“Leave[s] you beaming with joy,” a phrase that appeared in The New York Times in a review of *The Absolute Brightness of Leonard Pelkey*, is, critic Charles Isherwood conceded, an odd way to describe a play concerning the murder of an innocent, indeed angelic, teen boy. Isherwood is focusing on the way the play encourages us to smile at the memory of Leonard, a delicate and beautiful soul, to appreciate, nurture and adore his eccentricity.

Yet Isherwood seems to think the play is instructive at its core, that it is a guide to a better America, an America to which we might someday aspire. Implied in this formulation is that we’re
an intolerant, repressive people. Why are so many cultural elites so reluctant to release their grip on a model that is certainly false today, if it were ever true?

Leonard Pelkey was a Jersey Shore teen who glowed with life. His trademark item of attire was the rainbow-colored platform sneakers he made by gluing the soles of half a dozen different-colored flip-flops to the bottoms of his sneakers. He endeared himself to the local matrons by advising them on clothes and hairstyles, insisted on wearing fairy wings when playing Ariel in The Tempest, and wore mascara and nail polish. He stood out like a sunflower in a patch of weeds, and for being different he was murdered.

Leonard was gay, and in the off-Broadway one-man show The Absolute Brightness of Leonard Pelkey, actor James Lecesne, who also wrote the play, slips easily from playing the no-nonsense detective on the case to various townsfolk including middle-aged ladies, sulky teens, and a British drama teacher. The 75-minute play (at the Westside Theatre Downstairs) is a showcase for Lecesne’s mimicry. Robin Williams-style, he instantaneously changes his voice and bearing dozens of times, often mid-sentence. As a writer, Lecesne is soulful and sometimes even gently witty.

Still, Leonard Pelkey never existed. Does that matter?

The play is an impassioned cry, but one that has little to do with 2015 America. At times the New York theater world can seem like a closed system in which each member of the choir takes a turn preaching to the whole. Do we really need to be told that gay people deserve respect instead of bullying? Is there any theatergoer in New York who needed convincing on this point?

Lecesne, who adapted the play from his own young-adult novel, would no doubt argue that though Leonard didn’t exist and didn’t have a horrifying end, he might have. No doubt that is true—there could be a Leonard Pelkey-like case tomorrow. But it would be an extremely unusual event, the kind that would merit front-page news stories from coast to coast and fuel much somber commentary about whether we have made any progress whatsoever in accepting our gay brothers and sisters. A character in Lecesne’s play who makes the ominous discovery of one of Leonard’s sneakers floating in a pond wonders about the existence of evil:

“Can I ask you a personal question, Detective?... Do you believe in hell?...I’m just asking because not too long ago the Pope did away with Limbo. And I’m thinking Hell can’t be far behind. And I’m wondering what’s gonna
It is a fair question whether, in a post-Christian age, we risk becoming detached from our moral core, but Lecesne seems to think in terms of group guilt, a mass conspiracy of silence toward the rights of gay people to live and flourish. We all bear a degree of complicity in the wave of brutality and bullying and even murder. If you ask, “What wave of brutality and bullying and murder?” Lecesne’s response is, “Here is proof by a single example. An example that’s entirely fictitious.”

Lecesne’s vision is a dark one, one in which to be a gay teen is to exist with a target on your back. Throughout the play, there are hints that those close to Leonard told him to “tone it down,” to beware of predators such as the high-school bully who eventually kills him. It’s as if Lecesne’s contemporary Jersey Shore is not unlike Maycomb, Alabama, the setting of To Kill a Mockingbird, except gay people instead of blacks live in fear of being lynched. This seems to me sheer caricature. Was it ever, in fact, true that gay people had to live in fear of physical attack? The answer “Matthew Shepard” won’t do, both because the circumstances of the murder of that Colorado teen in 1998 turn out not to have been what we were told at the time and because a single case, or a handful of them, doesn’t prove the existence of widespread intolerance and loathing.

In the wake of the Supreme Court’s Obergefell ruling, there remain hotly contested areas pertaining to homosexuality, and we can expect dramatic court cases in which religious freedom will be challenged. But The Absolute Brightness of Leonard Pelkey sidesteps relevant conflicts and contents itself with slaying imaginary dragons.

The Absolute Brightness of Leonard Pelkey can be seen at the Westside Theatre Downstairs, New York, through October 4, 2015.

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