

Good Grief: "Rabbit Hole," at the Richmond Hill Barn Theatre through August 23

Written by Mike Schulz

Monday, 17 August 2009 06:00

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Although its script is a great deal funnier than you might be expecting, the profound senses of heartbreak and loss that fuel David Lindsay-Abaire's *Rabbit Hole* tend to sneak up on you and hit like waves, knocking you off balance and leaving you somewhat shaken. Anyone attending the Richmond Hill Barn Theatre's current presentation of the playwright's family drama is advised to bring tissues. (Unless you go the route I did, and surreptitiously dry your cheeks during scene-change blackouts.) Yet there's something else you might also want to bring, something I hadn't anticipated through a mere reading of this Pulitzer Prize-winner: a bib.

Lindsay-Abaire's characters, here, are mourning the loss of a four-year-old boy, and one of *Rabbit Hole*

's smartest, most understated motifs finds them doing what people are *oftentimes*

doing when they mourn - eating. Neither the playwright nor director Bryan Tank make a big, showy deal of it, but nearly every scene here features the copious consumption of drool-inducing sweets: crème caramel, cake, tortes, and other delicacies. And following Thursday's curtain call, several audience members seemed positively obsessed with the desserts on display, including the woman who exited alongside me, and said with a chuckle, "I want the recipe for those lemon squares."



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She was, however, also dabbling away tears when she said it, and her reaction seemed to encapsulate Richmond Hill's *Rabbit Hole* to perfection; the show makes you cry, makes you laugh, and makes you hungry. I think Lindsay-Abaire himself would love that combined response, as I hope Tank would, because it underlines what the author's trenchant, haunting play is all about: our inspiring ability to cope with unspeakable anguish through humor and the pleasures of the mundane.

Time and again, characters here find (momentary) solace in the most minor of comforts - a home movie, an amusing reminiscence, a slice of zucchini bread - and it's that surface banality that allows Tank and his exemplary cast to pinpoint the characters' pain without overplaying the suffering. *Rabbit Hole* celebrates the life-sustaining joys of *simplicity*, and Richmond Hill's production is a thoughtful, honest, and hugely entertaining exploration of grief, performed with unflinching wit and frequently devastating emotional accuracy.



As Becca, the young mother who manages her agony through endless busywork and the gradual removal of her son's belongings, Jessica Nicol is outstanding, and the actress is so *frequently*

outstanding at Richmond Hill that this might seem like old news. In *Rabbit Hole*

, however, the directness and open-heartedness we generally associate with Nicol are tempered by a somewhat chilly inscrutability; Becca says what's on her mind, but the performer's guarded stare and tight-lipped smile tell you she's never saying *everything*

that's on her mind. As she did in 2006's *Proof*

, Nicol allows you to read dazzling layers of subtext here, and when Becca's bottled-up emotions occasionally spill out, they do so in unexpected bursts that appear to surprise the actress as much as the audience. It's a beauty of a performance - subtle yet wrenching, and at times richly comedic.

Nicol's co-stars, meanwhile, give *Rabbit Hole*'s lead all the support she could ask for and *then* some. Denise Yoder, delivering the latest in her blessedly lengthy list of superb 2009 portrayals, brings absolute focus and a spirited sense of fun to the proceedings, playing Becca's sister Izzy as a terminal screw-up now stuck in the unfamiliar role of mediator. In Yoder's inspiringly selfless turn, you seem to be watching the ne'er-do-well Izzy grow up right before your eyes, and she and Nicol share a sisterly camaraderie and biting competitiveness that's effortlessly

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truthful. (And, in more than a few scenes, hilarious.) Jonathan Grafft, as Becca's husband Howie, has a series of lovely, low-key moments in which his grief over the loss of his son dovetails with his fear of losing his wife, while Kevin Maynard is marvelously honest and unforced in the tricky role of Jason, the teen whose presence threatens to tear

Rabbit Hole

's family apart.



As for Susan Perrin-Sallak, playing Becca's and Izzy's straight-talking mother Nat, I'm thrilled to report that the actress' extraordinary presence, bountiful talent, expressive voice, and unassailable timing are - *finally* - put in service of a role wholly deserving of her gifts. Over the past five years, Perrin-Sallak has always been fantastic, but until now, she's only had minor, frequently farcical roles in which to demonstrate that. Yet

Rabbit Hole

provides her with something else entirely: a meaty, beautifully written character in which she makes you weep with laughter one instant (Nat's take on Michael Kennedy's fatal skiing accident - "

Idiot

!" - is a black-comedy riot) and weep with empathy the next. (Her wordless act of lifting a tiny pair of shoes is a supreme heart-melter.) Given Tank's generous, smartly paced helming and Jennifer Kingry's typically first-rate technical direction, Richmond Hill's latest is sensational, and yes, those desserts might make your tummy growl. Chances are, however, that you'll leave just as hungry, if not

more

so, for your next stage encounter with Susan Perrin-Sallak.

For tickets, call (309)944-2244 or visit RHPlayers.com .

For more information on *Rabbit Hole* - including interviews with director Bryan Tank and Richmond Hill Players board president Angela Rathman - see

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[Down the Rabbit Hole](#)

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[: The Richmond Hill Barn Theatre Takes A\(nother\) Risk with a Pulitzer Prize-Winning Drama](#)

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