



Joe's View

With Joe Meyers, entertainment writer

'Follow Me Down': college days without nostalgia

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The new play “Follow Me Down” by Patrick Barrett takes place at Oxford University in 1925, but it tells a timeless story of those intense (and unlikely) friendships we form at college out of sheer proximity to people we would never get to know so well in the “outside” world.

Barrett introduces us to a group of very different young men who share college rooms and an unofficial decision to make the charismatic but troubled James (Graham Halstead, above right) the de facto head of the house.

James is in the great tradition of those wisened-up but disturbed adolescents who populate classic coming-of-age novels such as “The Catcher in the Rye” and near-classics like “The Sterile Cuckoo.”

Most of us who lived in a dorm or a fraternity house probably went through a stage of being drawn into the orbit of someone like James — a guy with an answer to every question whose combination of acerbic humor and good looks meant a wide circle of admirers.

It's easier to go with the flow and take advantage of the popularity of someone like James — when you're still too young to know what qualities should go into a close friendship — than to question his authority and to risk banishment from the circle of acolytes.

“Follow Me Down” is receiving its world premiere production from Aporia Theater in the very intimate confines of the downstairs space at The Flea Theater in downtown Manhattan.

Director Sarah Elizabeth Wansley has done a fine job of casting James and his roommates and the four young women who come to vivid life in the play but are never quite able to make it into the inner circle.

Only one of the women we meet — Tess (Kara Davidson) — is a budding feminist who wonders why she can't be the equal of any of the men at Oxford.

Barrett sets up the characters deftly, with James and Andrew (Justin Scalzo, left) and Simon (Jason Resnikoff) and Thomas (Thomas Anawalt, above left) and Phillip (Joe Rende) amusing each other in the first scene with a charades-like party game.



Although every character in the play is well drawn — and expertly acted — the play's central conflict develops between James and Thomas who start off disagreeing about Thomas' love of literature but end up in an emotionally devastating battle over more personal matters.

Thomas knows that *something* has to be simmering under the glamorous facade James maintains — he cannot be as blithe about emotional connections and what really matters to him in life as he pretends to be.

Under the influence of lots of liquor — and the ever-shifting alliances of the other roommates — the conflict between James and Thomas has profound consequences for everyone in “Follow Me Down.”

As played by Halstead and Anawalt, James and Thomas are well-matched rivals who get a fair fight in the playwright’s hands — we are pulled back and forth between James’ all-purpose cynicism and Thomas’ belief in life having a higher purpose.

With no audience member more than two rows away from the performance, “Follow Me Down” gives a theatergoer the sense of being in the same room with the people Barrett has created — the play quickly becomes an intense emotional experience.

(“Follow Me Down” is being presented at The Flea Theater through Nov. 1. For more information, go to www.AporiaTheater.com)



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