



Review: Tribes

Description

Play thrusts the deaf into view

By Byron Toben

The Bible is full of admonitions concerning hearing by prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah as repeated in gospel scribes Mark and Matthew. Stuff like “They have ear but they hear not and eyes but they see not.”

I don’t know if British director/playwright Nina Raine had some of those utterances in mind when she wrote Tribes, but they popped into my mind while watching this acclaimed play at the Segal. Ms. Raine, a regular at London’s vanguard Royal Court Theatre in Sloane Square, is a grand niece of Boris Pasternak whose Dr. Zhivago is one of my all time favorite films, so I was curious to see if talent runs in the family.

It does and here is why. The stage family of British Jews of intellectual bent consists of five:
Daddy Christopher (Greg Ellwand, fresh from his Segal Travesties triumph);
Mommy Beth (Toni Ellwand, yep, his real-life wife);
Son Daniel (Daniel Brochu, fresh from his Infini Progress starring);
Daughter Ruth (Lisa Norton, five-year Shaw fest vet);
and deaf Son Billy (Jack Volpe, real-life deaf actor).



Andrea Runge and Jack Volpe

This eccentric family has raised Billy without meaningful interaction with the deaf community, so he is a shy fellow good at lip reading that supplements his faint hearing even with a battery aid. Into Billy's life comes Sylvia (Andrea Runge, Shakespeare fest plus). She is an ASL (American Sign Language) teacher. They of course fall in love, she teaches him ASL and moves in with him and his tribe of a family.

However, now able to mix easily with the other souls of the Deaf tribe, and realizing that movement, facial expression and hands can combine into a unique art form without alliteration or meter, he deserts his family tribe to live alone. That argument, cross currents, anger and repressed thoughts can be transmitted so powerfully by a mix of broken words, wall titles and gestures is a tribute to Ms. Raines's vision.

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Mr. Volpe is also an instructor at the MacKay Centre and active with Seeing Voices Montreal where he is also a playwright/director. I would not be surprised to see him nominated at the next METAs as best actor or supporting actor, along with Chip Chuipka from Butcher at the Centaur, resulting in the odd nominations of two for English language awards, albeit speaking no or little English language.



I started this review quoting the Bible. I cannot resist ending with G. Bernard Shaw's apt quip: "The single biggest problem with communication is the illusion that it has taken place."

Images: Andrée Lanthier

Tribes continues at the Segal Centre until December 20.
Tickets: 514 739-7944 or segalcentre.org

Byron Toben is the immediate past-president of the Montreal Press Club.

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