

HIR
Written by Taylor Mac
Presented by the Steppenwolf Theatre Company during their 2016/2017
season

Anna Shapiro, the Artistic Director for Steppenwolf describes **Hir** (pronounced *here*) as a play where “*an oldest son is returning home from the current war [and] the youngest child is transitioning and a long-suffering housewife is turning the tables on her now incapacitated historically abusive husband. [E]ach character in **Hir** is immersed in the ever-common familial battle of re-definition: the sometimes futile and always comic attempt we each make to change how we are seen by the people who made us what we are.... Used to be, when you became a parent, there was only one thing you knew for sure: whether your child was a boy or a girl. And when you married, you entered a partnership with your husband or wife based on the idea of a shared wish for the future and your place in it. Now, all bets are off as so many things we took as facts have turned out to be nothing more than ideological constructs that helped perpetuate the status quo.*”

The playwright Taylor Mac describes the plot of the play in this way: “*[I]t’s fairly simple..., prodigal son comes home from the war and everything that he knew of home to be is now different. His sister is no longer his sister but his transgender/genderqueer sibling. And so everything is different and the house is a total disaster. The father made everything be orderly and now nothing is orderly. They’ve decided to basically deconstruct their home. And then this transgender character, Max, is kind of stuck in the middle a little bit. In a lot of ways it’s my way of saying, what if American (we always think of the prodigal son as the metaphor for America), what if the metaphor for America was the transgender kid instead? What does that do to our understanding of the United States?*”

As odd as this may seem, throughout the play, I kept wondering what Ludwig Wittgenstein would think about this play. Wittgenstein’s philosophy concerned itself primarily with language and its meaning. (“*For a large class of cases - though not for all - in which we employ the word meaning it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language.*”) I think he would have found the main point of this play – how we use language and what language means privately to be extremely interesting.

Before viewing this play, I was not aware of the issues around gender pronouns in the LGBTQ community. The UW Milwaukee Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender Resource Center indicates that it is important to respect people’s pronouns “because you can’t always know what someone’s personal gender pronoun is by looking at them. Asking and correctly using someone’s personal pronoun is one of the most basic ways to show your respect for their gender identity. When someone is referred to with the wrong pronoun, it can make them feel disrespected, invalidated, dismissed, alienated, or dysphoric... It is a privilege to not have to worry about which pronoun someone is going to use for you based on how they perceive your gender. If you have this privilege, yet fail to respect someone else’s gender identity, it is not only disrespectful and hurtful, but also oppressive.” I was not aware of this, and this play helped me to see this concept. It was done with humor and not done in

a way that was shaming or scolding, but done in a way that allowed the audience to understand the importance of respecting how one sees oneself and not make assumptions. I also found myself thinking about our work in the EAP practices we all are involved with. Being aware of these issues, especially those of us who work largely with the LGBTQ community, allowed me to “walk a mile” in someone else’s shoes and appreciate how someone wants to be perceived.

Scott Cullen-Benson