

# Review – The Bronx Balmers (Off The Leash Productions)

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*Stage Buzz Review by Byrne Harrison*

Picture it: The Bronx, 1969. An idyllic Jewish neighborhood that hasn't changed in decades suddenly finds itself on the fast track to the future, whatever that may be. The right people are moving up, the wrong people are moving in, and the people who are in the middle are just trying to figure out what to do next.

The Balmers and the Minkoffs are in that middle group. Rose Balmer (Dorcey Winant) desperately wants to move up: the Masada on Grand Concourse. Irving and Sylvia Minkoff (Michael DeNola and Goldie Zwiebel) want to move out: Long Island. Harry Balmer (Larry Greenbush) wants to see the world: Africa. Rose and Harry's daughter, Debra (Amanda Nichols), just wants to come home. Well, maybe wants is too strong a word. But come home she does, with a little surprise for the family.

*The Bronx Balmers* is a fairly conventional family comedy/drama. But considering this is playwright Jeremy Handelman's first play, that's not a bad thing. It could easily have been a nostalgic memory play about the good old times in the Bronx. Instead, Handelman chooses to show this family as it is, warts and all. Rose is a schemer who isn't above using blackmail and betrayal to get what she wants. Irving's a racist, not that he would ever consider himself to be, who has a secret that could ruin his life. Harry is tired of his life and wants something more, but when push comes to shove, he's not willing to fight for it. Debra's a spitfire who wants to shake things up. They are crazy, angry, happy, sad, and above all, they are believable.

As expected, there were the usual glitches that face newly opened shows in small theatres: flubbed lines, awkward blocking, a chuppa that seemed determined to fall over (okay, that's not exactly a 'usual' glitch). But the main problem with the play is that it wants to tackle every issue that the family is facing. It deals with racism, anti-Semitism, adultery, betrayal, the Mets vs. the Yankees, urban flight, the disintegration of social groups, the disintegration of families, and the inevitable change that the 1960s heralded throughout the country. Unfortunately, trying to deal with so many topics makes the play seem a little heavy, especially in the second half where the characters attend what is probably the most awkward party ever thrown in Bronxville. While most of the play works, it would likely run smoother if it had a tighter focus.

*The Bronx Balms* features a talented cast. Dorcey Winant's Rose is a strong, opinionated woman, and Winant seems to delight in playing her highs and lows without making her two-dimensional. As Irving, Michael DeNola manages to be sleazy but fairly likeable. Goldie Zwiebel is charming as the patient and sweet Sylvia. Harry Balmer, ably played by Larry Greenbush, is frustratingly passive, until he reaches his breaking point. The same can be said of George Santana's Pop, who comes across as a sweet teddy bear, until faced with being used by his daughter. Rounding out the cast is the lovely Amanda Nichols as Harry and Rose's exasperated daughter, Debra. She was at her best when working to choke back her anger at her family's hypocrisy.

While *The Bronx Balms* has some flaws, it shows the potential that Handelman has, especially if he continues to work with a talented cast and crew. And if he keeps exploring his Bronx roots, New York audiences can expect bigger and better things from him in the future.

Written by Jeremy Handelman  
Directed by Linda Burson

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Through November 19

[www.bronxbalms.com](http://www.bronxbalms.com)