**BWW Reviews: Circuit's BAD JEWS Is Exciting Theatre**

January 26

7:17 AM 2015 by Joseph Baker

While watching Circuit Playhouse's wickedly funny, stimulating production of [Joshua Harmon](http://www.broadwayworld.com/people/Joshua-Harmon/)'s BAD JEWS, I was briefly reminded of an almost forgotten episode of SEINFELD, in which "Elaine" clashes with her mutton-loving cousin "Holly" over Grandma Mima's missing napkins (actually used by "Jerry" to hide chewed pieces he couldn't swallow). SEINFELD was noted for raising the trivial to herculean comic heights, and in that respect, BAD JEWS surpasses it. One of the reasons is that, instead of "napkins," the object in question is a chai, a gold ornament a deceased grandfather guarded and hid under his tongue during his internment in a Nazi prison camp (now that's a backstory waiting to be told in a different play).

BAD JEWS belongs to that subset of "dramadies" (i.e. [Yasmina Reza](http://www.broadwayworld.com/people/Yasmina-Reza/)'s GOD OF CARNAGE or [Nicky Silver](http://www.broadwayworld.com/people/Nicky-Silver/)'s THE LYONS) which etches its humor in acid and manages to comment cogently and perceptively on clashes in culture. In this case, the clash centers on the subject of Jewish identity several decades after the Holocaust - itself a tragic and epic exemplum of the dangers inherent in unalterable wills. Mr. Harmon knows his dramaturgy: A cramped apartment is the perfect setting for the squaring off of two cousins, while a third -- despite the fact that it is his flat that provides the arena for the blistering battle of words that dominate the real-time performance -- looks miserably on.

On the surface, it would seem that Vassar senior "Daphna" is the heroine of the piece. After all, she has adhered to the traditional path of Judaism previously trod by the deceased grandfather; her cousin "Liam," however, a Chicago postgraduate (with a "shiska" girlfriend in tow), is very much "in touch" with the technologically changing times (significantly, he has missed the funeral due to the loss of his "iphone" in Aspen). While Daphna and Liam's laidback brother Jonah have dutifully been present during the funeral proceedings, Liam and his fiancée Melody have been amiss; and when they do arrive, the play's verbal pyrotechnics burst into frenetically furious glory.

Daphna herself - like her frizzled, uncontrollable hair - seems a bundle of contradictions. As Liam informs us, in her girlhood she "suffered" so from wanting to be Melody-like that she retreated into her Judaism; she uses her faith to build an impenetrable wall about herself. In fact, Liam observes that her zealous determination to preserve the purity of her faith isn't unlike that exhibited by the Nazis, who in their quest to preserve the purity of the Aryan race destroyed anyone who didn't "fit." Poor Melody - sweet, caring, uncomplicated, and (despite a background in opera) untalented - is the perfect Tweety Pie, and Daphna is rather like a female Sylvester the Cat, slyly toying with her before sinking in the claws.

Daphna, as played by the talented Laura Stracko Franks, is rather like a junior league "Martha" from [Edward Albee](http://www.broadwayworld.com/people/Edward-Albee/)'s WHO'S AFRAID OF VIRGINIA WOOLF?; when Liam (worthy adversary Oliver Jacob Pierce) learns that he and his fiancée will have to share brother Jacob's quarters with his whirling dervish cousin, he becomes almost hysterically sick. He knows that there will be an eventual confrontation over the chai (which, as his grandfather had done years ago, he plans to use in lieu of a ring to propose to Melody); and he's right. Giving the family treasure to an "outsider" is Daphna's worst fear (even the normally passive Jonah cringes at the thought); when Mr. Harmon allows Daphna to articulate quietly her case for preserving the chai as a family treasure, its contrast to the screaming shoutfests that have gone before is extremely effective.

Director Anita "Jo" Lenhart has done some excellent work here. The dialogue and confrontations zip by in real time (there is no intermission), and the four young actors (including Matt Nelson's sympathetic "Jonah" and Madeline Glenn Thomas' hapless "victim" "Melody") are exciting to watch. Through February 8.