Instead, this scene putters along with no payoff. Things aren't helped by the ineffective interjections by ensemble players Jeanne Task and Laura Starnik. When the dust settles, it is hard to find a clear moral at the end of this play. What the playwright seems to be saying is that misfortune is indiscriminate and, by laughing at the horrors that befall others, we may be better able to endure them when they most certainly come knocking on our door. Apparently misery does love company, and "Sons of the Prophet" serves up an entertaining case study. *"Sons of the Prophet" runs through March 17 at Dobama Theatre, 2340 Lee Road, Cleveland Heights. For tickets, which range from \$10 to \$26, call 216-932-3396 or visit www.dobama.org.*
