

Solo 'Wretch Like Me' — funny, touching, irreverent
By WOODY WEINGARTEN

I'm a secular Jew.

David Templeton's an agnostic Unitarian Universalist and, much more relevant, a former born-again Jesus freak.

The other day I sat amidst a sparse audience watching him execute "Wretch Like Me," an irreverent autobiographical two-act solo gig at the 6th Street Playhouse in Santa Rosa. I felt a connection.

Though his thoroughly engaging, funny and poignant showcase, Templeton manages to connect to virtually everyone — a gamut of Protestants, Catholics, Episcopalians, Jews and especially doubting Thomases and Chaims, not to mention lapsed everythings.

Fundamentalists? Well, maybe not so much.

His skillfully crafted performance — directed with equal talent by David Yen — includes his opting at age 5 to be a black sheep in a Christmas pageant, dedicating his life to Jesus as a fifth-grader in a Southern California trailer park, and trembling into high school as a geeky, nerdy outcast who hides behind shrubbery.

A teen Templeton finds himself immersed in group-think, group-zeal and group-dogma. And on a path that ultimately means three baptisms, which "doesn't make me better than Jesus, just a little wetter."

Along the way he becomes a faith-based puppeteer obsessed with death and with crucifixion, which, while lying in bed listening to John Denver records, he sees as "a corpse glued to a stick hanging on every wall." He joins a weekly Bible study group taught by a Jesus Lady, and a Jesus Club populated with "righteous misfits." Those way stations lead to an Afterglow in which "mystical daredevils" speak in tongues, and a girlfriend who while proselytizing wets her pants for Jesus. And that's only the first act.

What follows in Templeton's quest for joy, not in order of importance, are a 30-day fast, "witnessing" (aka, according to Templeton, "harassing people for Jesus"), scriptural probing of masturbation, dancing to Bruce Springsteen anthems, and musings about the flexible Righteous Jack or the rigid Reverend Dude and his Happy Chapel, delusional devotees, and communion with a peanut butter and jelly sandwich and grape soda.

Templeton regularly changes his voice to simulate the varied characters he introduces — ranging from Sam Galaxy, a green puppet made out of junk, to his depressed and depressing mother, a combination wannabe lounge singer and stud-shepherd.

In contrast, his set is basically monochromatic — Spartan, in fact. There's a huge yellow smiley face on the floor, with crosses for eyes. There's an easel in the rear, featuring a cartoonish black sheep. There's a couch draped with dingy light bedspread. And there are two stools, one to hold a Bible and a dictionary, one to hold the colorlessly clad actor-writer.

More isn't needed. Templeton, a highly physical performer, fills the stage himself, zig-zagging here, hopping there, talking with his ex-puppeteer hands and becoming a man of a hundred facial expressions.

I expected that, as a regular writer for The Bohemian and other publications, he'd be adept at crafting pithy phrases.

More surprising, perhaps, was his skill at manipulating melodies (including the theme from “Gilligan’s Island”) to fit the lyrics of “Amazing Grace.”

All the ingredients of “Wretch Like Me” are true, Templeton swears, except that he changed some names to protect the innocent — and, I believe, the guilty, in more than one meaning of that word.

The only flaws I experienced were that his evangelic journey was told all-too chronologically, and that the telling was roughly 20 minutes too long.

Will a minority of theatergoers find the Petaluma resident’s tale of being saved from being saved offensive? Blasphemous? Of course. But they shouldn’t be there in the first place, even though it’s more a coming-of-age exercise than a hit piece aimed at fundamentalist theology.

Templeton said opening night was four seats shy of a sold-out theater. His thought-inducing yet hilarious two-hour performances deserve that level of attendance every night.

One final thought: If you see this show and are untouched by it, you’re most likely a wretch unlike me.

Remaining performances at the Sixth Street Playhouse, 52 West 6th St., Santa Rosa, are at 8 p.m. Fridays, Aug. 13, 20 and 27, with Sunday matinees at 2 p.m. Aug. 15, 22 and 29. Tickets, \$20-25. (707) 523-4185 or www.6thstreetplayhouse.com.

After its Santa Rosa run, “Wretch Like Me,” (which previously appeared in Sat 142 Throckmorton Theater in Mill Valley) will appear at San Francisco’s Marsh Theater on Tuesday, Nov. 16 and then in Scotland’s Edinburgh Fringe Festival next year.