

# On Stage

## *The Boys Next Door* at Elite Theatre

By [Matt McGee](#) 03/13/2014

As I was leaving home for the theater, there was that awkward moment when I had to tell my eager yellow lab, "Stay here, I'll be back," followed by, "keep an eye on things" before shutting the door. I'd pretended to give her a job, some independence, when in fact I'd only compartmentalized her.

When the lights came up on Elite Theatre's production of *The Boys Next Door*, the audience was faced with a similar moment. Here are the "damaged" personalities — four men with mental challenges — making us laugh with seeming non sequiturs we'd rather forget while we get on with our lives. Yet as soon as Arnold (Justin Radford) steps into the lights with his groceries (17 boxes of Wheaties), life in a pistachio-colored fishbowl is reflected right back at us.

Jack (Shea Taylor), their live-in assistant, calls this living situation "mainstreaming" and has to rein in the boys' behavior. Lucien (the amazing Dan Tullis Jr.), enters with a stack of 70-year-old Department of Agriculture reports. Lucien doesn't care what he's checked out of the library, only that he's checked it out. Right until the end, Lucien flaunts his library card like a critical piece of self-identification. Tullis uses his tiny tic-like movements, gestures and voice range so effectively that Lucien is completely genuine and void of stereotype.

Jack describes the boys' individual conditions. Barry (Austin Miller) spends much of the show in full golf regalia, fancying himself a coach. His price? \$1.13 per lesson, though by show's end he's lowered his price to a quarter. You'd have to be a fool to pass up lessons at that price, but be assured: His students get what they pay for. It is when Barry boasts about his father's former athletic prowess that the cracks begin to show. At one point dad was a football coach. At another he was with the Yankees. When Barry's father (the always excellent Ron Rezac) finally appears, we see the truth behind Barry's thin façade and how easily it shatters.

Meanwhile, Norman (Shawn Lanz) keeps putting on weight from all the doughnuts he's sneaking away from his job. Jack tells us that receiving all the broken doughnuts from his work is "an act of kindness," but he's since gained almost 20 pounds. Even Norman's girlfriend, Sheila (Tosca Minotto), takes notice. "She's no Skinny Minnie herself!" Norman defends.

And in Minotto, Lanz has a perfect equal. While Lanz delivers as excellent a performance as anyone is likely to see on our local stages, Minotto is every bit as charming, effective and powerful. Whether swaying to a song or hiding for a surprise party, there is Sheila with ever-present fannypack and flowing skirts, keeping stride. As the pair sways beneath a disco ball we witness an ideal couple — not only two damaged souls finding solace, but two actors who found the right groove and dance together perfectly.

The cast is beautifully rounded out by Dana Rheaume juggling two roles, and the multi-faceted Sharon Gibson, who moves chameleon like through three. With the help of costumer Beth Glasner and some spot-on direction, Gibson delivers some of the show's funniest moments without a hiccup.

Miller provides one of the show's finest passages when he boasts about the chocolates his father sends every Christmas. He tells of Wally, a former friend with whom he'd share his dad's annual gift. Wally would eat only the chocolate shell and keep all the insides stashed in a box. When Wally passes away and his family tosses out Wally's box of candy innards, Barry can't reconcile how people could be so callous as to discard the most valuable part.

Eventually, the boys' shenanigans push Jack into a minor meltdown. "Every time I lose my temper with these guys I hate myself for about a week. I deserve better. Or they deserve better. Someone deserves something." Jack finally sees they're all in the same boat, wanting the same thing: to love and be loved.

Through Mike Carnahan's set and James Castle Stevens' direction, it's easy to love and embrace the boys next door. And though their behavior may remind us of someone we'd rather ignore, there's no ignoring the affection and simple kindness in

each of these characters.

And as soon as it was over, I sped home to take my lab for a long walk around the park.

*The Boys Next Door through April 6 at Elite Theatre in Oxnard.  
For more information, call 483-5118 or visit  
[www.elitetheatre.org](http://www.elitetheatre.org).*