

## SHOWCASE

## REVIEWS

## 'Unbinding Isaac'

Through May 6

Redmoon Theater at the Steppenwolf Studio, 1650 N. Halsted

Tickets: \$18-\$22; (312) 335-1650.

Highly recommended



The artists of Redmoon Theater have taken on the task of retelling the pivotal Old Testament tale of the patriarch Abraham, and God's demand that he sacrifice Isaac, his beloved only son, as the ultimate proof of faith.

But as anyone familiar with the work of this endlessly imaginative and emotionally probing troupe might suspect, its interpretation bears little resemblance to the standard-issue Sunday school Bible class versions you may have encountered in childhood.

Rather, in "Unbinding Isaac," a splendid collaboration with his team of performers and designers, writer-director Jim Lasko (the force behind "Hunchback," "Frankenstein" and numerous Redmoon street spectacles and pageants) has reinvented this biblical touchstone. And he has done so in a way that not only makes it utterly fresh and contemporary, but also timeless. Like Samuel Beckett's plays and Rene Magritte's surreal, cloud-strewn paintings (a key visual component in this piece), "Isaac" seems to stop the clock, even as it ticks off the moments of human existence.



Jim Slonina and Julie Hopkins appear in Redmoon Theater's "Unbinding Isaac," a creative retooling of an Old Testament story.

## OVERNIGHT

Even more crucially, Lasko's production, which opened Thursday night at the Steppenwolf Studio Theatre, subtly and magically captures and reinvents the deep and abiding mystery of the Abraham and Isaac story.

This is no glib update. It is a deeply poetic yet utterly whimsical meditation on the human condition—on human choice, human habit, human endurance, the mundane, the routine, the repetitive and, finally, the exalted act of just living in this world. And it thrives on the intense but understated

passion, ruefulness and gentle humor that emerges in all of Redmoon's work.

At the heart of the story is an Everyman-style Isaac (meticulous silent work by an exceptional physical clown, Jim Slonina), who awakes each day and performs the little rituals of stretching, dressing, eating, commuting, enduring the tedium of an office job, stopping at a pub, surviving his own nightmares and starting all over again the next day, despite the indignities he knows await him.

All along the way, Isaac is dogged by three anonymous Magritte-like figures in black raincoats and bowler hats (played silently by Ju-

lie Hopkins, Amy Jarvis and Ann Boyd, who later morphs into Sarah, the very moving figure of the eternally devoted wife).

Isaac also is continually tested, in the sneakiest little ways, by a blind streetcorner preacher. This character is stunningly portrayed by Alison Halstead, whose sly but deeply soulful rendering of the biblical narration is at once direct and haunting.

It is this preacher who reminds us that the magnitude of human greatness is measured by the nature of the force with which each man chooses to struggle. Some take on the world. Others wrestle with themselves. But those who are most exceptional take on God.

All this is accomplished as the actors move within the confines of a life-size 18th century toy theater stage, where bedroom walls and landscapes, buses and starry skies, alarm clocks, guilt-inducing birds and anxiety-sparking fire engines all slide in and out of view with childlike simplicity.

Stephanie Nelson's set, Shoshanna Utchenik's props and puppets, Sue Haas' costumes, Jaymi Lee Smith's lighting, Ann Boyd's choreography, and perhaps best of all, Seth Greene's absolutely brilliant music and sound design, combine to create a world that is full of simple joys and terrors.

It is a world in which people often appear to act like puppets, but are saved by some ineffable sense of faith.

*Hedy Weiss, theater critic*