

SATAN'S SOCK PUPPET!

NOT AVENUE Q AND CERTAINLY NOT THE MUPPETS, MEET TYRONE, A FUNNY, FRIGHTENING AND FILTHY-MOUTHED SOCK PUPPET IN HAND TO GOD.

IT'S BEEN described as *Sesame Street* meets *The Exorcist*. Since premiering at the Ensemble Theatre Off-Broadway in 2011 and moving to Broadway in 2015, *Hand To God* has earned five Tony Award nominations, opened in London's West End in 2016 and makes its Australian debut at Melbourne's Alex Theatre in 2018.

The play revolves around a Christian ministry puppet class, which sets the scene for numerous hilarious and controversial plotlines. It all happens in the conservative Texas town of Cypress. Young Jason has issues with his mother, Margery, as well as the local pastor, the school bully and the girl next door. Still reeling from the death of his father, he joins the local church puppet group and discovers a talent for comedy. However, when his hand puppet, Tyrone takes on a life of his own, a frightening yet poignant scenario unfolds, bringing faith and morality into the spotlight.

Directed by Gary Abrahams (*Angels In America*), the cast includes Alison Whyte (*Glitch*) as Margery, Grant Piro (*The Ex PM*) as Pastor Greg, Morgana O'Rielly (*Neighbours*) as Jessica and Jake Speer (*Home And Away*) plays the bully, Timothy.

In the lead as Jason and the puppet Tyrone is AFI and Logie Award-winner Gyton Grantley (*House Husbands*). Taking on such a complex role brings more than the usual challenges for an actor, Grantley explains.

"Switching between the two characters has been incredibly hard," he says. "Technically, I'm not even switching as both Jason and Tyrone are present at the same time. While Jason is talking Tyrone is reacting. While Tyrone is talking Jason is reacting - and also providing Tyrone's voice while manipulating the actual puppet! So, there are two brains working simultaneously.

"I've been working with professional puppeteer and director Jacob Williams," says Grantley. "He's been an incredible and integral help, developing my skills in bringing Tyrone to life. I learnt a lot by rote [the memorisation technique of repetition], as Tyrone has a whole bag-full of movements, which have slowly become organic.



“ Tyrone reacts on impulse as if he’s truly alive, and he actually spoke back to the director the other day!”



(TOP) THE HAND TO GOD AUSTRALIAN CAST. (ABOVE) ACTORS GYTON GRANTLEY AND ALISON WHYTE WITH TYRONE.

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Considering the puppet is taking possession of a troubled teenager, there's more at play here than just a few easy laughs. Anxiety, depression, sex, guilt, alcoholism, religion and death are the themes the cast must grapple with, apart from the complicated stage blocking of working with puppets.

"Delving into the emotional headspace of troubled characters can be very frightening," says Grantley. "I always try to find similar situations or scenarios in my own life that resonate or match. This can be painful and, yes, troublesome but it can also be quite cathartic. It's actually an interesting way of addressing trauma in your life, by dealing with it through your art."

Writer Robert Askins describes his story as an expression of "honesty and southern regionalism". *The New York Times* summed up *Hand To God* as a black comedy about the divided human soul. And, while it definitely makes a social statement about our current world, it draws out politically incorrect hilarity that, possibly, reflects our own hidden demons.

Hand To God gives audiences plenty to think about, says Grantley. "It questions religion and the confines it creates. It looks at community and the rules that come with it. It looks at the human spirit and how we can wake up to realise we've forgotten or let go of our dreams and desires. It's deep but, on top of it all, is a rollicking romp that will awaken your devil inside!"

MORE: *Hand To God* plays at Melbourne's Alex Theatre from 22 February. Go to handtogod.com.au