

by Edmon Rodman

The Chosen returns with relevance...How well does a work of fiction age over time? With the passing decades, does it get out of fashion, and frayed at the edges? Or, does it stay stylishly current in your mind, by continuing to relate to your life's experiences? These were questions that I had as I sat down to watch an illuminating new stage adaptation of Chaim Potok's novel "The Chosen," at the Fountain Theater.

The book was first published in 1967, and when I read it, I think my mother gave it to me as a Chanukah present, I was in high school. Growing up in a Conservative (United Synagogue) Jewish household, in Orange County suburbia, I was intrigued by the portrait of Orthodoxy, especially the schisms between what we would call today Orthodox Judaism and Chasidism.

In its first chapters, through baseball, the book introduces you to a religious war over words and labels. The more dogmatic Danny Saunders refers disparagingly to his nemesis on the baseball diamond, Reuven Malter as an *apikoros*, a heretic, one who according to the Mishnah, does not have a share in the world to come. It was a strange new word, I never had known anyone considered a Jewish heretic, and as a teenager, the concept grabbed my attention. It was the 60s, even behind the Orange Curtain, and I thought "Wow, if Reuven was a heretic, I was a heretic too." Or, even more mind-bending, maybe since I was attending Hebrew high school, and many of my Jewish friends were not, or didn't think about Jewish stuff at all, relatively speaking, *they* were the *apikorsim*, and me, the traditionalist.

Turning the pages, my attention was on Danny and Reuven, how their friendship could bridge divisiveness, and not on their rabbi fathers. Even though their thoughts and positions were central to the novel's conflict, the dads seemed in the background, like the parents in "Peanuts."

Fifty years, and three adult children later, my eyes see the story differently, and it's not about the glasses. Danny and Reuven, played convincingly by Dor Gvirtsman and Sam Mandel, are still literally center stage, but it is their dads, delivering many of their lines from the sides, that hold my attention, and keep the work relevant.

David Malter, a rabbi who educates Jews via his writings in the Jewish press, played in a spot-on understated manner by Jonathan Arkin, wants his son to expand his realm of knowledge, and see that expansion as a blessing.

The other rabbi in the room, the traditionalist, Reb Saunders, leader of a Chasidic sect, played passionately by Alan Blumenfeld, wants his son to follow in his communally-minded, often heavy-hearted footsteps.

Seated in the small theater, it is not the size of the venue that makes me feel that I am right up there on stage with these two fathers who though collegial are in ideological conflict over the destinies of their sons. It is the passion, and involvement that they feel towards their son's life choices about friends, education, and careers that draws me to them.

The one aspect that does date this adaptation by Aaron Posner (He and Chaim Potok wrote the first version) is the ideological battle over Zionism, and the creation of the State of Israel. Yet, their argument, did bring to mind an updating of this conflict that many parents have been exposed to recently when their children come home for college breaks—the battle over acceptance of Israel. Here, the fire of the play's language reflects some of the heat we may feel today about our Jewish identities and how they relate to a Jewish state. On stage, as the rabbis gave their positions with anger and passion, with a few changes, they could have been seated at our dinner table debating the two state solution.