

The Metal Children

Reviewed By: Dan Bacalzo . May 20, 2010 . New York

Fans of filmmaker David Lynch might take particular interest in Adam Rapp's *The Metal Children*, now receiving its world premiere at the Vineyard Theatre, under Rapp's assured direction. This engrossing new play has a similar feel to Lynch's landmark television drama, *Twin Peaks*, with eccentric characters, unexplained mystical phenomena, hidden secrets, and a surreal atmosphere that suffuses the entire work.

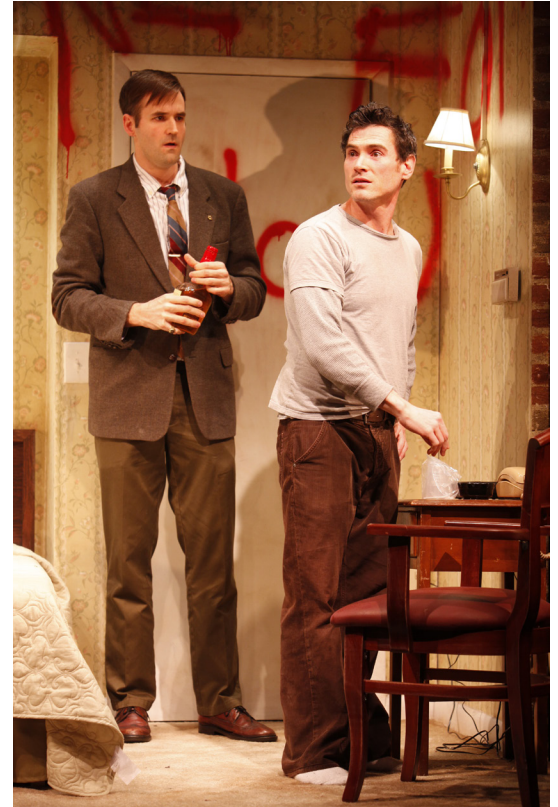
The play follows Tobin Falmouth (Billy Crudup), a down-on-his-luck author who journeys to the small town of Midlothia, somewhere in the American heartland, in order to defend one of his early successes, a young adult novel entitled *The Metal Children*. The book has been banned by the local school board, which claims that it "glorifies premarital sex, teen pregnancy, and a questionable young woman's grisly, self-inflicted abortion and suicide."

While the play does include debates about artistic freedom, Rapp isn't interested in a simplistic moral screed against censorship. In fact, he stacks the deck against his protagonist, as it appears likely that Tobin's book has actually had the effect that its detractors claim. The novel has inspired a cult-like following among a group of teenage girls in Midlothia, led by Vera (Phoebe Strole), an intelligent, impassioned 16-year-old who has an interpretation of the novel that its author did not consciously intend.

While it's clear that certain segments of the play are meant to be satiric, Rapp also manages to give the work a strong emotional arc. Tobin's experiences in Midlothia force him to confront some painful memories, make some rather questionable decisions, and pull himself out of the wreckage that is his life.

Crudup delivers a wonderfully nuanced performance, using both verbal and nonverbal modes of expression to create a vivid and complex characterization. Strole manages to sound confident and rational, even though what Vera says often borders on the illogical.

Several members of the supporting cast make memorable impressions, particularly David Greenspan as Tobin's dapper literary agent; Connor Barrett as the earnest high school teacher who introduced Tobin's book to his class; Susan Blommaert as a loquacious member of the staff at the motel in which Tobin is staying; and Betsy Aidem in two extremely different roles. Each actor seems to revel in Rapp's oddball creations, playing them with both humor and conviction.



Connor Barrett and Billy Crudup
in *The Metal Children*
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