Written by Mike Schulz
Friday, 10 July 2009 06:00

Director Lora Adams' Village Theatre production of *The Boys Next Door* opens and closes on the solitary figure of actor Jason Platt, and his portrayal here begs the question: Is there anything the man *can't* do?

Over the past 11 months, the local performer has played a distraught Argentinian in Quad City Music Guild's *Evita*; a tortured author in the Green Room's *Misery*; a sensible, gay nurse (and others) for the venue's two-part *Angels in America*; four romantic-comedy roles for the Richmond Hill Barn Theatre's *Almost, Maine*; and Nathan Detroit in the New Era Community Theatre's *Guys & Dolls*. Now, in playwright Tom Griffin's comic drama, Platt takes on the demanding character of Arnold - a man challenged by mild mental retardation and severe obsessive-compulsive disorder - and I'll be damned if he isn't wholly believable and almost unbelievably inspired in this role, too. What on earth is this guy putting in his breakfast cereal? Can we *all* have some?

Griffin's much-loved, mostly plotless *Boys Next Door* follows a quartet of roommates - three of whom are mentally challenged, one of whom is schizophrenic - through a couple of months spent in an assisted-living apartment. While the men socialize, bicker, and perform their daily functions, the play's stage action is routinely interrupted by commentary from Jack Palmer (Eddie Staver III), a caring social worker seeking a career change, and from Platt's Arnold, a ceaselessly talkative, easily agitated sort for whom nearly *any* change is unwelcome.

Yet while Jack is the character that audiences are inherently meant to relate to, one of this production's biggest, happiest surprises is that it's actually Arnold who becomes our unofficial surrogate. Exploring Griffin's theme of the limits of patience, Staver offers an empathetic and subtly emotional turn, suggesting Jack's inner struggle without pressing the point or resorting to melodrama. But in a role that could be played merely for well-meaning laughs (and the actor is

very, very funny in the part), Platt does something trickier: He makes you fully understand, and identify with, a man whose conversation is broken up into pause-laden fragments, who speaks in a series of non sequiturs, and who isn't even able to maintain basic eye contact.

As an acting feat, what Platt pulls off is topnotch - it's a graceful, imaginative performance both physically and vocally - but his work is haunting because of how thoroughly it reveals Arnold's soul. This mentally challenged figure isn't "just like the rest of us" because he's so fundamentally good, but because he's so cranky and paranoid and sensitive and hilarious - he's *specific*, just like the rest of us. One of the many joys of Griffin's script is that while his apartment-dwellers are designed to be lovable, that's never *all* they are, and Adams guides Platt and his castmates to such frequently wondrous work that 140 minutes in their company still doesn't feel like quite enough time spent with them.

In the role of Lucien, the most physically and mentally afflicted of the group, Jerry Wolking delivers an intensely risky portrayal that pays off to no end. Speaking in a high-pitched timbre, oftentimes so quickly that you have to really concentrate to make out what he's saying, the actor is so firmly in character that his performance borders on the alienating - which is just as it *should* be. Lucien is resolutely, unalterably in his own world, and Wolking provides a tour de force that gains in emotional heft when (in one of *The Boys Next Door*'s occasional turns toward the surreal) his character explains his predicament with the bearing and thoughtfulness of a "normal" adult. It's a startling, heart-rending moment, and in Wolking's hands, an unforgettable one.

Matt Mercer's Norman, with his shared fondness for doughnuts and the mentally challenged Sheila (a marvelously expressive and touching Denise Yoder), offers buoyant light comedy and ingratiating naturalism; you never catch Mercer straining for his effects, and he brings winning vitality to Norman's confusion, frustration, and continued good cheer. And the terrific Jacob Kendall - MIA from area stages, and much-missed, since his 2007 graduation from St. Ambrose University - lends the production wonderfully dry wit and shattering ache as the schizophrenic Barry. Playing the most seemingly centered (yet badly damaged) of *Boys*' central quartet, Kendall delivers his deeply humane and focused performance with a power that sneaks up on you, and is never more effective, or moving, than during the scene in which Barry has a disastrous confrontation with his long-absent father. (Speaking of MIA, Barry's one-armed dad is portrayed by Damien Cassini, whom I haven't seen on-stage since Black Hawk College's *Going Underground* in 2007. It would be to the great benefit of local audiences if this forceful, wildly entertaining performer picked up more acting gigs *pronto*

.)

With Mike Kelly and Patti Flaherty each enacting a trio of character roles - some broader than others, all of them enjoyable - Adams' cast exudes radiant delight in their material and in one another ... and I can only imagine that the radiance will increase once the show actually *opens*. Due to a weekend chockablock with new theatrical productions, I wound up seeing *The Boys Next Door* at its Wednesday-night technical/dress rehearsal, and while there were still a few tech elements that (understandably) required polish, the show was already in tip-top shape. Designed by Michael Kopriva, Michael McPeters, and the director, the show's set appeared beautifully lived-in; the sound and lighting effects (by Adams, McPeters, and Chris Ryder) were evocative and strong; and Adams' staging was elegant even during the on-stage mania - and *supremely* elegant when, as with Lucien, Norman and Sylvia briefly escaped their infirmities and shared a lovely, imaginary *pas de deux*. It proved a fitting end to Act I, as this entire *production* seems to be dancing.

For tickets and information, call (309)738-2540.