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The Brothers Berg

Written by Richard Abrons

Directed by Jay Broad

Presented by The New Federal Theatre at HERE

Review by Sid Ross

Richard Abrons has weighty issues on his mind. Morris Berg, the protagonist of Abrons's stimulating, thought-provoking play, *The Brothers Berg*, is a renowned, Phillip Rothian novelist, who has written blasphemous bestsellers with names like *Gefilte Fish Unleashed* and *Torah! Torah! Torah!* Berg also has been labeled a "ridiculous runt," walks with a cane and has three testicles. That third testicle might stand for Morris's other life—one with procreative powers of its own: the writing life, to which Morris is devoted unconditionally.

When we meet up with Morris, he is at a crossroads. He has a Mount Sinai-sized writer's block, his porno-star girlfriend has threatened to leave him if he doesn't marry her, and his handsome, younger Rabbi-brother Walter—the good sheep of the family to Morris's bad sheep—has requested Morris cancel his speaking engagement at Walter's synagogue, which is sold out and will be covered by C-span.

It is through the volatile, combative and ultimately affirming relationship between the two brothers that Abrons, whose fiction has won a National Magazine Award and been nominated for a Pushcart Prize, is able to discourse on themes as large as the definition of modern Jewry and as universal as the need to be loved unconditionally—whether as a deformed infant in the cradle, a social misfit/porn actress, or as an alternately celebrated and reviled best-selling author.

For much of the evening, *The Brothers Berg* is stirring theater, and as directed by Jay Broad, it has a kind of seductiveness mirrored by Morris's sex star consort and by the sight of two brothers from vastly different walks of life duking it out. In the second act, there is a moment when the play sizzles: Morris is asked at his synagogue lecture which qualities of a Jew he admires and which he decries. His answer bespeaks the pitiable, combustible combination of arrogance

and towering self-loathing that forms his character; it also adds a healthy subversiveness to the play.

The trouble is, Morris's answer also charts for the play a course it simply cannot keep. Almost as quickly as he utters his defamatory remarks, Morris apologizes for them, and the play resorts to a somewhat tidy, upbeat summation of its themes and plotlines. The theme of tragic alienation—the precursor of genius and, perhaps, mental instability (Morris is besieged by an active, ribald fantasy life)—is raised, brought to a fever pitch, and then abandoned. In the end, Morris's journey through his writing crisis feels strangely incomplete.

The Brothers Berg is presented at HERE by The New Federal Theatre, which has given it a first rate production. Robert Joel Schwartz's set is a fine, upscale rendering of the well-to-do novelist's paneled study, which converts effortlessly to areas of Walter's synagogue (though Morris's bookshelves might be a little spare for an acclaimed writer). Lisa Bostnar is winning as Tamara, Morris's vulnerable but resilient Russian born girlfriend, and Davis Hall and Doug Olear are thoroughly convincing as the Berg brothers who might be, as one of them suggests, the subject of the Rabbi's next sermon on Cain and Abel. Nicely rounding out the cast is Carolyn Vujecc as the Rabbi's wife and Len Stanger as Sy Rivkin, a kind of modern day, evil moneylender.

The Brothers Berg succeeds as a provocative play of ideas, the kind that is in too short supply farther uptown. Perhaps before it gets there, it can take its themes and characters down paths a shade darker and deeper—paths that would certainly be acceptable to the uncompromising, complicated protagonist to whom Abrons has skillfully introduced us.

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