

Review: ‘Permission’ and Spankings at the Lucille Lortel Theater

Permission

By Charles Isherwood

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The sex farce has all but disappeared from the contemporary stage, and those of you mourning its demise (Hello out there?) may want to check out “Permission,” the new play by Robert Askins, author of the darkly subversive “Hand to God,” now on Broadway. In Mr. Askins’s sex comedy with a twist — or rather a kink — two God-loving young couples discover corporal punishment as a way of spicing up their sex lives, or alleviating the tensions in their marriages, or a little of both.

All in the name of Jesus, of course.

The play, which opened on Wednesday at the Lucille Lortel Theater in an MCC Theater production, is less substantial than “Hand to God,” which manages to provide explosive entertainment value (via an obscenity-spewing puppet, mind you) while also movingly exploring the psychological fallout of loss.

“Permission” has less heavy matters on its mind. (And — sad face — no paddle-wielding puppet.) Although this tale of young Christians embarking on unusual sexual adventures also suggests that once the libido has been given full rein, anarchy may not be far away, the play never digs deeply into the psyches of its characters, remaining content to exploit its gimmick for raucous, mildly raunchy comedy.

Zach (Lucas Near-Verbrugghe) and Michelle (Nicole Lowrance) are hosting a casual dinner party as the play begins. She’s a little late with the preparation, which inspires Zach to hold up an admonitory finger — which we come to learn is a matter of counting the transgressions before strict discipline is in order.

He owns a sporting goods store and is planning to expand his operations, although Michelle, a successful lawyer, seems dubious. When Michelle announces with (fake?) chagrin that she forgot to put the gluten-free rolls in the oven, the couple repairs to the kitchen, whence come sounds indicating that Zach is implementing some corporal punishment for her failings.

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Their friends Eric (Justin Bartha), acting chair of the computer science department at a local college (we are in Waco, Tex.), and his wife, Cynthia (Elizabeth Reaser), an aspiring novelist, are suitably embarrassed, beating (as it were) a hasty retreat. Zach later explains to Eric that this isn’t just a lark inspired by close reading of “50 Shades of Grey” (an oxymoron, believe me, I know) but something called Christian Domestic Discipline, meant to re-establish the proper power relationships in marriages, in line with traditional biblical interpretation.

“There are groups online,” Zach says. “Check it out, it’s legit.” It all sounds perfectly cozy, in his description: “Shelly and I agreed on rules,” he adds. “When she breaks them, I give her a little lecture. Then I administer punishment. Then afterwards we snuggle.”

Eric smells hypocrisy. But on the other hand, Cynthia’s continuing funk — she can’t do the dishes because “Matlock” is always on, and she can’t get going on that novel — and his lack of sexual ardor mean their marriage hardly qualifies as ideal. After a few glasses of wine and some testy exchanges, Cynthia is bent over Eric’s knee, squealing with pleasurable pain as she accepts her punishment.

Mr. Askins’s gift for smart and funny dialogue is often in evidence. When Eric asks Cynthia if she’s even had the energy to read the newspaper, she defensively quips, “No but I Facebooked pretty aggressively, so I’m just as informed as I might have been.” And the actors, under the brisk direction of Alex Timbers, give lively readings of their characters.

But once the provocative conceit has been established, Mr. Askins doesn’t find any particularly revealing ideas to explore, letting the naughty novelty do most of the work. A flimsy subplot concerns the crush that Eric’s assistant, Jeanie (an amusingly moony Talene Monahan), develops on him as they plan for his important interview to secure his job permanently. Once liberated into a brave new sexual world, Eric finds himself tempted to indulge.

This results in the play’s farcical climax, during which all five characters carom around Eric and Cynthia’s living room like pinballs, coming together in various erotic combinations — some more intentional than others, some more punitive than others — with potentially calamitous results. The actors fling themselves into this knockabout scene with admirable commitment, not to mention well-choreographed precision.

Mr. Bartha's role is the meatiest. He transmits Eric's sometimes dazed vacillation between confusion (professional and marital) and excitement (sexual and extramarital). Ms. Reaser, a dead ringer for Katy Perry, persuasively charts Cynthia's journey from disappointed malcontent to enthusiastic if still anxiety-ridden partner in punishing sex play. (As part of their disciplinary practices, Eric locks Cynthia into her writing room every day, a joke — I think — on the masochism and the procrastination inherent in the writing life.)

As the couple initiating their friends into the delights of homegrown hanky-panky, Mr. Near-Verbrugghe and Ms. Lowrance are nicely matched. Zach presents himself as a man confident in his gender privileges, but underneath he is clearly insecure and feckless. It turns out Zach needs, well, direction from his far more assertive and accomplished wife.

Feminists may bridle at the glee with which Cynthia and Michelle appear to take to their submissive roles (though the success of "50 Shades" hasn't inspired much backlash), but Mr. Askins smartly explores how the power balances in both marriages are not as simple as they first might appear, despite Zach's somber reading of Bible verses insisting that wife should be subservient to husband.

Ultimately the play's attitude toward this peculiar byway of Christian behavior comes to seem mildly mocking. The couples in question may cloak their desire for sexual experimentation in the tenets of Christianity, but they are really just looking for something fresh to do when the dinnertime squabbles get too dreary, and there are no more episodes of "Matlock" to watch.

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