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Playwright and actor Jordan E. Cooper in rehearsal for the New York premiere production of "Oh Happy Day!", directed by Stevie Walker-Webb (Joan Marcus)



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The Book of Genesis is deceptive. It has a rich cast of characters: Abraham and Sarah read like the Ralph and Alice Kramden of the Bible (yes, God would be the Art Carney); then there's the tension between Cain and Abel; Adam, Eve and the snake; Jacob and his angel; Joseph and his brothers.

But the characters of Genesis have a tendency to slip into the background, their motives unclear, their stories impossible to pin down. Noah, for instance, is the protagonist of a beloved creation fable that is quite frightening: a tale of humanity having abandoned itself to evil and God committing global genocide, an act so horrific even he seems to recant it after it's done. What is this story actually about? And where does Noah figure in it?

At the Public Theater in Manhattan, New York, playwright Jordan E. Cooper and composer Donald Lawrence are presenting their own answer. Where the biblical story of the flood centers God's choices, Cooper's "[Oh Happy Day!](#)" instead centers Noah, finding in his story a searing cautionary tale about the harm done by the perfectionism of contemporary Christianity.

There is no righteous person

The beginning of "Oh Happy Day!" is as mysterious as anything in Scripture: Our protagonist, Keyshawn (played by Cooper) has just been shot and killed in a motel parking lot, but his family doesn't know it. Then he shows up at his father's birthday party.

It's immediately clear that there's nothing easy about this meeting. A devout Christian, Keyshawn's father had kicked his son out of the house as a teenager for being gay. Recent news about Keyshawn's work as a male prostitute has brought further scandal on the family within their parish community. Keyshawn doesn't want to be there, either, but three cheerful singing angels have revealed to him that a flood is coming, and if he doesn't convince his father, sister and young nephew to get in a boat before the rains start, they will die — and he will be damned.

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As a premise, "Oh Happy Day!" barely resembles the story we know from Scripture. But as we learn more, Cooper's underlying argument becomes clear: The character of Noah exists within a society, a religious community and a family that have all been damaged by sin. The scriptural notion of Noah "the righteous man," somehow above it all, is impossible. If you really want to tell Noah's story, Cooper insists, he has to exist within his own reality.

Mercy begins within

That insight changes the story of Noah in profound ways. Rather than simply a tool of God with no real personality or choices of his own, Keyshawn spends the play struggling to do what is asked of him. The promise of salvation is made tangible in the form of a beautiful home that he will be allowed to inhabit should he succeed. Yet faced with his life experience and his father's persistent disgust, God's demands feel viciously cruel.

Finally, despite both encouragement and warnings from the angels, Keyshawn abandons all pretense of forgiveness. He tells his father what happened when they abandoned him — most painfully, years of abuse at the hands of the family's pastor. To his shock (and ours), in choosing to finally reveal the whole brutal truth of his life, he frees himself and his father from their endless cycle of recrimination. Shouting is replaced with the quiet of two men finally listening.

Christianity teaches the need to forgive. But it often does so by painting those who have suffered as themselves the sinners if they struggle to get there. Somehow we are expected to "let go and let God," even though to do so can feel like another act of violence. Instead, Cooper insists that mercy can only emerge out of truth, and care for oneself.

Flipping the divine script

When Keyshawn confronts his father about what happened rather than fulfilling his given assignment, God sends his father and him to hell. Keyshawn knew that he had limited time and didn't get the job done, so he didn't get the reward. It's a horribly mathematical vision of salvation, but one that Christianity has been known to espouse.

But just as he refused to accept the bland image of Noah, Cooper too refuses to accept this callous image of God. As Keyshawn and his father comfort one another in a spooky nether world, God returns to reveal that Keyshawn's family has, in fact, been saved. He never actually expected Keyshawn to do the saving, only wanted him to face his pain so he could be free.

Hard going emotionally and intellectually, "Oh Happy Day!" fights to liberate Christianity from ideas that have caused great harm over thousands of years. We are not expected to be our own saviors, to bury the trauma we have suffered or to live conforming to some given equation. Cooper's God is the true God of Scripture, the deity who casts all scripts and expectations aside and intervenes. And the happy day he promises is equally beyond anything we might conceive.

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