

GLENDIA FRANK  
in New York

Shakespeare has returned to his residency in Central Park with *The Tempest* and *Cymbeline* (in July). God – more ironic than usual and in the guise of a famous television star – is enthroned on Broadway. Way downtown in a fourth floor walk-up, the Roaring Girl is crossing swords with rogues and scallywags while rescuing a friend's romance. It's summer in the city.

Usually the doldrums set in right after the multiple award ceremonies that crown May, but the producers who are backing Jim Parsons – joining the deceased Joe Papp -- seem determined to change the tide. Two Mays past, Parsons took over the James Stewart role in *Harvey*, Mary Chase's classic comedy, and made it his own, exciting theatre-weary critics, not to mention his fan-base. Joe Papp, in his mission to bring theatre to underserved audiences, started his summer theatre series (1954) in a traveling van before securing the Delacorte Theatre. He was part of the off-off Broadway movement that still flourishes during the summer. The New York International Fringe Festival is its high profile star. Lately proven talent has joined its roster of no-names. Meanwhile celebrities trod the boards of the Delacorte.

Jim Parsons is best known as Sheldon Cooper in the situation comedy *The Big Bang Theory*. As the deity in *An Act of God* at Studio 54, he honours the Old Testament while turning it on its head with wry insights, droll delivery, outrageous posturing (as a temperamental God), and his inimical pitch-perfect timing.

While for many of us his performance is the draw, it is only part of the pleasure. The script by David Javerbaum (13 Emmys for "The Daily Show With Jon Stewart" and several comic best-sellers), based on his 400-page book *The Last Testament: A Memoir by God*, is more than clever. Not only does it never beat a dead metaphor, but it leaps from discipline to discipline like a Mikhail Bakhtin acrobat, to explain the nature of the deity. I'm sure there are corners, maybe even whole states, that may be offended. Certainly the Creation myth is prickly.

Why did God create the world? Well, "he was God but he really wasn't godding." He wasn't judging, which was something he "always wanted to try." After he separated the earth and water, shaped Florida into what He knew "was going to be a penis," he created Adam, and from an administrative standpoint, in naming him gave "him a leg up alphabetically." (Which came first, the chicken or the egg? The Rooster, answers God, whose chosen footwear is red sneakers.)

But there was a problem. Adam was besmirching Eden doing you-know-what, so God created Steve and roofed his nectar. When a (closeted) snake told them they were sinning, they hid themselves in fig leaves, "the entirety of the Fall collection." Soon God reshaped Steve into Eve to enable procreation -- And, then God tells a Caitlyn Jenner joke.

The comedy sometimes seems improvised. A late comer is greeted with: "I'm God. I can wait. You're lucky I'm not Patti LuPone." When one of God's two literal "wing men" in white suits, the Archangels Gabriel (Tim Kazurinsky), who holds the Gutenberg Bible, and Michael (Christopher Fitzgerald), insists on an answer during an audience Question and Answer session, God smites off one of his wings to accompanying thunder. It is later attached with a giant band aid. "I have some anger management issues," God observes.

The Deity scoffs at the story of Noah. There are over 600 species of beetles, he observes. Instead of one of each kind, Noah brought along Sparky and Pillow, "two cute puppies." As for Darwin: "In me all things are fakable. I booked Darwin's cruise." The Deity has a sense of humour: he finds the Book of Job hilarious and appreciates the sarcasm of Cain when he asked "Am I my brother's keeper?" And he resents what he calls "prayer panhandling," requests for emergency services; taking his name in vain -- because he is "a well-established brand"; and people believing he favours any country or specific party. He has "no political aspirations."

God's mission on Broadway is to redraft the Ten Commandments, keeping many, such as Thou shalt have no other God. He resents the "Hail, Mary" prayer because it makes him a sidekick. Rather than honouring thy father and mother, God says we need to honour our children. His children are named Zach, Jesus and Kathy. Jesus was the surprise because God didn't think, as a middle child, that he would amount to anything. Jesus, by sacrificing himself daily, "is redeeming me." God confides.

If one joke on this simple stage with its white throne, white steps and open window to the galaxy (with all sorts of amazing projections) doesn't work for you, the next one will. "An Act of God" is a comic gift with simple messages: "Something has to change." "I don't need your help killing in my name." and "Thou shalt not tell others whom to fornicate with."

*The Tempest* at the Delacorte is disappointing, but the sound design by Acme Sound Partners and Jason Crystal is superb. There are always choices. Director Michael Greif (*If/Then*) decided to go with anger, which eliminated many subtleties. But the sound effects of the rage are impressive – the opening tempest, the warning to the plotting aristocrats, and the threats to the scheming clowns. Jason Crystal (*Hamilton, It Shoulda Been You*) evokes considerable emotive range with the xylophone and various percussion instruments, which are played throughout, sometimes serving as interludes to introduce a scene. Francesca Carpanini and Rodney Richardson were charming lovers, but the affect was diminished by the large stage. As he did for *The Winslow Boy* at the American Airlines Theatre in 2013, David Lander created impressive lighting effects.

Last year Mark Rylance headed an all-male cast in a double bill of *Richard III* and *Twelfth Night* at the Belasco Theatre. Staging was minimal, costuming was elaborate. Everyday Inferno Theatre, an off-off Broadway company, brings us their own take of Elizabethan-Jacobean theatre in *The Roaring Girl*, a feminist comedy about seduction, unscrupulous men, and love which was co-authored by Thomas Middleton, the cynical son of a bricklayer who wrote "The Changeling" and "Women Beware Women," and Thomas Dekker, who penned "The Witch of Edmonton." The play is rarely performed. At its heart is Moll Cutpurse (Mallore Hill), a "masculine womanhood" who makes a living as a cross-dressing thief. She swaggers and draws her sword when she should blanch with fear, struts when she should sashay.

Sets are minimal but the period-inspired costuming is rich, even elegant in silks, lace, sequins, velvet, ribbons, feathers, and leather in earthy and rich colors. The audience sits at cabaret-like tables or in the traditional space. For those at the tables, the action happens all around them; the full stage is employed. A large, multicoloured banner covers the ceiling

and drapes down the walls to the floor, creating backstage wings. It is ingenious – an obstacle turned into design. Director Anais Koivisto is also the company's artistic director, costume designer and photographer.

The main plot is contrived: Moll helps a rich boy, who hopes to wed a bankrupt's daughter despite his father's disapproval. But some of the subplots have more resonance with a contemporary audience. A rich shopkeeper's wife (the lovely Erin Beirnard) finds herself infatuated with a handsome Lothario (Joel DeCandio). She will do anything to please him, including devising an elaborate scheme so that her husband pays her lover. (Yes, it is funny.) Once she discovers her lover's greed, however, she is enraged and confesses all. But her quiescent husband pays him off because he has his wife, his children, and his fortune intact. He will "dine upon my scraps," the husband tells her.

The tone is light, the action swift, and the period musical interludes delightful.

BROADWAY LISTINGS: *An Act of God*, Studio 54; *Aladdin*, New Amsterdam Theatre; *Amazing Grace*, Nederlander; *An American in Paris*, Palace Theatre; *Beautiful - the Carole King Musical*, Stephen Sondheim; *The Book of Mormon*, Eugene O'Neill; *Chicago the Musical*, Ambassador; *The Color Purple*, Bernard B. Jacobs; *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Nighttime*, Barrymore; *Finding Neverland*, Lunt-Fontanne; *Fish in the Dark*, Cort; *Fun Home*, Circle in the Square; *Gentleman's Guide to Love and Murder*, Walter Kerr; *Hamilton*, Richard Rodgers; *Hand to God*, Booth; *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, Belasco; *The Heidi Chronicles*, Music Box; *It Shoulda Been You*, Brooks Atkinson; *Jersey Boys*, August Wilson; *The King and I*, Vivian Beaumont; *Kinky Boots*, Al Hirschfeld; *Les Misérables*, Imperial; *The Lion King*, Minskoff; *Mamma Mia!*, Winter Garden; *Matilda the Musical*, Shubert; *On the Town*, Lyric; *Penn and Teller*, Marquis; *The Phantom of the Opera*, Majestic; *Something Rotten*, St. James; *Wicked*, Gershwin.