

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Actors' stage 'Grace,' powerful look at interfaith relationships

The Kaufman Interfaith Institute is collaborating with the Grand Rapids Actors Theatre production of the play "Grace," which will run today through Saturday and Feb. 4-6. Following some of the productions will be talk-back panels reflecting on the interfaith themes of the play.

When ordering tickets online, use the discount code "interfaith" to receive a promotional price on the tickets.

The actor playing the role of Grace has written the following reflection:

Grace is a sharp-witted professor of natural science who is at war with her son, Tom.

Tom, also in possession of sharp wits, has left his career as a lawyer and is determined to

become an Anglican priest.

Grace, an atheist, is appalled.

But the conflict between them is not just a matching of wits. In fact, in the play "Grace," one of the strongest points is one Tony, Grace's husband, makes: "When has anyone ever changed their minds because of something someone has said."

Grace cannot understand why her son would choose such a path. She doesn't give credence to religion of any kind — refusing even to call herself an atheist because "the word itself gives credence to the thing it is pretending to criticize."

She counted on her son following in her rational footsteps. And when he doesn't, she lectures him on the dangers of religion, all religions — even blaming religious moderation for "serving as a fig leaf for religious extremism" — in Grace's mind, it's all "bollocks" and leads to violence.

IF YOU GO**'GRACE'**

When: 8 p.m. today through Saturday and Feb. 4-6

Where: Spectrum Theatre, 160 Fountain St. NE, Grand Rapids
Tickets: \$28, \$20 with code "interfaith," available at Actors' box office

More info:
actorstheatregrandrapids.org

It is one of the play's ironies that her reaction and language are suffused with violence, even if they're in the service of "helping" her son come to his senses.

It's been a fascinating journey working on this play and inhabiting the role of Grace.

One of the rather magical, transformational aspects an actor goes through is taking on his/her character's worldview, a useful process if you're to play

the character believably. When an actor becomes aligned with a character's motives and intentions, you suddenly become a champion for that point of view. For the actor, the character's circumstances, thoughts, feeling and resulting attitude become yours. You could liken it to a religious conversion — for the duration of the play, anyway.

Personally, I am much more in Tom's camp: "The truth has to be sieved in lots of different ways," but as Grace, I have to be committed to her view that, "No! It's exactly this kind of slippery talk that needs attacking!"

I can see why she clings so ferociously to her unbelief — it has helped her cope. Like any other human being, she's subject to impulses and feelings she's barely aware of. Playing Grace gives me insight into what it's like to cling to any belief, including unbelief. And how easy it is to

lose sight of the fact you and your belief are separate.

All the characters in "Grace" are confronted with the question, how do I see the world? The play hints at what science points to: our ever-evolving brain and its capacity for self-reflection and change.

At the play's beginning, Grace doesn't value any other way of apprehending the world: "Rigorous rationality is the only outlook we can truly rely on." And yet, when events occur that test her in ways she's never been tested, she finds that reason and rationality are not enough, not nearly enough. Her son might argue that's where grace comes in.

— *Jean Reed Bahle, in the title role of "Grace" at Actors' Theatre, is an actor, director and writer, and teaches in the Theatre Department at Hope College.*



Bahle