

BLUEBIRD OF UNHAPPINESS

The comedy of grief in "Sons of the Prophet" and "Relatively Speaking."

BY JOHN LAHR



“Ravishing” is the best word for Stephen Karam’s new comedy “Sons of the Prophet” (elegantly directed by Peter DuBois, at the Roundabout’s Laura Pels). At once deep, deft, and beautifully made, “Sons of the Prophet” stares unflinchingly at the Gorgon’s head of grief—the kind of grief on which words have no purchase, the indigestible pain that never really goes away. In other words, the suffering that an audience expects theatre to deflect with laughter, rather than to embrace.

“You . . . can’t stand in your pain too long,” a wise old woman says, late in the evening. “It’s like quicksand, you’ll sink, never get past it.” In this episodic tale, all

the main characters are caught, one way or another, in the tight grip of sorrow. Shit happens, as the T-shirt says, but Karam contrives to dump an entire outhouse on the luckless Lebanese-American Douaihy family. The Douaihyhs are very distant relatives of the Lebanese poet Khalil Gibran, the author of the inspirational text “The Prophet,” and Gibran’s famous mantra “All is well” haunts the hapless goings on at their house, in a run-down section of Nazareth, Pennsylvania, where all is definitely not well, and may never be.

“Against the assault of laughter nothing can stand,” Mark Twain said. Even before the play begins, Karam tests Twain’s assertion by dipping the audi-

ence into an acid bath of absurd disaster. Through a scrim, we see looming headlights collide with a silhouetted stag. The animal turns out to be the wooden mascot of the Mighty Bucks, the local high-school football team, which has been placed in the middle of the street as a prank; the resulting roadkill is the patriarch of the Douaihy clan. “The Douaihyhs have a habit of dying tragically. We’re like the Kennedys without the sex appeal,” Joseph (Santino Fontana), the newly orphaned twenty-nine-year-old elder son, says. Joseph, who is at the center of this dark comic storm, was an aspiring Olympic runner until an injury hobbled him. His eighteen-year-old brother, Charles (the droll Chris Perfetti), is a geography nerd. Both are gay. And, to add to the weight of Joseph’s bag of rocks, their blustering, disabled uncle, Bill (Yusef Bulos), who is by turns pious and racist, insists on moving into the family home as the brothers’ guardian, when it’s as clear as the walker in front of him that he can’t take care of himself. “Who’s looking after me now?!” Joseph shouts at his infuriating uncle. “Who’s taking care of me now?!—it’s been a *nightmare* organizing you living here and you keep pretending *you’re* taking care of *us!*” Topping the bill in this vaudeville of calamity is Joseph’s torn meniscus, the primary symptom of a trifecta of unrelated debilitating ailments, which will cost a king’s ransom to address—assuming, of course, that the doctors can figure out what’s wrong in the first place.

Standard comic anarchy turns the world upside down, then puts it back together again at the finale, returning us to the *status quo ante*. Karam’s ambivalent, sly, subversive brand of laughter, however, dares to assert that that is not how the world works. He lets his characters exist in all their messiness and refuses them a tidy resolution. In this gossamer game, Karam is trying to capture both the process of suffering and the comedy of how we cope with it. Through a series of narrative jumps, his finely pitched, oblique dialogue teases the audience into thought. Projected above each scene is a title inspired by the chapter headings in “The Prophet”—“On Friendship,” “On Reason and Passion,” “On Home”—drawing us into the rueful central drama, which is the mystery of change over

Perfetti and Fontana in Stephen Karam’s very dark comedy. Photograph by Platon.

time. For instance, the Douaihs at first refuse to meet Vin (Jonathan Louis Dent), the star player of the Mighty Bucks, who was responsible for the deadly prank with the deer, and are doubly outraged when a local judge proposes postponing Vin's detention until after football season. "We're not meeting this kid," Joseph says. "No good can come of it. . . . That kind of healing only happens in Lifetime movies." He adds, by way of explanation, to Uncle Bill, "Television for women." By the end of the play, at a cleverly written school-board meeting, it's the Douaihs who endorse Vin and his football future.

Grief, like hate, stops thought. To demonstrate this phenomenon, Karam has Bill retreat into superstition and his Maronite faith, praying to the blind St. Rafka, who wallowed in suffering as a means of getting closer to God. "She was, like, bring it on," Charles, who looks to numerology to impose order on his own out-of-control life, explains. But the most entertaining study of the refusal to parse pain revolves around Joseph's boss, Gloria Gurney (Joanna Gleason), a book packager whose reputation plunged after she published a nonfiction book that turned out to be a fake—a love story about a man who met his wife in a Nazi concentration camp. "His wife would disguise herself as a Christian farm girl and toss him a piece of fruit over the, you know, the big electrified fence at Auschwitz," she says. "Would *you* know the height of a concentration camp wall? . . . I'm not a detective, Bill. I wasn't *at* the Holocaust." Gloria has been "suddenly sidelined," but she has an idea how to get back in the game: taking on the story of the Douaihy family and their relationship to Gibran would allow her to cash in on Gibran's worldwide fan base. So she clings first to Joseph, then to his family, as ballast for her free-floating despair, which was triggered partly by her husband's recent suicide. Gloria, who is given a particularly bright and barmy spin by Gleason, embodies the comedy of melancholy, a woman so caught up in her internal drama that she can't listen to or retain anything. Even when she grabs the microphone to speak on Vin's behalf at the school-board meeting, it's the drama of her own life to which she obsessively returns. "Happiness . . . becomes this . . . thing . . . in *other* people's eyes," she says,

hilarious and heartbreaking at once.

Some things are lost; some are found; some are gone forever. "Sons of the Prophet" ponders this hard truth; it makes us consider the unacceptable. Just as darkness shows off brilliance, the play's poignant comedy makes us see that facing grief is one way to ease its terrible grip. Karam's bittersweet touch is as rare as his compassion; he loves his characters as much for their decency as for their eccentricity. His nuanced, comic storytelling—a delicate weave of the spoken and the unspoken, the outrageous and the unconscionable, delivered by a uniformly excellent cast—holds pain and pleasure together in startling equipoise, never trivializing either. The play ends not with words but with motion. Joseph and his kindergarten teacher, Mrs. McAndrew (Lizbeth Mackay), meet at a physical-therapy session. ("Kindergarten was a good year for me," he tells her.) Standing side by side, they go through a basic stretch, arms extended in front of them, gliding in unison. "The rhythm is simple, slow, mellow, steady, like a heart-beat," the stage direction reads. "The space feels a bit bigger, more open." For them, and for us.

And let's give a huzzah for the return to Broadway of two of its merriest Merry-Andrews—Elaine May and Woody Allen, who arrive in a triptych of one-act plays titled "Relatively Speaking" (directed by John Turturro, at the Brooks Atkinson). May and Allen are old-school; they believe that humor is a great pesticide, and they can certainly kill. (I'm sorry to report that the third offering, Ethan Coen's "Talking Cure," doesn't belong in the same, seasoned company.)

In May's "George Is Dead," Doreen (the ditzzy, dithering Marlo Thomas) swans into the life of her beloved nanny's daughter, Carla (Lisa Emery), just as Carla's marriage is breaking up, and trumps Carla's catastrophe with bad news of her own: her husband has died while skiing in Aspen. To such a droll mimic as May, Doreen's air of insufferable, infantile entitlement is a comic piñata. "I'm always stunned that people listen to each other's stories," Doreen says. "It's like having someone give you their underwear to keep. You'll never use it. It doesn't fit. It just uses up your space." The joke is well written and psychologically astute.

Doreen is a three-ring circus of shallowness. "I don't have the depth to feel this bad," she says, at one point. Her husband may be dead, but she has made no plans to bury him. When Carla suggests that the body needs to be shipped to a mortuary and a coffin chosen, Doreen is bewildered. "I don't understand any of this," she says. "I don't understand what you mean by 'ship.' Where will he be? Is there a special compartment?" May's sketch may be short, but she does something big with it: she puts our passion for ignorance on parade.

The laurels of the evening go to Allen, whose high-spirited little farce, "Honeymoon Motel," turns the tables on the familiar erotic trope: in this case, the panting groom is the stepfather of the would-be husband—he has run off with his stepson's young bride-to-be. If this sounds self-referential, well, it's meant to; Allen deftly flips the bird to the moralizing public. "Life is short, and there are no rules," a pizza-delivery man (the amusing Danny Hoch) says, to silence the outrage at the finale. Gradually, the honeymoon suite fills with all the affronted parties: wives, husbands, rabbi, psychiatrist. In the hubbub, Allen's wisecracks zing back and forth like a shuttlecock. "I admit Freud was a genius," the rabbi (Richard Libertini) says. "Who else could make an hour into fifty minutes?"

Since the revue sketch is now an almost defunct art, the style of how to play it has been more or less forgotten. To fill in their cartoon outlines, the actors have to bring their own vivid attitudes. A special shout-out, therefore, to Julie Kavner, a familiar Allen player, as Fay, the mother of the wayward bride; her grumbling voice and her put-upon shuffle convey the lament of ages. When her husband says that he wants to donate his organs to science, Kavner gives him the slow-eye: "Nobody's going to want your organs, Sam, unless you include Pepto-Bismol."

Allen has just finished shooting his forty-third film. Although some of his tales over the past decade have shown signs of fatigue, in the annals of the last century's joy Allen, as filmmaker, stand-up comic, and joke writer, fills a large chapter. "Honeymoon Motel" offers not just a spectacle of comic bedlam but the pleasure of witnessing Allen kicking up his heels. In other words, it's a rollicking good time. ♦