



'The devil made me do it'

Terra Jones and Leif Bramer with their naughty puppets.
PHOTO BY JOE HILSEE

A hilarious and scary coming-of-age story ... with puppets

The title of the play, it turns out, is perfectly ambiguous. And the action of *Hand to God*—now showing at the Blue Room Theatre—takes its audience on an emotional ride with its intense depiction, or dissection, of universally relatable small-town humanity in the throes of sexual passion suffused with and confused by religious fervor.

by
Carey Wilson

Review:
Hand to God shows
Thursday-Saturday,
7:30 p.m., through
Feb. 2.
Tickets: \$15

**Blue Room
Theatre**
139 W. First St.
895-3749
blueroomtheatre.com

We know things are going to be strange when the play opens on the darkened stage with a monologue delivered by a hand puppet thrust through the backstage curtain. The seemingly innocent character, Tyrone, offers a profanity-laced summation of the natural history of civilization, ending with: “So the same motherfucker who invented ... virtue, that ballsy piece of pig shit topped all his previous work and he invented ... the devil. [So] when I have acted badly, in order that I may stay around the campfire, all I have to do is say ... ‘The devil made me do it.’”

Lights come up to show us a small-town church basement. The recently widowed Margery (Samantha Shaner) is there to teach puppet theater techniques to three teenage students—her son Jason (Leif Bramer), who manipulates the puppet Tyrone; their girl-next-door neighbor, Jessica (Terra Jones), who operates the buxom Jolene; and Timmy (Joseph Slupski), a slightly older punk who “forgot” his puppet and is there to pursue his crush on Margery and kill time while his mom attends an AA meeting.

Playwright Robert Askins’ use of the puppets as a means of allowing his characters to access and express emotions or perceptions that they normally would not

is brilliant. That’s especially true in the case of Jason’s alter ego, Tyrone, who is either a genuine manifestation of supernatural demonic possession or the channel through which the timid and insecure Jason can eloquently express his most transgressive and subversive ideas and observations regarding his companions in the hellish crucible of the church basement.

Director Lara Tenckhoff and her cast obviously have put hours of concentrated effort into perfecting their characters. Shaner, one of Chico’s most fearlessly uninhibited actresses, allows the confused vulnerability and barely repressed passion of Margery to emerge in a spectrum of emotions that entwine the audience’s compassion, horror and hilarity. It’s all woven in an inextricable braid as she is pursued with (and rejects) the smarmy come-ons of Pastor Greg (Alejandro Padilla), and submits at least momentarily to the urge to get it on with bad-boy Timmy in a scene of explosively physical comedy. Bramer and Jones combine their characters’ adolescent innocence and naivety with the dawning of sexual desire in a scene enacted by their expertly manipulated puppets—to hilarious effect.

The mix of comic sexual fiasco, religious satire and humanistic drama in *Hand to God* is sustained throughout its hour-plus run of nonstop verbal and physical action. In description, and absent any spoilers, the elements may sound a bit random and incohesive. But placed within set designer Amber Miller’s finely appointed Sunday school basement setting; cued by sound designer Joe Hilsee’s introductory soundtrack of classic oldies and country songs; and brought to electrifying life by a thoroughly engaged cast, the play delivers a rollicking and sometimes scary outburst of comic theater that will provoke thoughts and conversations long after the cast takes its final bow. □

GET YOUR DRIVERS LICENSE

NEW YEARS SPECIALS!

IMMEDIATE OPENINGS!

EXPERIENCED TEACHERS

HIGH-END, SAFE ACURA CARS!



(530) 588-9011

FIRSTMILEDIVING.COM
574 MANZANITA AVE #6, CHICO

AWARD WINNING BBQ!

Steaks, Burgers, Sandwiches & more!

Fri/Sat Prime Rib Specials

Full Bar + Catering/Venue

23x Award Winner

LASSEN
STEAKHOUSE

4945 Hwy 99E, Vina • (530) 839-2938 • Thurs-Sun 11am - 9pm

SIERRA NEVADA
HERITAGE SERIES
NORTH MISSISSIPPI ALLSTARS
LIVE AT
THE BIG ROOM
THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 11, 2019
SIERRA NEVADA BREWING CO.
1075 E. 20TH ST., CHICO. TICKETS ON SALE NOW! \$20
AVAILABLE IN THE GIFT SHOP OR
ONLINE AT WWW.SIERRANEVADA.COM/BIGROOM



f SierraNevadaBeer

@SierraNevada

@SierraNevadaChico