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Journeyman Handle A Sensitive Topic Well

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Tom Griffin's play "The Boys Next Door" focuses on the everyday lives of four mentally and emotionally challenged young men. The play veers between poignant drama and crackling comedy and is shaping up to be a hit for the second-year Journeyman Theater Ensemble. Performing in Crystal City's crumbling Clark Street Playhouse, the sophomore troupe had an enthusiastic full house on hand on opening night, a feat the more established theater companies that share the venue might envy.

Director Jeff Keenan and his cast of nine have crafted a tight ensemble effort that simply ignores the awkward foundation of comedy based on the very real frailties and eccentricities of people living with disabilities and barrels straight ahead, no holds barred. They plunge into the darker realities with abandon, creating sensitive moments out of ragged, raw emotion. Sometimes audiences don't know what to make of this play. Several minutes in, as they realize they are laughing at, and not with, disabled people, an uneasy silence mushrooms. But that was not the case in the debut performance here, as the cast carried the audience past that point of uncomfortable self-awareness and into a surrendering of concern for propriety.

The actors' efforts to create "funny" mannerisms goes just far enough over the top to not lose the sense that these men carry grindingly heavy burdens. That may be Griffin's message: that these are just people like everyone else and that it's permissible to laugh at their weaknesses, just as we would do with those whose disabilities may not be so evident.

This production reunites director Keenan with actors Deborah Kirby and Cecil E. Baldwin, the team that staged the absorbing two-person drama "The Colorado Catechism" last season. And while this is an ensemble effort, Kirby and Baldwin are first among equals. Kirby has taken on what is usually a male role, Jack, the caring but weary social worker who watches over the "boys" in their group home, and Baldwin is the hyper-intense and super-nerdy Arnold, the "marginal" one whose insecurities provide much of the energy that keeps the house humming. Baldwin's performance is much less subtle than the rest of the cast's, perhaps because he carries the critical opening minutes of the play, when the parameters of what is acceptable to find funny are set. His portrayal is so amusing it is difficult to not loosen up.

The other "boys" are Lucien, a mentally challenged, almost incoherent and seemingly innocent creature played with affection and a soft touch by Dallas Dartanian Miller; Norman, the mentally challenged but determined doughnut shop worker, played by Don Prather, who has a sweet romance with Sheila, played with edgy charm by Becky Peters; and Arnold, a deeply wounded schizophrenic who lives his fantasies, played by Michael Propster in some of the play's most intensely dramatic moments. Kirby holds the story line together, narrating the individual plot lines as she pours out her character's frustrations in a carefully controlled and understated portrayal. Without knowing anything about Griffin's qualifications to write about people living with the various conditions depicted here, it is impossible to judge the characterizations. He is obviously confused about how government works, however, as he has Lucien appear before the U.S. Senate to seek reinstatement when the bureaucracy rules he no longer qualifies for government assistance. The inappropriate scene provides a touching moment, though, as we suddenly go inside Lucien's head and hear his thoughts elegantly expressed without the jumble of mental retardation, as he feels them. A similar moment ends the first act, as Norman and Sheila shed their ugly-duckling facades and become swans gracefully waltzing into the night. It's a triumphant reminder that real people exist behind the masks of disability.

"The Boys Next Door," performed by Journeyman Theater Ensemble, continues through Oct. 15 at the Clark Street Playhouse, 601 S. Clark St., Crystal City. Showtime is 7:30 p.m. Wednesdays and Thursdays; 8 p.m. Fridays; and 2 p.m. and 8 p.m. Saturdays. For tickets and information, visit <http://www.journeymentheater.org> or call 202-248-2295.