

Theater review:

'Altar Boyz' shakes The Rep (in a great way!)

By **Susan West Chamberlin**

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Five hunky guys on stage shakin' it to live music in the name of God? Now that's a spiritual experience anyone can appreciate. Part "Jesus Christ Superstar" and part "Stomp," The Seacoast Repertory Theatre has blasted opened the theater season with the hip hop rock opera satiric comedy "Altar Boyz." The show, by Gary Adler and Michael Patrick Walker, is the story of five band members: Abraham (Ryan Bates); Matthew (Kristofer Stock); Mark (Phillip Deyesso); Luke (Theo Lencicki); and Juan (Tommy Labanaris) — who get together to shout out their Christian faith to rock music. "Altar Boyz" is also a slicing parody of the contradictions that arise in the capitalist, sex driven, religion market that turns faith into a commodity and practitioners into consumers.

The jokes, puns, and double entendres are constant. Many are on the edge of offensive and others fly right over the edge into the insufferable so the audience is cringing and laughing at the same time. The five young men work this edge, creating a comedy that is rude and funny, sincere and blasphemous, without being (too) insulting or mean spirited. As the title suggests, Catholicism is the subject of most of the comedy, with a few pokes at Judaism for good measure. If you can't imagine laughing at crucifixion jokes, then perhaps this show isn't for you. Or perhaps you absolutely need this show to see the humor in the sacred.

With very little dialog, "Altar Boyz" catapults from one song and dance number to the next. For the cast it's a feat of sheer athleticism and endurance as well as exuberant singing and dancing. Director /choreographer Brian Swasey keeps everything moving with style. The dance numbers are tight, sharp and well executed. There is no compromising on complexity as each actor is up to the task. The physical jokes woven into the choreography are especially clever, creating sly, surprising, and pointed jabs at religious dogma. And doing it all to a live on stand band — made up of Catherine York, Jon Wilkins, Dennis Munroe and Dana Cyr — is an unexpected pleasure.

Lencicki is a wonderful Luke, a Mark Wahlberg in his Marky Mark days, and a crowd pleasing break dancer. He rolls and bobs in that hip hop gangster style, while confessing to regular bouts of "exhaustion." Deyesso is flamboyantly entertaining as a not very closeted Catholic and Bates is terrific as the only Jewish Altar Boy. Both can belt out a song with great conviction. Labanaris, who provides the devilish costumes as well as portraying the Hispanic character Juan, carries a pivotal scene where the truth about his family is revealed and instead of reflecting God's love it shows the capriciousness of life. He leaves it all on the stage, careening from anguished sobs to platitudes of spiritual positivism. The cast is wretchedly funny as they try to sing and dance through the calamity. In a parody of religion it is a real crisis of faith and the crew struggle to make sense of it, which lets the audience see them as more than marketing props; they are young people trying to find their way. It is this duality, captured by director Swasey and his cast, which gives the show its depth. "Altar Boyz" makes fun of evangelical hype but also shows its appeal.

The temptations of sex are a persistent theme in religious teaching with the dual mandates of "Be fruitful and multiply" and "Just say No" confusing the kids. Not to mention the unanswerable theological conundrums, such as, was Mary Magdalene hot? "Altar Boyz" teases the tension with bump and grind numbers filled with testosterone as well as god, a gay themed love interest, and admonitions on virginity. It's a contrast that somehow works. Listening to Stock croon about the joys of abstinence, with his farm boy good looks, styled mohawk, tight black T-shirt and prominent silver cross belt buckle, is too funny. And who conceived of a Hasidic Jewish Lamb Chop and had the nerve to put it on stage? To say too much more would spoil the show, as some of the best moments are created by the shock which bubbles into laughter as you gasp, "I can't believe they did that!" "Altar Boyz" is an evening of great dancing, singing, and over the top political incorrectness, setting a very high standard for the rest of The Rep's season.