



FANATICISM IN MIDDLE AMERICA: Connor Barrett (left) & Billy Crudup in a scene from Adam Rapp's intriguing but flawed *The Metal Children*. Photo: Carol Rosegg

Theater Review

Adam Rapp's *The Metal Children* poses provocative questions about censorship & religious fanaticism

By David NouNou

A strong case can be made about why playwrights should not direct their own plays or, perhaps more aptly put, why good plays deserve better directors than a playwright. There is a reason why directors were created. They hopefully bring insight or a vision that the playwright had not thought about or, better yet, steer a play in a proper direction and eliminate a lot of extemporaneous dialogue and help fill in thematic holes. Case in point: *The Metal Children*. Adam Rapp has written a fine play with an intriguing concept and characters, with a tight, suspenseful, and well-executed first act. Unfortunately, things unravel at a rapid pace in act two.

The Metal Children centers on writer Tobin Falmouth (Billy Crudup), who 12 years earlier had written a young adult novel by the same name and has now created quite a stir in a small community in the American heartland. In the novel, teenage girls got pregnant and started disappearing one by one, and were being replaced by metal statues in a cornfield. The controversial novel has been taken off the high-school reading curriculum of this small town and all the copies have been placed in a church basement. For this town has some strong believers in what the novel has to say, mainly high-school English teacher Stacey Kinsella (Connor Barrett), and a student/emulatee Vera Dundee (Phoebe Strole). And, as one can well foresee, for every believer, there are dissenters. In this case, many of them, as Tobin will soon find out when he goes to the town for a school-board meeting to discuss the pros and cons of his book. Strange things begin to happen.

All this would work great in a suspenseful mystery. However, Mr. Rapp is not writing a mystery; he is also writing about ideas and the processes that go into writing a novel. Does an author have a responsibility to society, especially to the youth? For words after all have the power to influence minds, behavior, and rationale. Many English professors love to give meaning and significance to novels and essays and infuse in them symbolism that the author may never have intended. Can it be possible that an author simply writes a book for the sake of writing it, with no underlying symbolism or meaning? Rapp poses this provocative question quite eloquently.

As well as the first act is set up, the second goes awry, because the happenings in the heartland run amok. The supporters and dissenters are at odds and chaos ensues. There are a few performances that add credibility to the play's message. Billy Crudup as the embattled novelist is wonderful. He embodies the lost author and the problems that have plagued his life, namely his broken marriage, among other travails. Connor Barrett is perfect as the English teacher. He is effective as a supporter of the novel and avoids the cartoonish stereotype of a Middle American outsider. Also good is Phoebe Strole as Vera, the student and ardent fan of the book. There are lots of good ideas here that have strayed in different

tangents due to a singular vision in writing and direction, proving that *The Metal Children* might have benefited from having someone other than the playwright direct.

Published May 24, 2010

Reviewed at Second Night Press Performance on May 22, 2010

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