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# Papa Don't Preach

*'The Young Ladies Of'* channels Big Daddy

by Leonard Jacobs

**I** OFTEN THINK most sons become a variation of their fathers—even if the younger generation claims to have totally altered the nature and character of their Y-chromosome-bearing patriarch. Yes, this is absurd: Not everyone knows their father or can even state who their father is. Plus many men will say they've liberated themselves from their fathers' specter, broken from the values that crushed them as young boys, distorted their sense of masculinity or scarred their psyche.

Taylor Mac, whose deeply inspiring *The Young Ladies Of* is a beautiful play, not a performance piece, is hardly a chip off his father's block. A gender-bending glamazon, Mac appears in the smudged frock of a deflowered prom-queen, a bra beneath its folds acting as a thong. His father was a Vietnam veteran, the product of several generations of hyper-masculine family rites that included losing his virginity to a whore, and he died in a drunken motorcycle accident when Taylor was not yet 4. While overseas, his father—who came from a "tough, Texan conservative, macho, military farm family who would brag of their faggot bashing stampedes..."—placed a personal ad and received thousands of letters. After Mac's mother unearthed them, Mac discovered he could use them to measure the distance between himself and the man who gave him life.

The structure of *The Young Ladies Of* can be off-putting: Whether he's singing the "Soliloquy" from *Carousel* or crazily ad libbing, Mac's style is nearly neo-Dada—Dada for Da Da, if you will. Yet there's method at work: Mac uses "Soliloquy," a song in which a man dreams of his unborn son, to imagine his father's absent soul. In a thrilling and campy *coup de theatre*, a massive deluge of the letters pours on top of him as the "Carousel Waltz" swirls; pulling large, correspondence-laden boxes from left, right and center, Mac dumps thousands more letters on the floor. It's like Beckett's *Happy Days*—with the sole character buried up to her waist in Act I, up to her neck in Act II—with a dose of fabulousness.

Hell hath no fury like a disappointed drag queen, especially one with pancake makeup, glitter and great expectations: The letters' contents prove mostly full of boring observations from trite, forgettable women. Still, Mac trudges on, using his long, lanky frame, Lypsinka-like lips and Joan Crawford-like voice to make the best of such banality. When a lovelorn correspondent writes, "Winter is my favorite season as fashions show themselves truthfully in winter," Mac exclaims, "Work!" And when the letters seem most



Taylor Mac works his memories of his father in *The Young Ladies Of*.

silly, Mac offers a family slideshow—images of men-folk in dresses as babies, juxtaposed with images of Mac in all of his outré gorgeousness.

Slowly, Mac realizes that the unknowable is unknowable—as much as his father was enigmatic, he is enigmatic, too. The story of Mac receiving a great big pink dog for his fourth birthday and hugging it—not understanding it was a castrating tease, not sensing that a rifle awaited him when the joke was complete—is both hilarious and devastating, thanks to the accompanying photo. No, Mac is anything but a variation of his father, so there goes my theory. But when the audience is singing "What's the Use of Wond'rin'?" from *Carousel* or watching his extended scene with a pair of sock puppets, we cannot help but embrace his kind, child-like aura, his courageous disowning of gender, his variation on themes that are entirely his own.

Through Oct. 19. HERE, 145 6th Ave. (betw. Spring & Broome Sts.), 212-352-3101; \$20.

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