

## Theater review: 'The Boys Next Door' at Elite Theatre in Oxnard

*Elite Theatre takes poignant look at four men struggling to navigate life*

By Rita Moran for the Ventura County Star  
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Elite Theatre Company has gathered an exceptional cast to fill the extraordinary roles in Tom Griffin's "The Boys Next Door." The vivid acting that brings to the stage the lives of those struggling for bits of normality in a group home is so convincing that it's almost as if the four main characters simply walked onto the stage from the outside world. They are men whose challenges make it extremely difficult for them to lead a life that most people take for granted, which is one of the compelling reasons to see the play.

Each of the "boys" has problems, but with the help of a social worker they are able to cope, most of the time, in a Boston group home. Their limitations vary. Arnold (Justin Radford) speaks with a rapid-fire intensity that confuses even himself at times, yet still manages to hold a minor job cleaning up a theater. At the home, he takes care of the group's basic grocery shopping, though that in itself can be a problem, not because Arnold isn't doing due diligence but because the store staff takes advantage of him.

Norman (Shawn Lanz), too, holds a job, in a bakery whose tempting doughnuts helped make him a bit on the roly-poly side but still eminently huggable. Norman yearns for Sheila (Tosca Minotto), a similarly impaired woman he meets at a group dance, and their fumbling romance is one of the most tender highlights of the play.

Lucien (Dan Tullis Jr.) is the most handicapped of all, grappling with the alphabet, bringing home library books even though reading is far beyond his grasp.

Barry (Austin Robert Miller) is different from the others in that he is not mentally challenged but psychologically broken. He has a fixation that he is a golf pro, a dream that sustains him however precariously.

Director James Castle Stevens has brought together skilled players who enter into their characters' worlds with total commitment. Each actor makes the "boys" fascinating, but more importantly deeply human.

Jack (Shea Taylor) is the compassionate but often discouraged social worker who tries to keep these men content. He is new to the task but tries his best amid the emotional ups and downs of the situation.

The play, written in the 1980s, is still relevant and moving, with laughter that sometimes is shared by the men and sometimes arises from the surprises that occur as each of them tries to focus on his piece of reality. An underlying camaraderie helps them cope, most of the time.

Playing multiple supporting roles are the notable Sharon Gibson and Dana Rheaume.

Crises arrive frequently. Barry's father, who hasn't seen him for nine years, drops by, and it's immediately clear how Barry's entire life has been battered by the unseeing, unfeeling man who never really cared for the bright, sensitive boy. Played by Ron Rezac with gruff distance and a moment of physical cruelty, the man shatters what remains of Barry's psyche.

Most moving of all, though, is Tullis as Lucien, who has been called before a government committee to prove he still needs the program. Tullis first stumbles through Lucien's confused ABCs. Then he stands and becomes another Lucien, who delivers in stentorian tones an eloquent statement about who the "boys" are and the handicaps they weather. It's a message from his soul. And still, he adds, "I will not go away. And I will not wither because the cage is too small." It's a profound plea not to be forgotten, spoken in a way that audiences will not forget.

## The Boys Next Door

Tom Griffin's drama about four mentally handicapped men runs through April 6 at the Elite Theatre Company, 2731 S. Victoria Ave., Channel Islands Harbor, Oxnard. Performances are at 8 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays, 2 p.m. Sundays. Tickets are \$18 general, \$15 seniors and students. Call 483-5118 or visit <http://www.elitetheatre.org/>

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