

## Garden of dysfunction

### 'Children of Eden' takes a simplistic, but tuneful look at the genesis of family bickering

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Well, where was there to go after playing a hilarious Nazi playwright in “The Producers,” the shrewd-but-clueless Henry Higgins in “My Fair Lady” and the governor of Texas in “The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas”? Actor John McCool Bowers has skipped over the presidency and went right on to God in his latest role at the Simi Valley Cultural Arts Center.

In the biblical musical “Children of Eden,” presented by Actors’ Repertory Theatre of Simi, Bowers — tall, bare-domed and reeking of power — plays Father, the term used by composer-lyricist Stephen Schwartz and author John Caird to denote the Almighty. The role seems a reasonable progression for the actor-turned-attorney, who’s relishing his return to the local stage.

If there’s a problem with the characterization, it’s partly because Schwartz and Caird have this vision of the Father and his children that begins with a close-knit blend of innocence on the part of Adam and Eve, and benevolent dictatorship by Father, who creates an idyllic environment, but allows a tempting apple tree to remain visible just a short way away. As everyone who has read the Book of Genesis knows, things didn’t go as Father planned, or at least hoped. Eve grabbed the opportunity to go beyond the bounds, enticed by a serpent. Adam joined her in seeking to know what was out there, and the Father banished them.

Father then takes a bit of a back seat until the show’s second act, when Noah and his family are guided by him to build an ark to save the family, and pairs of animals, after Father has deemed the rest of mankind unworthy of existence. All he asks is that Noah not take any of the descendants of Cain, the child of Adam and Eve who recklessly killed his brother, Abel. Again, things don’t go as Father anticipated.

If this all seems like a pretty simplistic take on the creation and development of the world and its inhabitants, it’s a usable but scant framework on which to hang the father-child difficulties still with the world today. Plus, it gives lots of opportunity to display a variety of musical styles and showcase fine voices, both as soloists and as choristers. And if Bowers isn’t as convincing as the genial, accommodating Father, he scores big

as the thunderous rule-giver. When Father intones "Let There Be," you'd better believe it.

No one can begrudge a little smudging of biblical history if it gives an opportunity for some fine vocalizing, which Actors' Repertory of Simi provides, with Jonathan Bluth as the earnest Adam/Noah; William James Jr. as the stirring Cain/Japheth; Darrienne Lisette Gross as vibrant Eve/Mama Noah; Kyle Caldwell as the good son Abel/Ham; and Erin Hollander as Aysha, the girl Japheth chooses to join him on the ark. There are singing and dancing highlights among the supporting players, too, particularly the soloists in the reggae-tinged "Generations," with DeAngelo Justice and Jillian Lawson leading the tribes. It's one of the show's highlights.

Bolstering the array of featured players are the stalwart storytellers and the children's choir, obviously dedicated and well-trained.

Adding to the whimsy of the work are the constructed "toys" used to tell the tale, from the pole-driven animal puppets to the marvelously sinuous snake, handled by adept crew members as it slithers and coils around the stage.

As usual in Simi, it takes a village to carry off the show, notably producer Jan Glasband, director George Kralemann, musical director Gary Poirot and his ever-ready band members, choreographer Becky Castells and production designer Sean Harrington.

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