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Warning: Reading Can Be Hazardous to Your Health

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Who says the novel is doornail-dead, irrelevant, a moribund art form incapable of holding the attention of the chronically distracted in the digital age?

Consider the ruckus stirred by the young adult book at the center of “The Metal Children,” the new play written and directed by Adam Rapp that opened Wednesday night at the Vineyard Theater. A testy night at the school board meeting is just the appetizer. The book also inspires a swarm of teenage pregnancies, a horde of pig-masked vigilantes terrorizing the populace, a suicide and at least one murder attempt.

And get this: there isn’t a single vampire in the darn thing!

At first, Mr. Rapp’s signature gothic sensibility appears to be in abeyance in this provocative if improbable comedy-drama about a cultural conflagration taking place in “a small town in the American heartland.” The play’s opening scene, set in the gruesomely untidy New York apartment of Tobin Falmouth, the author of the incendiary novel, is a fiercely funny encounter between cranky writer and oily agent.

Tobin, played with a vivid sense of shellshocked distraction by Billy Crudup, has obviously let his life go to seed since his wife, a fellow writer, left him for her editor. A fetid-looking fish tank gurgles in the corner of the room underneath a dying houseplant. Tobin stares emptily from the couch, trying to prepare a video testimonial to protest the banning of his book “The Metal Children” from a high school. (Mr. Rapp, who also writes young adult novels, was the subject of a similar controversy; one of his books was removed from the curriculum of a school in Pennsylvania.)

“I’ve felt more passion from a can opener,” wails the agent, played with delicious histrionics by David Greenspan, as he views the results.

“Who are you all of a sudden?” snipes the grumpy Tobin. “Uta Hagen?”

This testy tug of war over Tobin’s anomie — he’s months late on his latest book, doing serious pot and apparently sleeping with the slatternly neighbor from downstairs — may be the single funniest scene Mr. Rapp has written. But those who prize this prolific playwright for his pitch-dark sensibility need not fear that he’s taken a turn for the lighthearted, or for that matter the moralistic.

“The Metal Children” at first might appear to be a predictable story of the culture wars, in which the forces of good — meaning liberal-minded, culturally sophisticated New Yorkers and their sympathetic brethren in middle America — do battle with the armies of the Christian right, self-righteous and closed-minded. To his credit, Mr. Rapp indulges only mildly in such schematic pigeonholing. Instead he presents a more murky, ambiguous tale of the dangerous ideological uses to which literature can be put, by its champions and its detractors alike.

The play’s naturalism is hard to reconcile with the lurid and implausible events that unfold when Tobin heads to the heartland for a showdown with his critics. And “The Metal Children” invokes too many disparate ideas for all of them to be cogently explored. But the play certainly holds the attention with its twisty and twisted plot, a keenly felt, dryly funny performance from Mr. Crudup and its characters’ charged, if sometimes unlikely, eloquence.

Tobin is in no better emotional state when he arrives at a motel in the town of Midlothia for the school board meeting at which the banning of his book will be debated. Staring in wonder at the graffiti scrawled on the wall of his room, he doesn’t recognize it as a quotation from his book. Fortunately, everyone in town seems to know the novel by heart.

The motel manager, Edith (a prim, funny Susan Blommaert), is reading it for the third time, although she’s still not sure whether she’s for or against. Tobin is next visited by the English teacher whose passionate advocacy stirred up the hullabaloo: Stacey Kinsella (Connor Barrett), who makes like a jumping bean every time the phone rings, probably because he’s become the target of the town vigilantes crusading against the book with increasingly violent

tactics.

But Tobin's greatest admirer is his last visitor, Edith's niece Vera (Phoebe Strole), the leader of a group of high school girls who have taken up the fight with ferocious zeal. Tobin's novel details a mysterious spate of teenage pregnancies in a small town. One by one, the pregnant girls disappear, only to reappear as statues in the surrounding cornfields. The book concludes with another pregnant teenager mutilating herself with a hunting knife. (How this obviously button-pusher ever got onto the school curriculum is never elucidated.)

Vera and her followers construe Tobin's book as a call to arms for young women to take charge of their destinies by intentionally getting pregnant and heading off to Idaho to form a commune. "Existentially speaking," Vera calmly reasons when Tobin expresses doubts, "aside from suicide, it's the most meaningful choice a young woman can make. We control our own fate. Not parents or priests or politicians."

Vera's reasoned argument for the aesthetic and moral power of the novel is among the stronger speeches in the play. "As a reader you construct the world of the book with the author," she says. "You're in essence a performer. A creationist. That's why they're so afraid out there." But the insight and intelligence of her language doesn't jibe with the lunacy of Vera's crusade for teenage pregnancy as a statement of free will.

Having introduced various provocative ideas about the ability of good literature to inspire bad behavior and the responsibility of the artist to respond (or not) to potentially dangerous interpretations of his work, Mr. Rapp doesn't come up with much follow-through in the play's disjointed and disappointing second act.

It opens with that board meeting, a theatrically deadly series of speeches at which the smarmy Christian characters spout the predictable benighted outrage. Tobin is passive to the point of catatonia after a traumatic night at the motel. He essentially recuses himself from the debate over the ethics of banning literature that provokes dissent, instead offering a rambling, solipsistic speech about the personal problems that gave rise to the book. "I was just writing because I had to," he says, "and that's the way it came out."

This is followed by scenes depicting how the book's influence continues to wreak havoc in town. The low point is a fiery exchange between Tobin and the Christian leader of the charge against the book that descends into more predictable position-taking.

The ideas Mr. Rapp engages about the amoral impulses behind the creation of art, and its power to inspire and corrupt (sometimes simultaneously), are intriguing, but they do not carry much weight in the context of his dramatically unconvincing play. In the end "The Metal Children" earns your respect for not saying what you expect it to, but also disappoints by failing to say as much as you hoped it might.

The Metal Children

Written and directed by Adam Rapp; sets by David Korins; costumes by Jessica Pabst; lighting by Ben Stanton; music and sound by David Van Tieghem; production stage manager, Jennifer Rae Moore; production manager, Ben Morris; general manager, Reed Ridgley; associate artistic director, Sarah Stern. Presented by the Vineyard Theater, Douglas Aibel, artistic director; Jennifer Garvey-Blackwell, executive director. At the Vineyard Theater, 108 East 15th Street; (212) 353-0303. Through June 13. Running time: 2 hours 20 minutes.

WITH: Betsy Aidem (Lynne/Roberta Cupp), Connor Barrett (Stacey Kinsella), Susan Blommaert (Edith Dundee), Guy Boyd (Otto Hurley), Billy Crudup (Tobin Falmouth), David Greenspan (Bruno Binelli/Father Derby), Halley Wegryn Gross (Kong/Tami Lake/Boy X), Jessy Hodges (Cooper/Nurse/Porky Pig Boy) and Phoebe Strole (Vera Dundee).