

Transcript: Connie Meng Review aired Thursday, July 3, 2003

The Boys Next Door

St. Michael's Playhouse, Colchester, VT

From Tuesday, July 1 to Saturday, July 12, 2003

THE BOYS NEXT DOOR by Tom Griffen is a very moving play about four mentally disabled adult men who share an apartment. Although it has many comic moments, the play is ultimately very powerful theatre, which explores the lives and dreams of these men and those of their caregiver. These characters make it clear that mental disability comes in many forms, each with its own problems and triumphs.

Director Peter Harrigan, his designers and his talented cast have done a splendid job of bringing this play to life. The apartment set by John Paul Devlin is up to his usual high standard, as is Jeffrey Salzberg's lighting. Good use of projections stage left and right help localize the action.

This is truly an ensemble cast that works together beautifully. The four boys of the title all give excellent performances, including consistent and believable physicalizations.

As the compulsive and edgy Arnold, Mark Nash plays the honesty of the character, and we can see that he really is, as he says, lost on his way to Russia. John Gardiner plays the damaged schizophrenic Barry who is obsessed with golf. Only when he speaks of his father's gifts of chocolates do we begin to see his fear and withdrawal.

Norman Bulansky is played by Ross Williams, whose self-image is bound up in his keys and his job at the donut store. Kevin Maurice Butler plays Lucien P. Smith, who is trying to learn the alphabet song and is so very proud of his Spiderman tie.

All four are just wonderful in their roles, and each character has a moment when the action stops and he steps forward to show us the potential of what he could have been. Perhaps the most striking moment is Lucien's monologue at the Senate hearing when a mature Lucien emerges like a butterfly from its cocoon.

Kelly Veronica Lambert is both physically and vocally perfect as Sheila, the apple of Norman's eye. Their scenes together are touching and funny and their dance at the end of Act I made me grope for a kleenex.

Mr. Klemper, Barry's father, is well played by John D. Alexander. Crippled both physically and emotionally, all he can offer Barry during his disastrous visit is a damaged heart. Bill Farley makes an all-too-brief appearance as Mr. Hedges, Barry's golfing student.

Jack, the caregiver, is beautifully played with warmth and humor by Patrick Flanagan. The emotionally draining nature of his job becomes apparent when he says, "They never change, but I do."

The rest of this large cast are all very good in their small roles. In this cast there are no small actors, only small parts.

A special performance by the Awareness Theater Company will be given on Sunday, July 6th at 4PM in the McCarthy Arts Center Recital Hall at St. Michael's. This company has been existence for five years. Its members are adults who receive services from Howard Community Services, the collaborator for the production of THE BOYS NEXT DOOR. There will also be post performance discussions following THE BOYS NEXT DOOR performances on Saturday, July 5, Wednesday, July 9, and Friday, July 11.

It's unusual to find a play of this depth in a summer season, and especially one that maintains such a high artistic level of production. Director Peter Harrigan is to be congratulated for giving us such a wonderful evening of theatre. This is a play not to be missed.

On a scale of one to five, the St. Michael's Playhouse production of THE BOYS NEXT DOOR gets five covered bridges. For North Country Public Radio, I'm Connie Meng.