

# Hospitality Knows No Boundaries

By Jim Spencer and Shirley Lorraine for the Ventura Breeze  
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Some subjects are still handled with kid gloves. Mental disabilities is one of them. In the Elite Theatre Company's current production of Tom Griffin's *The Boys Next Door*, such delicate differences are handled with care and empathy.

The play follows four differently-abled roommates through their daily lives in an independent living group home. Each has challenges that annoy the others and yet they all get along. Sounds just like the average family. The play is surprisingly simple with few plot machinations. Instead, it relies primarily on the characters themselves to move the action.

The boys are Arnold (Justin Radford), a nervous young man with advanced OCD and a need for order; Lucien (Dan Tullis Jr.), a gentle man with the IQ of a child under ten; Norman (Shawn W. Lanz), a substantial young man with a penchant for donuts; and Barry (Austin Miller), a schizophrenic who firmly believes he is a golf pro. Their social worker Jack (Shea Taylor) tries to keep them in check on a day-to-day basis.

Secondary, but pivotal characterizations are provided by Tosca Minotto as Sheila, Norman's love interest; Sharon Gibson in several small but key scenes, Dana Rheume as several characters, and Ron Rezac as Barry's domineering and abusive father.

Directed with sensitivity by James Castle Stevens, the action gives the audience insights into the needs of each young man. The first act sets up each character, while in the second act the audience really begins to be immersed in their worlds. Several seemingly small events are played to theatrical advantage, eliciting empathetic reactions from the audience.

Radford, as Arnold, is the leader of the group, having the most to say on any subject. He is suitably flighty, both physically and mentally, as he analyzes every action, both his and others.

Shawn W. Lanz is endearing as the rotund Norman. Gentle scenes at the community dance with his girlfriend Sheila are both poignant and touching.

Seasoned professional Dan Tullis Jr. further stretches his theatrical wings as Lucien, shining in a moment where the audience is treated to what Lucien is thinking, rather than what he can actually articulate.

Austin Miller, as Barry, seemingly the most normal of the group, is, in truth, the most broken as he portrays Barry's mental illness at a deeper level.

The play is filled with laughter – not at the inadequacies of the characters, but at the humanity they possess. Each has challenges and copes as best he can, as we all do. As the play progresses, we come to appreciate each of them individually. When Jack makes a decision to change jobs, everyone is impacted for a time, and then life continues.

Opening the Elite's season, which has an emphasis on comedy, *The Boys Next Door* is a marvelous beginning. As Norman says "...welcome to my home. Won't you take a seat?"

*The Boys Next Door* plays Fridays and Saturdays at 8 p.m. and Sundays at 2 p.m. through April 6 at the Elite Theatre Company, 2731 S. Victoria Ave., Oxnard. 483-5118.  
[www.EliteTheatre.org](http://www.EliteTheatre.org).

<http://www.venturabreeze.com/3.5.14.pdf>