



FALL GUYS: (from left) Patrick Heusinger, Cotter Smith, Patrick Breen in the first-rate drama, *Next Fall*, at the Helen Hayes Theatre

Photo: Carol Rosegg

Outstanding cast, sharp script make *Next Fall* one of spring's best dramas

NEXT FALL

Written by Geoffrey Nauffts

Directed by Sheryl Kaller

The Helen Hayes Theatre

240 West 44th Street

(212-239-6200), www.nextfallbroadway.com

By Scott Harrah

Questioning one's faith, self-acceptance of homosexuality, and Christian and family views of same-sex love—all are just some of the serious themes explored in *Next Fall*, the Geoffrey Nauffts drama that recently opened on Broadway after a successful off-Broadway run at Playwrights Horizons.

Playwright Geoffrey Nauffts has a rare ability to tell a story through flashbacks, and that is something that almost never works onstage, but it's wonderfully effective here.

It's also amazing that a character like the play's lead, Adam (Patrick Breen) is not always likable, but audiences still feel sympathy for him. Forty-year-old Adam, who borders on being a stereotype of a whiny, neurotic New Yorker, somehow lands a much-younger, handsome boyfriend, Luke (Patrick Heusinger), but their relationship is complicated indeed. Luke, an aspiring actor, is a devout Christian from the South. He believes that his sexuality is a "sin," and prays for forgiveness after sex. As Luke falls in love with Adam, he's unable to free himself from the perceptions of homosexuality indelibly rooted in his fundamentalist Christian upbringing.

The pair's world is literally shattered when Luke is hit by a cab. Most of the story transpires in the waiting room of a New York hospital as Adam, his best friend and boss Holly (Maddie Corman), and Luke's parents from Florida, Arlene (Connie Ray) and Butch (Cotter Smith), await the outcome of Luke's fate.

As bleak as the narrative might be, *Next Fall* somehow manages to be entertaining, thanks to the crisp dialogue and the fine performances of the cast, tightly directed by Sheryl Kaller. The various flashbacks—how Luke and Adam met, how Luke hid the truth about his sexuality from his parents, Adam meeting Luke's father for the first time—unfold beautifully in a breezy manner. The acting is so superb and the banter between characters so amusing and lighthearted that one almost overlooks the fact that Nauffts is making earnest statements about relationships and theological interpretations of sexuality.

Patrick Breen brings a rough sense of realism to Adam, a man who's an agnostic, cynical, and discontented about life in general. Heusinger's warm interpretation of Luke as a lovable, somewhat naïve soul is consistently moving, and makes Luke's tenuous grasp at life that much more touching as the tale progresses.

The story's only major flaw is the character of Brandon (Sean Dugan), Luke's longtime friend who's a successful businessman, but has a warped, archaic view of same-sex love and gay lifestyles. It's never made quite clear just what Brandon's intentions are, or why he is so disapproving of Adam and Luke's romance.

Regardless, *Next Fall* is a captivating story with unforgettable characters. What sets *Next Fall* apart from many gay-themed dramas is its ability to tackle issues of human sexuality, relationships, religion, and parental perceptions of gay children in an honest way without resorting to melodrama or coming across as heavy-handed.

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