

CRITIC'S PICK

The Unbelieving' Review: Life After Faith

In a probing new play from the Civilians, based on the book "Caught in the Pulpit: Leaving Belief Behind," current and former members of the clergy grapple with the reality of losing their religion.



By Laura Collins-Hughes

Nov. 1, 2022, 3:46 p.m. ET

The Unbelieving NYT Critic's Pick

For Adam, not his real name, change started with curiosity and critical thinking. A Church of Christ minister and a creationist, he came to realize that his worldview was sheltered, so he set out to educate himself.

"In nine months, I read over 60 books, listened to hundreds of hours of lectures and debates, watched 25 documentaries and movies," he says. "Went through eight online courses on philosophy, evolution."

It didn't occur to him that what he found would shake his faith. He thought, he tells a researcher, that God "can handle any questions I've got."

"Well, he didn't measure up!" says Adam (David Aaron Baker), his voice rising with emotion that's more wounded than angry. His belief in God has left him, and that threatens his job, his family, his friendships — every corner of his life. So when he speaks to the researcher, he insists on the protection of a pseudonym. He cannot afford for word to get out.

"The Unbelieving," a probing, interview-based new play from the Civilians, is about people like Adam: current and former members of the clergy who have lost their religion, even if they still publicly practice it.

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Written by Marin Gazzaniga and based on interviews conducted for Daniel C. Dennett and Linda LaScola's 2013 book, "Caught in the Pulpit: Leaving Belief Behind," this smart and slender play listens to its characters without judgment. Not trying to hit its audience over the head with lessons, it is conducive to empathy.

Like Linda (Nina Hellman), the researcher, Steve Cosson's production at 59E59 Theaters is quiet, inquisitive and welcoming. Designed by Andrew Boyce and Se Hyun Oh, the setting for Linda's interviews is as anonymous as can be: a hotel meeting room with beige walls and vertical blinds, drawn. (The lighting, by Lucrecia Briceño, heightens the atmosphere.)

Linda interviews, among others, a Mormon bishop (Dan Domingues), an Orthodox rabbi (Richard Topol), a former Roman Catholic nun (Sonnie Brown) and a former imam (Joshua David Robinson), who allows himself a little smile when he boasts that he won "trophies at Quranic reading competitions" growing up.

These are contemplative people, and they were sincere in their devotion once. Now each describes what is, to varying degrees, a crisis. Not a crisis of faith; they're beyond that. Rather, it's a crisis about faith: how to go on without it — practically, emotionally, socially.

In documenting that dilemma, "The Unbelieving" becomes not only an examination of the power of religion in American culture. It's also an even-keeled meditation on the link between conformity and community — the enormous fear of being cast out and the frantic desire to continue belonging, even if that means living dishonestly.

Take Johnny (Jeff Biehl), an Apostolic Pentecostal pastor who works for his closest friend as a building inspector. His friend, Johnny says, is “a flaming Charismatic Pentecostal,” so Johnny has not confided in him about his own loss of faith.

“Everyone knows me as a minister,” Johnny says. “So everybody who sees that he has hired me, they’re like, ‘You have got a jewel. This is a man of God.’ If all of a sudden I become the atheist, as far as they know, I’m going to forge reports and lie about inspections, and cheat people out of money.”

To leave his church would be to risk his livelihood, his relationships, his reputation. Then there’s what the shift in his beliefs has already taken from him: the comforting prospect of spending the afterlife with people he loves.

“It means,” he says, “that this pact that my grandmother and I made 20 years ago doesn’t mean anything: that we would do everything we could to both be in heaven together.”

There’s a lot of anguish in “The Unbelieving.” As it turns out, there’s a lot of courage, too.

The Unbelieving

Through Nov. 19 at 59E59 Theaters, Manhattan; 59e59.org. Running time: 1 hour 5 minutes.