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## St. Mike's offers poignant portrayal of the developmentally disabled

By Jim Lowe, Times Argus Arts Editor

**COLCHESTER** – “The Boys Next Door” is Tom Griffin’s poignant – and very entertaining – story of four developmentally disabled men living in a supervised apartment in Boston, and the St. Michael’s Playhouse Equity professional production, which opened this week at St. Michael’s College, proved sensitive as well as emotionally charged.

The power of “The Boys Next Door” comes from an accurate depiction of the heartbreaking difficulties of being “different” in American society. Though written in the ‘80s, the depictions remain largely accurate, save for a few comments about treatment. What makes the story so fascinating and poignant, is what these four men have in common with the rest of the world, not what makes them different.

Directed by Peter Harrigan, one of St. Michael’s Playhouse’s co-artistic directors, this production is appropriately simple and straightforward, and benefits from some fine and beautiful portrayals. Perhaps one of the most accurate was Patrick Flanagan’s of Mark, the exasperated mental health worker responsible for the men. Flanagan conveys the difficulty of essentially parenting these difficult people, missing out on much of “normal” life to be there for them, yet still loving them.

The overly compulsive and mildly retarded Arnold is played by Mark Nash, artistic director of Vermont Stage. Nash gave a very natural performance of this very unnatural person who nearly falls apart whenever anything not planned happens, and focuses on any one thing seemingly endlessly.

Kevin Maurice Butler is Lucien P. Smith, with the mind of a child “somewhere between 5 years old and an oyster,” but with a heart of gold. Butler brings across an understanding of Lucien exasperation at his inability to understand, yet beautifully childlike-nature in his enthusiasm for every bit of life. When the state yanks Lucien’s funding, his testimony before some state senators proved a heart-breaking but powerful moment.

Ross Williams’ donut-loving Norman Bulansky is perhaps the most fun. Retarded, he works in a donut shop and the manager misguidedly gives the burgeoning young man all the leftovers. Ross and Kelley Veronica Lambert as Sheila, a young woman with similar problems, display real sensitivity in their touchingly real teen-like courtship, an ordinary part of life that the public and mental health establishment often tries to withhold.

John Gardiner plays Barry, purportedly a compulsive schizophrenic, who offers golf lessons, though he likely has never played. In one of the play’s few missteps (not the production’s), it implies that **Barry got that way because of an abusive father, realistically and scarily played by Vermont actor John D. Alexander.** (Schizophrenia is caused genetically, not by childhood experiences.) Still, Gardiner successfully conveyed the severe frustration of not being able to find a place of his own in this world.

Most of all, though, the production conveyed the wanton mistreatment of these very real people that have real difficulties in dealing with life. But, it also offers the hope that these men, their paid support and the public are able to offer. Although the play is no literary masterpiece, Wednesday’s performance proved one poignant evening of theater.