

## REVIEW: WORLD PREMIERE OF 'PRAY AWAY THE GAY' AT BROWARD CENTER

▶ J.W. Arnold

**D**rag review producers Murray Hodgson and Peter Hendrickson have ventured into the world of theater with the premiere production of "Pray the Gay Away," playing through Sept. 8 at the Broward Center.

The comedy is based on experiences of Zachary and Michael Zakar, Arab-American identical twins and Instagram personalities who grew up in the Midwest and chronicled the process of coming out in an autobiographical book of the same title. Their mother was a staunch Catholic who responded to their sexual epiphany by attempting to "Pray Away the Gay."

What "Pray Away the Gay" is not: If you're looking for deep insights into how the Zakar twins came to grips with their homosexuality (as twins or not) or dealt with their mother's homophobia, you're not going to find either in this show. The latter was signaled by the casting of a male actor as "Mom."

If there are any young gay people out there struggling with their sexual orientation or coping with conservative religious dogma, they probably won't find answers in the Amatur Theater. But, for the mostly older men in the audience who came out decades ago, the sophomoric jokes about blowjobs, boners, butt sex and bottoms are humorous reminders of those wild-eyes encounters many young gay men seek after coming out.

What "Pray Away the Gay" is: Thanks to writer Bobby Brower and director Eric Swanson, the show is a fast-paced, laugh-a-minute, campy romp that has audiences in stitches from opening to closing curtains. The show sometime seems out of place in a performing arts center (and more appropriate for Empire Stage or Wilton Theater Factory), but, simply put, it works if you're looking for a little raunchy escape from current events.

The Zakars and Cory Shorter, Jeffrey James Fox and Zachary James Morgan (in multiple roles) make the most of the material with well-timed delivery, but it is Vince Kelley as "Mom" who shines brightest in nearly every scene. Kelley (who is NOT a drag queen, but a female impersonator) clearly is in a class by himself, offering an over-the-top performance that is funny, smart and sophisticated at the same time.

While the show may feel like an extended



Identical twins and Instagram personalities Michael and Zachary Zakar star in the autobiographical comedy, "Pray the Gay Away," at the Broward Center in Fort Lauderdale. Credit: Murray and Peter Present.

"Saturday Night Live" skit—and there's absolutely nothing wrong with that—"Pray Away the Gay" benefits from strong production values. Justin Hawley's clever set design never seems cheap (in that "SNL" way) and is surprisingly utilitarian, quickly transforming from the twins' bedroom to a church confessional, their high school bathroom and even a "gayme" show set (like we've never seen that one before). Effective lighting design by Daniel Morency, video animations by Fernando Castillo and high energy sound design from Herb Harris Jr. and Project 1 Music Group support the production.

The verdict: Overall, "Pray Away the Gay" is a very funny, well-produced diversion easily worth the price of admission, but it could be so much more. It would be worth the effort for the creative team and the Zakar twins to search a little deeper for the teachable moment their compelling story deserves.

Peter and Murray Present the Zakar twins in "Pray the Gay Away" through Sunday, Sept. 8 at the Broward Center in Fort Lauderdale. Tickets start at \$37.40 at [BrowardCenter.org](http://BrowardCenter.org).

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