



LIVING ON A PRAYER

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN RELIGIOUS BELIEF AND ATHEISM COLLIDE IN A HOSPITAL WARD?

LGBTI PLAYS often deal with well-worn themes: homophobia, AIDS, politics and family are regularly in the spotlight. *Next Fall*, by Geoffrey Nauffts, tackles the thorny issue of religion.

A gay relationship comes under scrutiny through the prism of religious belief when the couple and their families face a tragedy.

Luke believes in God. In fact, he's a born-again Christian. Adam is an atheist. After Luke is injured in a car accident and lies comatose in hospital, friends and family descend for a vigil. What follows is an intense (possibly cathartic) exploration of ideals, beliefs and understandings as people are forced together by the life-and-death situation.

Luke is played by Mark Davis (*Winners And Losers*), while Darrin Redgate reprises the role of Adam from last year's successful Sydney season.

"The challenge is to keep Adam real and ensure his charm and wit are not lost in his ideals," says Darrin. "Adam is very like me; opinionated, an atheist and, I'm told, witty and charming, with a firm belief that if you can't see or touch it then it isn't real. But he's more extreme about things than I am, especially his fears and hypochondria.

Adam's situation will resonate with a lot of people – his lack of self-confidence and the belief that he has under-achieved, feeling a bit of an outcast."

For Mark, taking on the role of Luke has meant considering views he wouldn't normally hold, and doing his research with an open mind. "It's important for me not to present an idea of these



topics, but to really understand my character's point of view," he says. "Luke's Christian beliefs are a bone of contention for he and Adam, and for me, having not set foot in a church since I was a schoolboy, I had some demons to address!"

Also in the cast are Sharon Davis (*Killing Time*), James Biassetto (*A Streetcar Named Desire*) as Luke's closeted ex-lover Brandon, Paul Robertson (*The Merchant Of Venice*) as Luke's father and, in the role of mother Arlen, is Green Room Award-winning actress Kaarin Fairfax. Director Peter Blackburn co-directed the 2014 Australian Theatre Company's production of *Holding The Man* in Los Angeles.

New York theatre critic David Cote described *Next Fall* as "the little play that could" and "heartwarming" but with "formulaic sitcom qualities"; so decipher what you will from those ambiguities! An online review of the Sydney season commented that it presented the issue with humour and genuine tension, and "does great service to the issues it comments on".

Next Fall was nominated for Best Play at the 2010 Tony Awards and won the Drama Desk award for Most Outstanding Play.

"The thing I've learned from this play is to appreciate every minute of life," says Darrin. "To enjoy how wonderful it is and remember that as often as possible. There are strong undertones of marriage equality within the script, and it's my hope that people will energise around the importance of the issue."

Mark agrees. "After my first reading of the play I felt inspired to reach out to the people I care about, and make sure they know I love them regardless of our differences."

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MARK DAVIS PLAYS LUKE IN THE MELBOURNE PRODUCTION OF *NEXT FALL*. (INSET) DARRIN REDGATE (RIGHT) AS ADAM IN THE SYDNEY PRODUCTION OF 2016.

MORE: *Next Fall* plays at The Loft Theatre at Chapel Off Chapel, Melbourne from July 12 to 30.