

“The Boys Next Door” – A Hilarious & Touching Presentation

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REVIEW BY CARY GINELL

Tom Griffin’s play, *The Boys Next Door*, presents a sympathetic look at the mentally disabled through the eyes of a burned-out social worker. Elite Theater Company’s current production, which made its debut last night in Oxnard, deftly balances laughs and pathos with an extraordinary cast of indelible characterizations. As director James Castle Stevens told me after the show, 90% of his job was done as soon as the show was cast, and what a cast it is.

The show concerns four mentally handicapped men living together in a communal residence in Boston. Their overseer is Jack, a kindhearted but worn-out divorcee whose life has stalled as he looks after his charges. Jack is sympathetically played by the wonderful Shea Taylor, whose job it is to not only be the stabilizing force in the play, but to underplay the shenanigans by his “boys.” Even though your attention is drawn to the boys’ outrageous behavior, watch Taylor carefully. His blood doesn’t boil when mayhem occurs, he simply displays the resigned patience of Job. Jack has his hands full; after all, he is basically dealing with children in grown-ups’ bodies. When the man-child Lucien tries to wash dishes and ends up with soap all over his face, Jack doesn’t bat an eye, or even cast a helpless gaze skyward. Taylor’s consummate brilliance prevents the show from becoming a farce because he displays not only Jack’s humanity, but his character’s utter frustration at dealing with individuals who are incapable of learning or changing their behavior.

Justin Radford is Arnold, a manic-depressive who probably functions better in the real world than his three roommates. Arnold is a human bowl of Jello. He shakes, he stammers, he stutters, he thinks of twelve things at once, and has a penchant for mixing metaphors that make sense only to him. Like all the others in the house, Arnold has fixations on random objects, like rugs, and when he gets frustrated,

he packs a suitcase, puts on a ushanka hat, and sets off to catch a train to Russia. Like the others in the house, Arnold is deadly serious about his phobias and foibles, which is what makes the show so charming. Radford is perfect as Arnold; and watching his eyes dart about, you identify with Arnold's haphazard, skittish mind at work, with sparks flying from so many loose wires.

Shawn W. Lanz, one of Ventura County's most talented actors as well as directors, gives his finest performance ever as Norman, the sweet-natured doughnut-lover who just wants to like and be liked by others. Nobody enjoys life as much as Norman, and nobody tries as hard to be sociable. He has programmed himself to respond to doorbells with his full name and a welcome for his guests to sit down, although he often mixes up his words so that they come out, "I'm Norman Balansky, welcome to my chair, please have a home." When he goes to the community hall to dance, Lanz's joyous gyrations to the techno-rock music being played are exactly how we might expect Norman to dance: the random, ecstatic movements of a man whose heart is on his sleeve and who hides nothing from anyone. Norman's fixation is a massive set of keys, which he wears on a chain on his belt. They act as his security blanket and he only panics when someone tries to remove them. With his innocent love of life, Lanz makes you smile every moment he is on the stage.

Dan Tullis Jr. plays Lucien, the one member of the household who is probably the least able to function in the real world. Childlike, with a five-year-old's mentality, Lucien has a library card and borrows stacks of books that he has absolutely no capability of reading, if he could read at all. But Lucien is very tender-hearted and curious, and actually shows love and sympathy for his roommates when they encounter problems. At one startling point in the play, Tullis steps out of character, when Lucien appears before a board that is considering taking away his disability funds, in one of the most profound moments in the show.

Austin Miller plays Barry, a schizophrenic who has been tormented and traumatized by his abusive father (the esteemed Ron Rezac). Although Barry appears at first to be the most level-headed and sensible one of the four (he fancies himself a golf pro), he is the most

troubled and fragile of all of them. He is uncomfortably self-centered and carries on monologs directed at whomever might be within earshot, even Lucien, who has no understanding at all of the fine points of golf that he is imparting. You get the sense that Barry is the only one of the four who could be helped with proper therapy. Barry wants to have a relationship with his father, who he hasn't seen in nine years, but is paralyzed with fear when they finally reunite, unable to even lift his head to look him in the eye. His transformation into a near-catatonic state after their horrifying encounter is disquieting and profoundly sad. The rail-thin Miller, who has a majestic, Shakespearean voice and prodigious acting ability, is utterly devastating in this role.

In addition to Rezac, who is powerful in his role as Barry's father, the cast also includes the versatile Sharon Gibson in three roles, the wonderful Tosca Minotto as Sheila, a similarly challenged object of Norman's affection, and Dana Rehaume, as Arnold's employer and one of Barry's golf students.

The Boys Next Door brings to mind the shattering 1975 film about the mentally disabled, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, however, the main difference is the humanity with which Jack treats his four charges, which is more representative of what the mentally disabled need, making this play a much more loving portrait. Despite their handicaps, Arnold, Norman, Lucien, and Barry want just what everyone wants, but need the patience and understanding that Jack has provided for them, not to be treated like they were psychotics.

The show is admirably produced by Akira Dann with a sturdy and effective set design by Mike Carnahan. "The Boys Next Door" is highly recommended for all audiences – you will walk away entertained, moved, and above all, profoundly affected by this monumentally talented cast.

The Boys Next Door plays through April 6 at the Elite Theatre Company in Oxnard. For dates and showtimes, see the VC On Stage Calendar.

<http://vconstage.com/the-boys-next-door-a-hilarious-touching-presentation/>