

Reviews for *Blank*
Directed by McKerrin Kelly

GO! BLANK

In his deceptively simple, powerful solo show, playwright Brian Stanton describes the process of reuniting with the birth mother who gave him up for adoption when he was an infant. Although material of this sort could easily founder on reefs of melodramatic cliché, the piece is instead deeply moving, and Stanton launches us on an existentialist journey as his inner debate over meeting his mother shifts into Hamlet-like musing on the nature of self-definition and the heartfelt needs we may not even be aware of. The play charts the paroxysm of the self-analysis that occurs after Stanton, an appealing young performer who looks as though he is central casting for the happy-go-lucky next-door neighbor on a TV sitcom, learns his birth mother's name. When he subsequently discovers the horrific incidents that led to his being put up for adoption in the first place, the knowledge takes on the force of Greek tragedy, as Stanton must come to grips with the fact that he is, in his own words, "part victim, part monster." In director McKerrin Kelly's brisk, passionate production, Stanton's writing is simultaneously dramatic and erudite, eloquently juxtaposing the philosophy of Plato and Buddha along with his own not-to-be-disparaged poetic turn of a phrase — and he demonstrates a flair for creating unexpected images out of the most minimalist concepts, such as a sequence in which he imagines a conversation between himself and the ghost image of his rapist biological father, who is depicted as a coldly smiling prophet of evil. Stanton's skill in balancing a profoundly personal tale with classical underpinnings ultimately hints at the evocative idea that all our lives are full of events and incidents that touch on the mythic and the timeless. Lounge Theatre, 6201 Santa Monica Blvd., Hlywd.; Fri., 8 p.m.; Sat., 7 p.m.; through May 23. (323) 960-5770. A Lone Star Ensemble Production.

Review by Paul Birchall for L.A. Weekly

Wow!

If it takes guts merely for an actor to stand up in front of an audience and play a role, imagine how much more courage is required when there's no one else on stage to be his safety net—and the role that he's playing is himself.

Brian Stanton accepts this challenge in *Blank*, the actor's funny, moving, thought-provoking autobiographical look at his identity as an adult adopted child with two birth certificates, one as Brian Timothy Stanton and the other as Blank.

"Blank! I'm Blank!" exclaims Brian upon seeing that other birth certificate for the first time. "I mean I know I'm Brian, but I started out as Blank. There has to be something about Blank that is part of who I am, right? So, who the hell is Blank? Blank! I feel like there are two of me all of a sudden. Blank! Jesus! Like I don't already have issues, I'm an actor!"

It is this need to discover just who "Blank" is that sent the then 20something Brian in pursuit of the 16-year-old who gave birth to him. The same need now sends Brian-at-35 on this very public search for just who actor/husband/father/son Brian Stanton is.

In the process, the oh-so talented star of *No Sex Please, We're British*, *Is He Dead?*, *Bright Ideas*, and *Tom, Dick, and Harry* (check out StageSceneLA's rave reviews) portrays not just himself, but a bevy of real-life characters who have shaped the man Brian Stanton is today.

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There's Breeze, Brian's flamboyant drama teacher who pronounces the "oe" in Oedipus like the "e" in Edith, and dubs himself the "rock n' roll professor"; Mrs. Nash, Brian's sweet old 2nd grade teacher, who insists that young Brian can't possibly be adopted because he isn't "Oriental" like his adopted classmate Chrissy; Ma, Brian's chain-smoking mother who is so encouraging of her son's identity search that she finds Brian's birth mother in the phone book and makes the first call; best friend Adam, a fellow adoptee who has no interest in searching for his own birth parents because "We're all actually 99.9% identical on the genome level, so aren't we all kind of one big family anyway?"; Doc, Brian's "long-winded, slightly senile" former undergrad professor, who has his own particular pearls of wisdom to impart; Fr. Stark, Brian's high school priest who's not above a little minor physical torture when the young man dares question the Bible as literal fact; Big Grandma, "90, still working, and planning her next annual adventure, riding bareback through the Grand Tetons"; Gramps, who post-stroke "lost all feeling on the right side of his body, and lost all vocabulary as well except for: Hey, OK, And, Come on, Hi, Bye, Yes, No, and 1, 2, 3. Oh! And all curse words;" and several more equally well drawn characters.

Blank offers far more than just one actor's life story and a chance for him to portray more (and more diverse) characters in 65 minutes than his career would normally allow him in a year or more, though this Stanton does indeed do to perfection, each character instantly recognizable by his or her unique voice and body language. Blank is a theatrical piece likely to resonate with anyone who has ever adopted, been adopted, known someone who has adopted or been adopted, or imagined what it might be like to be in that situation. That is to say that pretty much everyone will be able to relate in some way to Stanton's search (and struggle) for a sense of identity.

When one particularly shocking aspect of Stanton's birth is revealed to young Brian's (and the audience's) horror, Blank does take a rather too artsy (for this reviewer) turn, the actor/writer engaging in a conversation with what turns out to be blind prophet Tiresias. The prolonged exchange (underscored with the scratching noise of an old vinyl LP) makes dramatic sense, as Stanton begins Blank with himself as a young acting student blanking on an Oedipus monolog, but lost me there for a while.

Other than that segment, Blank held this reviewer enthralled, amused, and emotionally touched from start to finish.

Credit for Blank's success must be shared between its actor/writer and its director, McKerrin Kelly (a gifted actress herself). Kelly has clearly had a hand in shaping and fine-tuning Stanton's impressive work here and in keeping the production visually varied, no small task on a virtually blank black stage, save for a couple boxes and some words and phrases scrawled on one of its walls—an actor's guide to creating his character's back story. Rob Fritz's lighting design helps immensely as well, as do Erin Scott's sound design and Christine Suarez's movement design. Dan Mailley is scenic designer and Kelly Passinault is stage manager.

Reviewed by Steven Stanley for StageSceneLA.com