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Title: Jesus Hopped the 'A' Train

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1/22/2012—Saturday night, I saw a play at the New Hazlett Theater on the Northside in Pittsburgh, just a few blocks from our house. It was a powerful experience. The play is set largely at Rikers Island and examines the relationship among two prisoners—Angel Cruz and Lucius Jenkins—a lawyer representing Cruz and two prison guards, D'Amico and Valdez. It shows that I have religion on the brain that to me the central issue in the play is the role of religion, which was not much mentioned in Ben Brantley's review of the play in the New York Times in 2000. On the other hand, why this title if not to suggest a look at religion. The setup is that Jenkins is a serial killer about to be extradited to Florida for execution. He acts very much like he has found God and forgiveness since the killings, but we are not sure and the hint of Lucifer in his name just increases our doubts. Meanwhile, Cruz has shot a fraudulent cult leader in a sort of protest of the brainwashing of a friend. When the man dies later in the hospital, Cruz faces a serious murder trial that he has a good chance of winning. But Cruz feels tremendous guilt over his actions and, excessively, over everything wrong he has ever done. Before he leaves Rikers Island, Jenkins tempts Cruz to confess his guilt in the shooting in order to get right with God. In the end, nothing seems to have been gained. The good guard is blind to Jenkins' faults, the bad guard is filled with hatred, the lawyer whose motives are mixed is disbarred for suborning perjury, Jenkins is executed while high on drugs and Cruz is in prison for a long stretch without achieving any forgiveness from the God he longs to touch. Religion as portrayed in this play is a powerful, flawed crutch. Strong enough to mask pain for Jenkins and strong enough to push Cruz past gaming the system, but not good enough or true enough to bring redemption and transformation. The one character who protests the misuse of religion is Valdez, the bad guard, but his righteous protestations mask his own sadism. On the other hand, religion is the only thing these characters have. The characters who lack religion—D'Amico, the good guard and Cruz's lawyer—lack any sense of who they are and may be the furthest from transformation. Or maybe they need it less, in which case religion is a problem rather than a help. Without religion, Jenkins is just demons. Cruz, a street vigilante. With religion, they might be more.