

Suffer the Little Children

Young adult novels receive the play they deserve in 'The Metal Children'

By Mark Peikert



Phoebe Strole and Billy Crudup in *The Metal Children* / Photo by Carol Rosegg

Playwright Adam Rapp returns with a vengeance after his disappointing *Kindness* with *The Metal Children*, his oblique, thrilling new play about young adult novelist Tobin Falmouth, who packs up his self-pity and cynicism for a trip to Middle America's Midlothia, where one of his books has just been banned.

He's there to assist a small band of fierce partisans, led by the abnormally poised 16-year-old Vera, who are fighting for the book to be allowed to be taught in the high school curriculum. Vera reads far too much into Tobin's book, but the fictional book's plot could easily pass for a brainy mystery novel: It's about a group of pregnant teenagers disappearing, only to be replaced by statues in a cornfield. It ends with the alliteratively named heroine martyring herself at the statues' feet.

Instead of a staid town hall meeting over the merits of his book, Tobin is greeted by graffiti in his motel room, a terrified English teacher and a roving band of vigilantes in Porky Pig masks called The Pork Patrol.

Alternately a thriller and a cold-eyed appraisal of the way we interpret (and misinterpret) literature, Rapp's play manages the neat trick of holding up both the self-proclaimed arbiters of taste (confiscated copies of his book, which shares the play's title, are kept in a vault in the Good Church of Christ's building), and the hormonal teenagers who turn books into Holy Grails. There is more than a shade of the girls who moon over *Twilight*'s deadly vampire Edward, a decades old teenager who is so in love with a girl that he fears he'll rip her throat out. It also mirrors Rapp's own career: He's written young adult literature and had a book removed from the curriculum at Muhlenberg High School in Pennsylvania.

No one in Rapp's play is particularly appealing. Everyone sympathetic to Tobin's cause gushes with unseemliness over his prose, quoting from his book as if it were the Bible. And the people who speak out against it do so by quoting actual scripture, and proclaiming that things like pre-marital sex, pregnancy and abortion shouldn't be mentioned around teenagers.

As the leader of the group pushing to keep Tobin's novel in schools, Vera (an intense Phoebe Strole) paints herself gold and calmly explains to Tobin that she and a group of girls plan to become pregnant and run away to start a collective in Idaho. In some ways, she's as blinkered as the representative of the Good Church of Christ, crafting the book into something which it could never support.

Rapp, who also directs this production, refuses easy answers as always, preferring to keep audiences both guessing and enthralled. But *The Metal Children* wouldn't work as well as it does without Billy Crudup's magnetic performance as Tobin. Crafty, abrasive and acid-tongued, Crudup's Tobin doesn't keep people at arm's length so much as push them there. Yet he manages to serve as the audience's surrogate, bewildered by a town that seems

eerily reminiscent of a Shirley Jackson short story, where writers can be condemned by a minority and teenagers prove themselves to be just as calculating as anyone else. Peppered with vivid performances from a pitch-perfect cast—including David Greenspan, Betsy Aidem, Susan Blommaert and Connor Barret—Rapp's play is both an ode to the power of reading and a cautionary look at what books can do when read at an impressionable age. Smart, literate and adult, *The Metal Children* is the perfect antidote to the Broadway season.

The Metal Children

Through June 13, Vineyard Theatre, 108 E. 15th St. (betw. Irving Pl. & Union Sq. East), 212-353-0303; \$65.