



PRODIGAL 'SONS': (left to right) Jonathan Louis Dent, Chris Perfetti, Santino Fontana & Yusef Bulos in Roundabout's *Sons of the Prophet*. Photo: Joan Marcus



Theater Review

Sons of the Prophet is richly textured drama

SONS OF THE PROPHET

By Stephen Karam

Directed by Peter DuBois

Through January 1, 2012

Harold & Miriam Steinberg Center for Theatre/ Laura Pels

111 West 46th Street, (212-719-1300)

www.roundabouttheatre.org

By David NouNou

Ask any critic, "What is the most exciting thing about your job?" Most likely, the answer could be discovering a new playwright whose voice is emerging or witnessing an actor who has done consistent work and finally gets a breakthrough role that propels him into the front ranks of a new leading man. In the case of *Sons of the Prophet*, we get both: Stephen Karam is the playwright, and Santino Fontana is the actor.

Mr. Karam's play is richly textured and layered. Set in Central Pennsylvania; it tells the tale of the Douaihy family and the misfortunes they encounter. In particular, Joseph Douaihy, played superbly by Fontana. He is a descendant of the popular poet Khalil Gibran, who wrote *The Prophet*. We first meet Joseph at his office, working as assistant for a publisher, Gloria (Joanna Gleason), a lady who moved from Manhattan after her husband committed suicide. As is the case of a lot of rich women who have been left a huge sum of money and ventures into a business, Gloria is totally nuts. Joseph is working for her only for the health insurance. She, in turn, wants to cash in on his Lebanese ancestry and relation to Gibran.

Thus, the layering in Mr. Karam's work begins. Joseph was a champion runner who is now afflicted with inexplicable chronic leg and hand pain and it is getting steadily worse. His mother died two years earlier, and now his father has gotten into an accident, swerving off the road to avoid hitting a deer. It turns out the deer was a decoy and a prank on motorists by the high-school star football player. Of course, the father dies, leaving Joseph to be the sole provider for his brother Charles (Chris Perfetti) who is gay; and his frail, ultra-vocal Uncle Bill (Yusef Bulos), who moves in with them. Oh, did I mention that Joseph is gay, too? What are the odds?

The texture of the play comes from the dignity in suffering and pain. For the Douaihy family, their guardian angel is Saint Rafqa, who is blind and loves suffering. Mr. Karam imbues this family with the belief in their ancient roots. Although the boys were born in America, they still hold dear the belief and ideologies of their parents and ancestors that suffering and pain in silence is good. The more you suffer, the more alive you are. Certainly this is not a bromide for today's generation. What Mr. Karam has infused his work with is a charming sense of humor, and that is no easy task considering the heavy subject matter.

As staged by Peter DuBois, he extracts excellent performances from each of his cast members, especially the veterans Joanna Gleason and Yusef Bulos and newcomer Chris Perfetti. In the wrong hands, this could have been a maudlin evening, but Mr. DuBois keeps things moving at a fast-paced tempo. I also have to add that any show that has sets by Anna Louizos is going to be a visual treat. Her sets anchor a show and seamlessly change within the context of a story.

Santino Fontana has appeared in *The Fantasticks*, *Billy Elliot*, *Sunday in the Park with George*, *Brighton Beach Memoirs*, and earlier this year in Roundabout's hit revival of *The Importance of Being Earnest*. In that show, he did not leave much of an impression on me, due to Brian Bedford's impeccable performance. However, as Joseph in this play, he is compelling, charming, confident, and displays the quiet dignity the character needs. He has finally landed the role that should catapult him into the league of future leading men of the American stage, be it in dramas or musicals.

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