



# 'Hir' redefines dysfunctional home life at Unicorn

By Bob Evans



Cynthia Levin/The Unicorn Theatre

Both comedy and tragedy stem from a dysfunctional situation and the approach to it, but when seeing the new super, super dark comedy, "Hir" at The Unicorn, the dysfunction goes so far out of bounds that the audience may think they have entered an alternative universe.

"Hir" tells the story of a family in radical crisis mode. Nothing about this family fits any norms as the father appears to be a cross-dressed, near-invalid clown; the mother has abandoned all housekeeping tasks; the daughter is in transition to a man; and the son has just returned from the

service after a dishonorable discharge. The pieces are different and unique as



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is the title which needs some explanation as well.

Without being offensive, *Hir* (pronounced *Here*) is a gender-neutral word by some transgender persons. *Hir* derives from the gender pronouns *him* and *her* and is considered a gender neutral pronoun. Pronouns *he* and *she* are replaced with *ze*. And, some transgender persons prefer the terms *they* and *them*. The idea creates confusion, but as the play progresses, the terms become more familiar. Mostly in the play, audiences will hear *ze* used.

“*Hir*” by Taylor Mac tells the story of a family in transition. But, only one character is fully in transition, the daughter, Maxine, a.k.a. Max, who bought testosterone online and began transition to male. Another character, Arnold, is being given estrogen for reasons revealed in the play. Even though the transgender forms the focus of the story, the play deals with so much more— spousal abuse, drug usage, revenge, cruelty, demoralization, mental instability, rage, marital infidelity, and puppets. Get ready for something never seen before.

The play opens with Arnold, dressed in a nightgown and dress,

wearing a wig and garish clown makeup. He's had a stroke and barely functions or speaks. His wife, Paige, has decided to abandon all normalcy, refusing to do laundry, fold clothes, cook, clean or other chores expected in a normal home situation. The interior of the house looks like that of a beginning hoarder with nothing in place and her clothing looking like something out of a comic book and 40 years out of date.

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As the scene unfolds, Isaac arrives home from the service after his dishonorable discharge for shooting drugs up his rectum (no kidding). Aghast at the house and his father's appearance, he immediately tries to restore some order to the life he anticipated for his return home. When he thinks he's had the biggest of shocks, Max enters and he now confronts Max's transgender persona.

The playwright pushed beyond all limits in this play to create the darkest of comedies, yet "Hir" remains in the comedy realm. As a reviewer, I spent all of Act I thinking how to approach the critique. I spent Act II shaking my head as what was a horrendous situation to explain continued to spin further out of control. Putting words on paper for readers without giving away the story line presents immense challenge. To explain the world of a transgender person without being offensive presents another challenge. My hope is to let readers know what to expect without telling the whole story

and letting the play develop for viewers.



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For “Hir” director Ian R. Crawford assembled a remarkable cast and gave them the opportunity to craft outlandish characters, unique characters not seen before on stage. Sam Cordes plays Isaac, the service reject whose job was to gather dead body parts from war zones and return it to loved ones. Results of his duty led to drug abuse, PTSD, a dishonorable discharge and a bleak future. Cordes take the audience on a journey as he confronts his ailing father, his out-of-bounds mother, his sister’s gender transformation to name a few of the changes his character confronts. With that, his character shows fear, disbelief, pity, rage, anger, PTSD explosions, and tenderness. His character undergoes so many changes and challenges. Cordes excels in this character’s development.

Paige springs to life through Carla Noack in a role so far beyond any character on Kansas City stages in probably-forever. Noack created a monster of a character, devoid of most maternal instincts. Her harsh reality is that of payback, revenge, cruelty, and growth. She abandons the characteristics of a loving wife, mother, and mistress of the house and morphed into a deranged woman on a mission to undo and destroy what disagrees with her. No words on paper could explain the character Noack brings to “Hir.” Her performance defies words.

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As Arnold, Phil Fiorini grab the audience from lights-up as he is seen as the garish man in the clown makeup, wig, and nightgown. The appearance is shocking, hideous, sad, humbling and pitying. Fiorini hits every emotion as he struggles to speak, to make sense, to perform simple tasks like closing a door. Playing a stroke victim, he garners the audience's pity as he is mistreated and humiliated. With very few words, Fiorini gives a touching performance throughout the play.

Ahafia Jurkiewicz-Miles delivers the character of Max in a brilliant strong performance of a character no one in Kansas City has seen before on stage. The character explains what a transgender person feels, undergoes, and identifies. The portrayal provides insight into a different aspect of humanism. Jurkiewicz-Miles, as Max, makes the audience re-think any past stereotypes and helps educate them to use more current terms and appropriate pronouns.

"Taylor Mac's hilarious and terrifying 'Hir' is a dysfunctional family dramedy for a new era, a highly intelligent, tenderly heartfelt, and deeply, darkly humorous portrayal of a family in crisis, in which domestic abuse, the trauma of war, and the acceptance of gender neutrality are illustrated in a nearly absurd, emotionally gripping, intensely real dynamic."—Stage Agent website.



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“Hir” definitely shocks and amazes. The play definitely falls into the category of Theatre of the Absurd—in this case THE most absurd. And the set design, properties, costumes, makeup, lighting, and all the technical aspects of this production stand out as well as the fabulous performances. The production contains no weaknesses. Still, “Hir” is not for everyone. Definitely mature audiences are expected.

The play runs opened June 2 and runs through June 24. Tickets for “Hir” can be purchased by phone, in person at the box office, or through The Unicorn website.

Tags: “Hir”, Unicorn Theatre, Kansas City Theater, Kansas City Performing Arts, Kansas City Arts & Entertainment