

Out to beat the banned

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Last Updated: 11:22 AM, May 20, 2010

Posted: 12:22 AM, May 20, 2010

Playwright Adam Rapp has crammed a lot into his latest work, "The Metal Children." And it's a lot of big themes: the creative process, suicide, teenage sexuality, censorship. Not enough? Rapp throws in abortion and religion, as well.

Our guide through this minefield is Tobin Falmouth (Billy Crudup), a writer who lives in a slovenly New York apartment. He's ambitious but has made his name within the young-adult genre, a field he considers to be inferior.

As the show opens, Tobin's best-known book, "The Metal Children," has just been banned by a school board in "the American heartland" because it deals with sensitive issues. So Tobin gets into a rented SUV and sets out to help a local English teacher (Connor Barrett) plead the novel's case.



CAROL ROSEGG

Billy Crudup plays a New York writer who travels to the school that banned his novel.

Rapp burst on the downtown scene in the early '00s with plays such as "Finer Noble Gases" and "Stone Cold Dead Serious." They reveled in outrage and excess, and required strong nerves from the audience. Since then, Rapp has disciplined -- but not watered down -- his high-intensity style, with particular success in "Red Light Winter" (2005).

"The Metal Children," which Rapp also directed, is his most ambitious work yet and retains the author's trademark zingers (he can be as sharply funny as Tracy Letts). But the play's impact is undermined by its very richness.

In quaint Midlothia, Tobin faces zealots of all kinds, from churchgoers to radical teen girls bent on emulating the book's heroine. (This brings to mind the deluded Ellen James Society in "The World According to Garp.") The atmosphere becomes increasingly surreal and violent.

As if this weren't enough, Tobin must also confront his responsibilities as a writer -- something that hits close to home for Rapp, whose young-adult novel "The Buffalo Tree" was censored by a Pennsylvania school in 2005.

But he doesn't spare his character, and Crudup bravely plays a complicated man whose mixture of self-regard and self-pity makes him lose perspective when dealing with 16-year-old Vera (Phoebe Strole).

Each time a new subplot appears, Rapp loses some of his hold on the narrative. And yet you can't be indifferent to this brave, messy show, which refuses easy answers and wholly likable protagonists. That Rapp makes us confront these gray areas may be his biggest provocation.

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