

Pintauro's "Cathedral" Takes A Closer Look At Moral Compromise

by Douglas Harrington



Joe Pintauro, Jim Lawson, Les Marder and David Williams at Opening Night of Pintauro's new play, "Cathedral." *Photos by Douglas Harrington*

New York City- To be touched by theatrical art that challenges our social values and moral perceptions in the current era of theatrical fluff is both a privilege and a responsibility. At the opening performance of Joe Pintauro's "Cathedral" at the Manhattan Theatre Source, both the privilege and the responsibility washed over me like an unexpected wave at Ditch Plains.

Joe Pintauro's workshop re-working of his "The Dead Boy" (1998) has been turned into "Cathedral" as a more deeply and deftly re-written examination of the Covenant House scandal. "This is my second attempt at putting the Bruce Ritter Covenant House scandal in perspective. It's one of those works you feel forever trapped in. I wanted an exploration of the dichotomous internal life of a priest accused of that crime. I wanted to see a play about him, not about people reacting to the bad thing. Human failure, in such a character is too interesting to leave unattended. I decided to return to my "Dead Boy" and give it what is missing."



The black box set of "Cathedral" at The Manhattan Theatre Source.

Father Bruce Ritter, the founder of Covenant House, was accused of the sexual abuse of some of the very boys his seminal, on-the-street outreach program and sanctuary was attempting to save. He was also accused of the misappropriation of Covenant House funds. Kevin Kite, the male prostitute that first accused Ritter of sexual misconduct, said that Ritter used \$150,000 to support him in exchange for sexual favors. No charges were ever filed by the Manhattan District Attorney or the New York State Attorney General, however a diocesan internal investigation, conducted by a private firm, allegedly found evidence that Ritter did engage in at least questionable activities and inappropriate behavior. Ritter mounted a vigorous public relations campaign and denied any wrong doing, but he was forced to resign from Covenant House in 1990.

It is the ghosts of our past, threading through the actions and decisions of our lives, that can alter our best intentions and change them into unacceptable, if not unspeakable, deeds. As usual, Pintauro brilliantly succeeds at weaving the historical exposition of his characters into the tight, poetic and honest dialogue of his craft. In "The Dead Boy" the playwright focused on what might, and I say might in the context of this play, be considered the victim. In "Cathedral" Pintauro reaches inside of the mind of the Bruce Ritter character, Father Jacob "Jake" Hansen, played with exquisite understatement by Jon Eukland. Father Jake has lost his believe in his faith and the relevance of his calling, yet battles with the decision, teetering precariously between the religious and secular worlds. Depressed and wrestling with his past choices and present decision, Jake converses with the ghost of his younger self, the alter ego still fresh with a faith and optimism that is unquestioning.

Cary Woodworth does double acting duty, playing both Ghost and the Kevin Kite character, Will Draper, reprieved from "The Dead Boy." Woodworth's performance is spot on in both cases, giving us the innocence of young Jake and the manipulative, moral vacancy of the hustler Will. A vacancy resulting from both abuse and self-abuse, Will is the victim that also creates victims in his wake. Woodworth's character transitions throughout the play are seamless, culminating in Pintuaro's striking metamorphic staging near the conclusion of the play.



The cast of "Cathedral" (front to back) Tom Godfrey, Kate Middleton, Vincent Marano, Jon Ecklund and Cary Woodworth.

Kate Middleton's performance, as the journalist and past parishioner grappling with her own crisis of faith, evoked in me memories of Jane Fonda's brilliant performance in "Agnes of God." Playing Kate McGuire, Middleton delivers a portrayal full of tension and humanity, as she investigates the accusations levied against Father Jake by the hustler Will. Her character carries with it the weight of a lifetime of Catholic doctrine compromised by the decisions of her life in the secular world: infidelity, divorce, and the lost custody of her own child. Perhaps to justify her own agnosticism, like the Pharisees to Judas, she has paid an editorial bounty to Will for the betrayal of Jake. A truth she simultaneously does and does not want to reveal, as the distinction between victim and predator blurs even for this world weary, collapsed catholic.

The necessary, albeit obvious, allegory of the Roman Catholic church itself is presented in the character of Frances Hammond, a near sighted, almost blind Cardinal who tries desperately to bring Kate and Jake together in the play to confront and resolve the truth he himself is unable to accept. As the Cardinal, Tom Godfrey gives a beautifully textured performance that evokes both pity and abhorrence, sympathy and outrage. In Pintauro's startling last scene of the play, Godfrey delivers the dialog of a priest individually and a church in general, whose desperate need to cling to ancient, if not imperfect, dogma has blinded itself to its own failed mission and internal demons.

As richly poetic and realistically tragic as the dialog may be, Pintaro has peppered his play with moments of subtle humor and humanity, the foil of which is presented, particularly when verbally dueling with the Cardinal, in the character of Father Angelo Rosetti. Like the Jester to King Lear, actor Vincent Marano confronts the obvious reality that surrounds the cathedral and is seeping uninvited through the church's, again, allegorical cracks and weaknesses. Subtle when needed, broad when necessary, Marano gives us those moments of comic relief necessary in any tragedy in both his physical and well delivered, compassionate performance.



The "Cathedral" post-performance cast party.

Whereas Pintauro has once again succeeded as playwright, he has as well succeeded as director, with the help of lighting designer Jason Jeunnette and sound designer Ien DeNio, in a minimalist space that would challenge the most seasoned director presented

with staging a play of the moral, social and set dimensions Pintauro has created. However, the very minimalism of the Manhattan Theatre Source gave the playwright the venue to closely examine what he hath wrought in the re-working of the difficult and disturbing subject matter. For the audience, it is that rarefied opportunity to see a work in the purist moment of theatrical intimacy between artists and audiences that only an Off-Off Broadway venue can provide. As MTS Artistic Director and former Associate Artistic Director of Guild Hall Jim Lawson proudly stated, "Guerrilla Theatre in the Village! No illusions, it is an Off-Off Broadway, 50-seat black box, presenting worthy stagings of new stories for the first time on their feet with the playwright's input." In a time of difficult economic challenges for both audiences and producers, Lawson, working with The Writers Forum, has provided a exceptional space for new and seasoned voices of American theater to bring to fruition works that might otherwise be silenced or ignored.

In "Cathedral" Joe Pintauro has once again confronted head-on the struggle of faith and spiritual self-realization. He has imbued in his characters the very real challenges we all face and identify with in the day-day existence of living lives tempered by buried pasts, social conformity, self-delusion and embedded moral compromise. It is a profound work, exquisitely acted and directed, that is both poetic and brutal, compassionate and unnerving. "Cathedral" is what great dramatic theater is suppose to be: honest, confronting and uncompromising. Pintauro, as both playwright and director, has more than succeeded on all counts.

"Cathedral" will run at the Manhattan Theatre Source until May 16. For reservations, directions and more information call 212 260-4698 or go to the website: www.theatresource.org.