

Hand to God

A hilarious, provocative and impolite new comedy
by Robert Askins

playing from 16th March 2018



This teachers' resource pack includes factual information as well as tasks and topics to be dealt with in the classroom. Cut and paste as you please, and please consult the official programme for additional information. Difficulty levels are graded for your convenience.

**English Theatre Frankfurt
Teachers' Resource Pack**

Hand to God

a scene-by-scene synopsis

Prologue:

The prologue establishes the tone of the play. It occurs either before the timeline of the play's events, or "outside of time". Here we meet Tyrone, the sock puppet. He gives a little speech about the origins of humanity, society and morality. His word choice makes him sound like an angry teenage boy, using plenty of vulgarity like "shit", "rut" (*brunsten*), "motherfucker", "fucking", "bastard", "ballsy" (*mutig*), and asshole. He uses one unusual term, referring to women as "ladies". Tyrone finishes his monologue by saying "The devil made me do it." That's a common way of casting the blame for our actions onto a supernatural agent instead of our own poor and weak judgment. It suggests that Tyrone is going to do something morally questionable in the play.

Act One, Scene One:

The first major scene introduces all of the characters. It takes place in a church basement, a room traditionally used for different functions (*Gemeinschaftsraum*). We meet Margery, her teenaged son Jason, two other teenagers Jessica and Timothy, and later Pastor Gregg. Margery is trying to teach the kids how to work with puppets to tell Bible stories. Her prudish puppet's name is Rita. The kids are ignoring her. Jessica is trying to add breasts to her puppet, Jolene. Timothy makes fun of the other kids and reveals that his mother is an alcoholic who is seldom sober.

Jason uses his puppet to sing a Christian song taught to small children called "Jesus Loves Me". The effect makes him seem emotionally stunted. Jessica and Jason leave the room to get colas, so that Margery and Timothy can talk.

It comes out that Margery's husband (Jason's father) died six months before of a heart attack. She reveals that "I have one thing in my life that is keeping me together and that is my dedication to my lord and saviour Jesus Christ and because I can't sing and I can't preach and my brownies taste like old tires I am trying to teach myself and you how to do puppet shows." The fact that she refers to Jesus Christ as "her lord and saviour" instantly reveals that she is part of an evangelical faith (evangelical faiths believe in the centrality of the conversion or "born again" experience, the authority of the Bible as God's revelation to humanity, and in spreading the Christian message). Timothy admits that he's attracted to her, which makes her very uncomfortable. He pressures her to kiss him but she refuses. They are interrupted by the entrance of Pastor Greg.

Pastor Greg is a nice guy but rather clueless and represents much of the problems the evangelical church, like much of the US, faces due to the unquestioned privilege of white men. Without meaning to be demeaning, he says "Thatta girl!" to her more than once as though she were his daughter needing a pep talk. Pastor Greg makes Margery commit to preparing her Christkateers (the name of the puppet troupe and a—perhaps intentionally ironic—combination of Jesus Christ and the Disney "Mouseketeers") to perform at the service on the following Sunday. He also encourages her to join the potluck lunch (a meal where everyone brings a dish) after the service, promising not to leave her side. She is reluctant to say yes but agrees not to just say no.

Act One, Scene Two:

Jessica and Jason are swinging and talking at a playground. They are clearly attracted to each other. Jason is overly sensitive to everything Jessica says. He shows her a routine he has developed with his puppet. It's an adaptation of an old vaudeville routine by Abbott and Costello (check out the original on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kTcRRaXV-fg>). Jessica enjoys the routine and the ice is broken between them. However, Tyrone tells Jessica that Jason can't stop thinking about her and even masturbates when he does. Jason tears off the puppet and throws it on the ground. This whole thing disturbs Jessica and she leaves.

Act One, Scene Three:

Margery and Jason are driving home. Jason tells his mom he doesn't want to work with puppets anymore because it's having a bad effect on him. Margery refuses to listen. She admits that she agreed the kids would perform next week and she uses emotional blackmail to pressure him to go along with it. Neither is willing to budge. Margery keeps pushing and Jason damages the puppet. Margery demands he get out of the car and she drives away, leaving him to walk home alone at night.

Act One, Scene Four:

Margery and Pastor Greg sit facing each other in the church basement. Pastor Greg tries to get Margery to see him as a man who's attracted to her, and not as a pastor. She turns him down and he leaves.

As she bursts out in rage and frustration, Timothy enters. She tells him to leave but the prospect of destruction in the room excites him and he joins in. At Margery's command, he breaks and destroys different items, tearing up and chewing up a poster. Finally, their destructive behaviour becomes self-focused, and they start making out very roughly.

Act One, Scene Five:

Jason is in bed and Tyrone, now repaired, wakes him up. Tyrone tells Jason to take him to the puppet show and tell the others what he really thinks about them. Jason wants to be nicer than that, but in the end, he agrees that they only have each other.

Act One, Scene Six:

We return to the church basement. Pastor Greg has discovered all the damage. He starts to repair it. Margery enters, followed soon after by Timothy. They both claim not to know who damaged the room. Jason enters, followed by Jessica. Pastor Greg leaves so they can rehearse. Margery asks the kids to set up the stage while she leaves to make photocopies. Timothy acts like a bully, as he usually does. This time Tyrone reacts very strongly to Timothy's behaviour. Timothy, humiliated, tells Jason he had sex with Jason's mother. Tyrone first laughs and laughs very provokingly and then attacks him and tears off his ear. Margery returns as they fight. Tyrone asks her if what Timothy said is true. She tries to deny it but the truth is clear in her face. Pastor Gregg returns. Before Tyrone can reveal her crime, Margery accuses Jason of being possessed by the devil. Tyrone gives them a "taste" of the devil and causes the light to blow out.

Act Two, Scene One:

We're next door to the basement functional room in Pastor Greg's office. Margery is sewing Timothy's ear back on with puppet string. Jessica and Pastor Greg think they should call the police. Margery wants Pastor Greg to perform an exorcism because she's worried Jason will reveal her terrible secret: that she had sex with teenager Timothy.

Act Two, Scene Two:

We return to the church basement, where Jason and Tyrone have "redecorated". Jason and Tyrone talk about what happened until Pastor Greg enters. Pastor Greg is not intimidated by Tyrone or his childish threatening words. They convince him that Margery has been sleeping with Timothy and the truth upsets him so badly that he leaves, locking the door behind him.

Act Two, Scene Three:

Now we're next door again in Pastor Greg's office. Margery is alone when Timothy enters and tells her that he loves her. She tries to explain that love is nothing more than terrible pain and disappointment. Their passions are once again aroused. Jessica enters and asks for the keys to Margery's van so she can get puppet-making supplies. They give her Margery's entire purse and tell her to take everything and leave. She does. They get closer, then hear Pastor Greg returning. Margery chooses not to stop until he enters and sees them. Pastor Greg confronts Timothy and sends him away. He then confronts Margery. She rages against him, her deceased husband, her son and the church as a whole. Finally, she accepts that she needs help. He helps her up.

Act Two, Scene Four:

One last time we return to the church basement. Tyrone is giving Jason a pep talk. Suddenly the window high up opens and Jolene, Jessica's puppet, appears. Her breasts are even bigger now than before. She and Jessica climb in through the window. Tyrone and Jolene proceed to have puppet sex as Jason and Jessica talk. Jessica tells Jason he doesn't have to be a "bad boy" like Timothy to attract girls, that a little of that behaviour is sexy but too much of it is unattractive. Jessica offers to go to homecoming¹ with him but only if he leaves his puppet behind. As soon as the puppets are finished, Pastor Greg and Margery unlock the door and enter. Jessica leaves with Jolene. Margery tries to reconnect with Jason, but he's too angry to listen. She leaves. Pastor Greg tells him that "a man has one voice ... and we gotta take responsibility for that," meaning that Jason has to choose between being who he wants to be and being the angry child he is when he voices Tyrone. Then Pastor Greg leaves.

Jason tries to separate from Tyrone but Tyrone won't let him. He bites Jason's finger, then tries to bite his neck. Jason pounds Tyrone with a hammer and throws him off. He wraps a towel around his finger and the towel becomes Tyrone. He is about to attack his hand with the clawed end of the hammer when his mother runs in and tries to intervene. He hits her hand and she

¹ Homecoming is an annual tradition in the United States. High schools come together, usually in late September or early October, to welcome back alumni and former residents. It is built around a central event, such as a dance and a game of American football. The activities vary widely but they usually consist of a football game played on a school's home football field, activities for students and alumni, a parade featuring the school's choir, marching band, and sports teams, and the coronation of a homecoming queen (and at many schools, a homecoming king). A dance commonly follows the game or the day following the game. When attached to a football game, homecoming traditionally occurs on the team's return from the longest road trip of the season.

screams. The shock is enough to bring him back to his senses and they reconnect. Pastor Greg returns and then leaves to get the car. They rise together and leave to get help.

Epilogue:

Tyrone returns menacingly. He explains that humans have always needed scapegoats (*Sündenbock*). First it was actual sheep, lambs, babies, then it was Jesus Christ. He wonders if someday we won't need to put the blame on others, if we'll accept that being human means having all of these feelings, good, bad and otherwise.

Exercise: Interpreting a theatre review

Have your students read the following review of the Broadway production of *Hand to God* and answer the questions at the end.

Difficulty: easy medium **hard** challenging

Alexis Soloski reviews the Broadway production at the Booth Theatre in NYC:

It's right there in the Book of Matthew: "If thy right hand offend thee, cut it off." Most of us accept that Jesus spoke figuratively, but in *Hand to God*, a savage, often hilarious, and profoundly irreligious satire by Robert Askins, young Jason takes a fundamentalist approach to scripture. Yes, it's his left hand that's troubling him and no, there isn't a sword or a cleaver around, but maybe that handy hammer will help him to sin no more.



Poor Jason is a forlorn teenager stuck in his mother's Christian puppetry workshop, the Christketeers, somewhere in suburban Texas. With his father newly dead and his mother increasingly frazzled, Jason seeks and finds some consolation in Tyrone, the red-haired sock puppet he has made. But when Jason's anxieties

become unbearable, Tyrone turns darker and meaner and well, kind of Satanic. He can cause doors to slam and lightbulbs to burst. "You want the devil? I'll give you the devil," Tyrone says. Then his polycotton head spins around, Exorcist-style.

Askins's script, directed by Moritz von Stuelpnagel, often betrays an adolescent desire to shock and scandalise. Monologues that open and close the show spell out the religious critique too baldly. Some of the motivations are explained away tidily and a lot of the humour is puerile. But the puerile bits are particularly funny. (Though be forewarned: puppet fellatio is something you can't unsee.) Askins is smart and engaged enough that even the play's most outrageous actions seem grounded in character.

Steven Boyer, a slight and moon-faced blond who looks at least a decade younger than he is, plays both Jason and Tyrone, most often at the same time. Jason isn't a ventriloquist and neither is Boyer. You can always see his lips moving. This suggests that Tyrone is just a fuzzy manifestation of

his id, though that doesn't exactly explain those lightbulbs. And to see Tyrone spew his insults and obscenities and threats ("Fun fact number two: The smallest of cuts to the Achilles' tendon will cripple a man for life"), while Jason observes him in silent shame and horror is enough to make you think they're played by different actors. Geneva Carr is quite good as Jason's hectic Mom, Michael Oberholtzer as his bad-boy rival, Sarah Stiles as his nerdy love interest, Marc Kudisch as a milquetoast pastor.



But it's Tyrone we've come to see. At the seeming end, a sort of glooming peace is achieved, which almost feels like a kind of let down. But then Tyrone is back again, to deliver his own gospel. "Miss me?" he asks. Oh, yes.

Questions about the review to answer:

1. Who are the fictional Christketeers? What real group is the playwright satirising with this name?
2. Did Jesus really say in the Book of Matthew (5:30) "If they right hand offend thee, cut it off"? What did he mean by that?
3. What does it mean that the head of Tyrone the puppet "spins around Exorcist-style"?
4. The reviewer says that the playwright wants to "shock and scandalise"? How is shock different to scandalise?
5. The reviewer also says that a lot of the playwright's humour is "puerile"? What does that mean? Can you make your own example of puerile humour?
6. According to the reviewer, the puppet seems to be a "manifestation of the main character's id". What is a person's "id" and how is it different to a person's "super-ego"?
7. The reviewer writes about how the main character "spews his insults and obscenities and threats". How is "spew" different to "say" or "deliver"? "What is an "obscenity"?

Possible answers:

1. The Christketeers are a fictional puppeteering group: a group that performs shows for an audience with puppets. The name is a combination of the Disney "Mouseketeers" and Jesus Christ.
2. The actual quote from the King James Bible (1611) is "And if thy right hand offend thee, cut it off, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell." It's important to understand the context: that Matthew was writing about adultery (Ehebrechen). Theologians and other scholars would argue that Jesus (or Matthew) was using the shock value of these words to warn his followers to monitor the heart so that no sin could sneak in. The Luther translation of the same passage is: "Wenn dich deine rechte Hand verführt, so hau sie ab und wirf sie von dir. Es ist besser für dich, dass eins deiner Glieder verderbe und nicht der ganze Leib in die Hölle fahre."
3. The Exorcist was an American film released in 1973 about a girl who becomes possessed by the devil (like it sometimes seems that Tyrone has been). At one point in the film, the girl's head spins around 360 degrees (which is physically impossible for the human body, as it would kill us).
4. "Puerile" is an adjective that means "childishly silly and immature". In German it would be "kindisch". It is often used to describe a person's humour or argument, and sometimes their behaviour.
5. As verbs and actions, "shock" and "scandalise" are very close in meaning. "Shock" is more neutral in tone and simply means "to surprise someone strongly". In contrast, "scandalise" means to surprise someone negatively, to horrify them", something like "empören".
6. In Freud's model of human psychology, he separates people's mind, or better said, their psyche into three agents. The id is the primitive, instinctive agent that operates in our unconscious and controls our biological needs and desires (food, warmth, sex, etc.) It doesn't ask questions; it simply feels a need and sends a signal to us to meet that need. On the other end is our super-ego, which plays a critical, moral role. In other words, the super-ego looks at our actions and thinks: is this okay, is this acceptable, is this the right thing to do, is this who I really want to be? In many ways, religious doctrine directly addresses our super-ego. Jason's super-ego would ask "Is this the Christian thing to do? Is this the right thing to do? Will I spend eternity in hell if I do this?" In German this would be the difference between the "Es" and the "Über-ich".
7. "Spew" is a very graphic or visual verb related to the German word "speien". The puppet doesn't simply say his insults. They come out of him like a fountain!

Exercise: Word Search

Have your students search the puzzle and circle the names of different people and places mentioned in Hand to God. For additional work, and medium difficulty, have them break into groups and figure out who these people are.

Difficulty: **easy** medium hard challenging

Hand to God Word Search

The names of different people and places mentioned in Hand to God are hidden in the puzzle below. Circle them when you find them.

F G F K Y A B O B I I H I O M
Y Y H E Q A U O Z S G O U M A
Z N S O D P E X N P R P A K H
C H R I S T K E T E E R S J A
J E K Y L T V C Q P G H O D R
G C T A H E B C H E I L T I B
C H H O T T A U R R E G T F A
H I J S L A O Y S N I A G T S
A C I S S E J M E T F S K Y U
F K N I E V E I I H E Y T R S
K F K O Q V F B P T I R R O E
X I P A S T O R T W J I S N J
D L D M G A W P M L V H P E T
N A T Y U A J L P Z K Z G J G
J O K P K O G V A I N R A N P

ABRAHAM _____

CHICK-FIL-A _____

CHRIST _____

CHRISTKETEERS _____

EVE _____

GHOSTBUSTERS _____

GREG _____

ISAAC _____

JASON _____

JEKYL _____

JESSICA _____

JESUS _____

JOLENE _____

LOT _____

MARGERY _____

NARNIA _____

PASTOR _____

PIGGY _____

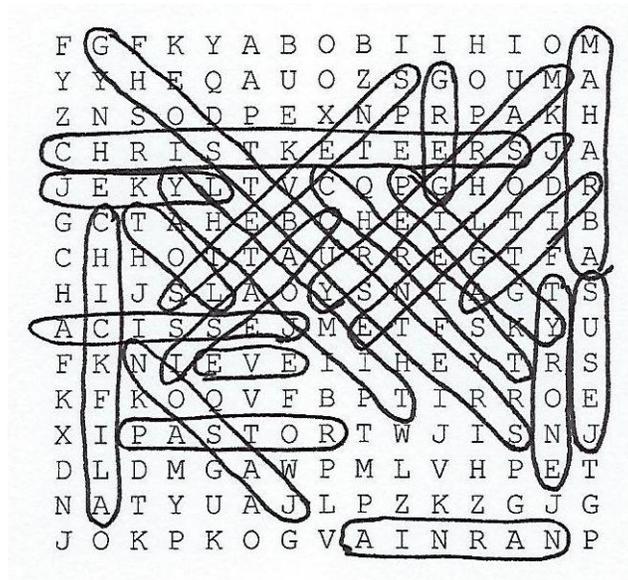
RITA _____

STEVENS _____

TIMOTHY _____

TYRONE _____

Word Search Solutions



ABRAHAM *The father of all Jews*

CHICK-FIL-A *A fast-food chain in the US*

CHRIST *The title given to Jesus*

CHRISTKETEERS *A church puppeteering group*

EVE *The woman in the Garden of Eden*

GHOSTBUSTERS *A film comedy from 1980s*

GREG *The pastor's name in the play*

ISAAC *The son of Abraham*

JASON *The main boy's name in the play*

JEKYL *A fictional doctor in a horror story*

JESSICA *The girl's name in the play*

JESUS *The son of God in the Bible*

JOLENE *Jessica's puppet's name*

LOT *A Bible story Margery wants to enact*

MARGERY *The mother's name in the play*

NARNIA *A fictional world behind a closet*

PASTOR *Greg's job in the play*

PIGGY *Miss Piggy is a funny Muppet pig*

RITA *Margery's puppet's name*

STEVENS *Jason and Margery's last name*

TIMOTHY *The bully's name in the play*

TYRONE *Jason's puppet's name*

Exercise: Writing your own theatre review

Have your students read the following instructions and write their own review of Hand to God at the English Theatre Frankfurt. Submit the reviews to our Education department at education@english-theatre.de for a chance to have their reviews recognized and shared.

Difficulty: easy **medium** hard challenging

How to write your own theatre review

It's not as hard as you might think. Just keep the following ideas in mind:

Purpose

The purpose of a theatre review is two-fold:

- (1) to give the reader a sense of the play and
- (2) to let them know what you liked or didn't like about the production.

Structure

Follow this clear structure to write your first theatre review (the basic examples are from Jekyll & Hyde:

Paragraph 1 Introduce the production: what did you see? Where did you see it?

Last Thursday I saw Jekyll & Hyde at the English Theatre Frankfurt. It's a musical thriller with music by Frank Wildhorn and a book and song lyrics by Leslie Bricusse, who has written songs for many famous movies. The production has a small cast of very powerful singers and talented musicians.

Paragraph 2 Give a short summary of the plot: what happens when or how?

The story is based on the novel "The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde" by Robert Louis Stevenson. It's about a scientist who uses chemistry to separate the "evil" and the "good" within humankind. The evil side takes control of him and destroys him. It takes place in London during the Victorian era, when people were focused more on appearing respectable than actually behaving that way. It's a warning to us that, if we do not pay more attention to our real feelings, we could allow darkness to grow within us until it takes control. That's very relevant today when many of us use social media to create a false image of our lives as happy, lucky, beautiful people and do not accept that sometimes we are sad or angry, unlucky and unattractive.

Paragraph 3 Discuss the acting and directing: how were the performances?

First I have to say that the cast is full of very strong singers. I was especially impressed by John Addison in the lead roles of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde and Matt Bond as Spyder and Lord Savage. The two female leads, Clodagh Long and Samantha Dorsey, sounded best when they were singing duets with the Dr. Jekyll. The action was sexy and moved quickly but it was sometimes funny when it should have been serious. It was an odd choice to have the murdered priest walk back onstage and lie down after the interval.

Paragraph 4 What did you think of the lighting, costumes, set, sound, music?

The set was very impressive. It made Dr. Jekyll look like he was an experiment of all the others, who looked down onto him. The lighting was good for setting the right mood:

dark, erotic, scary. There's a good lighting effect when Hyde takes control, but I won't give it away. The costumes made it clear who was part of the upper class and the lower class and this was important information to the story.

Paragraph 5 Summarize your overall impression of the experience, maybe giving it a star rating.

This show does not have any songs that get stuck in your head like some shows (Hamilton, Tanz der Vampire). However, the atmosphere is good, the story moves along quickly and the performers are all very strong singers. I would therefore recommend the show and give it three stars out of five. (★★★ - -)

Now you've read a complete sample review. After you see Hand to God, write your own review of the show. But don't wait too long; it's much easier to do when the impressions are all fresh in your minds!

For your information... (not an exercise)

Who is Robert Askins

From his interview with Christopher Wallenberg, Globe Correspondent, on January 6, 2017:

NEW YORK — Robert Askins has always been a rebellious soul. Growing up in Cypress, Texas, he was an angry, troubled teen with a self-destructive streak. He got drunk, smoked pot, and cut classes. In college at the Baptist-affiliated Baylor University, he found his passion in writing plays. But even there, the explicit sexuality and violence of his plays raised the hackles of some of his teachers and fellow students.

“I’ve always been a contrarian and always really thrilled at ‘You can’t do that on television. You shouldn’t do that.’ It’s like, ‘You know what? I’m going to do it,’” says Askins, with a laugh.

Tucked into a corner table at a coffee shop near his Brooklyn apartment, Askins says that all writers “vibrate on a different frequency.” For him, that frequency is “anarchic rage,” “lethal perversity,” and “sex, blood, and Jesus.”

“I want to see things on stage that I haven’t seen before or that I haven’t seen in a long time,” he says. “I get bored very easily. So I want to make people scream and cry and laugh.” Indeed, acerbic anger, surreal desperation, and subversive humor animate the action in Askins’s black comedy “Hand to God.”

Nominated for five Tony Awards including best play, “Hand to God” ran for nearly nine months on Broadway in 2015 after two previous runs at smaller off-Broadway stages. It centers on an awkward, troubled Texas teenager named Jason who whiles away his afternoons in the basement of his local Christian church, where his widowed mother, Margery, has taken over the congregation’s puppet ministry. Jason is alienated and grief-stricken. But his most pressing problem is that his arm seems to have become possessed by a satanic sock puppet named Tyrone, who spews hilariously vulgar insults and foul-mouthed blasphemies, while savagely calling out everyone in his path for their bad behavior.

Is Tyrone the product of Jason’s subconscious run amok, a coping mechanism for his adolescent angst, or a malign supernatural force?

“I actually think it’s extremely important that the play keep alive that central duality or even contradiction, which is that Tyrone is both a manifestation of Jason’s need to lash out but also an external force,” says David R. Gammons, director. “If it’s just, ‘Jason had a lot of problems so he created an imaginary friend on the end of his hand to help him navigate his anger, loss, and frustration,’ well, OK, that’s an after-school special. If Tyrone is just an evil force from without, that’s just a cheap horror movie.

“Somehow the two coexisting are what give the play its depth and its humanity, and both of those things can be true and shed light on each other.”

While “Hand to God” is a comedy — and an outlandish one at that — Gammons says it’s really about people dealing with grief, loneliness, and impulses they don’t understand.

“It’s the human heart underneath it that I really leaned into,” he says. “Yes, we laugh. Yes, we gasp. I hope that people will be genuinely shocked by some moments. But I think people will not walk away feeling like, ‘Oh, that was gross or gratuitous.’ Instead, I think they’ll walk away weirdly charmed by and moved by the world.”

Askins, 36, can trace the genesis of the play to some specifics of his own upbringing and turbulent teenage years. His mother ran a Christian puppet ministry in their conservative church, and he would perform shows for other children at preschools and Bible camps. He also sang with the choir and even preached for a little while when he was in high school. When he was 16, his father died and his rebelliousness amped up.

“A lot of my emotions were not expressed, which is part of the reason I think it came out in other behaviors. I wasn’t able to say to people, ‘I am hurting. This really feels bad.’ So some people who knew me during that period of time, when they see the play, they don’t see a comedy. They just see this [messed-up] kid acting out,” he says.

Still, he traces the development of his humor and facility with language to that youthful frustration. “If you just say a [expletive] thing, it lets them punish you. But if you say a really clever and awful thing, you’re Oscar Wilde,” he says.

In college at Baylor, Askins was exposed to all kinds of new writing. He cites Edward Albee, Sam Shepard, David Mamet, Martin McDonagh, and Sarah Kane as influences for the way they captured an inner turmoil and impulse for violence that’s part of our primal human makeup.

He was still tending bar at a Tex-Mex joint in Brooklyn up until “Hand to God” went into rehearsals on Broadway, and he occasionally fills in there to this day. Fortunately, he now has an HBO television pilot, “Brotherhood,” in the works, inspired by his time writing for a campus humor magazine at Baylor.

Despite his embrace of the personal, Askins says he resisted writing about home for a long time. “I’m a little bit hardheaded. I was writing these strange, heady idea plays about science and postmodernism.” Later, he tried imitating Shepard by penning dark, surreal westerns, but he moved away from that stylistic approach because ultimately it wasn’t his own experience. “I eventually got to that place where the South is more Walmarts than it is fistfights in a muddy street, where it’s about mega-churches and not charismatic [Christianity],” he says.



“It’s a very different world, and it took me a long time to figure out that you have to find your own expression of what that place is. For me, it was comedy. It was going through the Sam Shepard of it all to get to the place that is not necessarily less dark, but just [expletive] funnier. So you can stand to look at how dark it is.”