

# 2nd Story's Boys Highlights Characters' Humanity

Rhode Island has the highest population of persons living with disabilities in New England according to U.S. Census data. It makes sense that Tom Griffin's 1988 play, *The Boys Next Door*, which is about four adults with various diagnoses living in a shared apartment, resonates with Rhode Island audiences. The script in turns humanizes the "boys" and those who care for them and gives us problematic lines that otherize those living with disabilities. 2nd Story Theatre provides a solid production that is not without its issues.

The audience is seated around the apartment. Low partial walls designate the boundaries of the interior of the communal living area shared by the "boys." To the left and right are doorways that mirror each other, as seen in many apartment buildings. There are archways that serve as a door to the outside world, the bathroom and bedrooms that we never see. The set only contains two chairs and an entryway bench, all used to keep the actors moving in a way that never gets boring for the audience. In some scenes, the apartment is transformed into the dance floor at a community center. The lighting is so good, the furniture seems to disappear and we can focus solely on the characters' dance drama.

The cast of *The Boys Next Door* is phenomenal. Christian O'Brien, as Jack Palmer, talks about the burnout of the job, how he changes but the "boys" do not. O'Brien gives us a Jack who is trying to be engaged with a job about which he obviously cares deeply, but mostly succeeds in listlessly flopping into a chair to have conversations that have clearly happened many times before. Marlon Carey as Lucien, Frank Iaquina as Barry, Joe Henderson as Norman, and Ashley Hunter Kenner as Sheila are all sweet, funny and human. They do not play up the disability, they all play the human living with a disability.

Luis Astudillo is the stand-out performer of this cast. He plays Arnold Wiggins, a self-described "nervous individual" who is always concerned about something. He is easily taken advantage of by a store manager and a co-worker, giving us some of the most heartbreaking lines of the play. At the same time, Astudillo brings out the humor and humanity of Arnold in such a way that keeps the audience laughing out loud throughout the two hours the audience is visiting the communal residence.

While all of the actors take care to play each character as a full human being, not a single actor in this cast is living with a disability. It would be nice to see 2nd Story making an effort to give actors with disabilities the respect of being able to work alongside their abled counterparts.

However, not all of the characters are written in a way that would allow the theater to fully cast the show with differently-abled actors. In one very problematic monologue, Lucien (Marlon Carey) has been called to testify on his own behalf in a State Senate hearing. Lucien is being asked to talk about his life, and if he could fully integrate into the community. The character drops his disability in what can be seen as a "dream state." Lucien speaks clearly and articulately on his thoughts and feelings as a man living with mental retardation. Unfortunately, this monologue calls for the character to describe himself as "damaged" and "shattered." "I am here," says Lucien, "to remind the species of the species... without me, without my shattered crippled brain, you will never again be frightened by what you might have become. Or indeed, by what your future might make you." At this moment, the playwright sets up the

characters as being here for the benefit of abled people, and forgets that the characters have their own individual humanity just like the rest of us.

The script is problematic, sometimes painful, for those of us in the audience who are close to people who live with disabilities. There are also moments of true humanity, sweetness and humor to soothe the painful moments. The ensemble does each character justice in a way that emphasizes their humanity, rather than to focus and stereotype the disabilities. This play is worth taking a chance on.

*The Boys Next Door runs through October 29 at 2nd Story Theatre in Warren. You can purchase tickets at [2ndstorytheatre.com](http://2ndstorytheatre.com) or by calling the box office at 401-247-4200*