

No Simple Answers in Counter-Productions' *Gidion's Knot*

"We watch the war and we write about the great deeds done or the horrors done. And that is how God remembers you - the way we write you. And no other way."

- *Johnna Adams, Gidion's Knot*



Victoria Ezikovich as Heather

Valerie Remillard as Corryn

Photo credit: Jason Talbot

The term "Gordian Knot" is commonly used to describe a complex or unsolvable problem that is resolved with a simple, yet overlooked, workaround. The historical "knot" in question was severed by Alexander the Great's sword, whereas the tangled mess found within Johnna Adam's play about child suicide and adult responsibility has no such resolution and the title's pun (Gidion is the name of the child in question) almost dares us to believe that answers in such cases could ever be as easy as a simple cut-and-run. Counter-Productions Theatre Company takes their final bow with this Kira Hawkrigde-directed gut punch and the echoes of the unanswered questions will hang in the air of 95 Empire's black box for some time to come.

The premise of *Gidion's Knot* is certainly complex and often harrowing - a grieving mother shows up at her dead son's grammar school in order to keep a parent-teacher conference that had been scheduled to address why the boy had been suspended from school. As the conference had been scheduled before the boy takes his own life, his teacher assumes that the mother won't show and, when she appears in the classroom, prepared to keep her appointment, a dialogue ensues that forces questions both necessary and impossible to face head-on without going insane. Throughout the one-act piece, we learn that Gidion was either severely bullied or an instigator of violence. We find that he may have been gay while also the subject of a female classmate's affection. Gidion's flights of brutal, escapist poetry and his Freudian quagmires are overwhelming for a fifth grade teacher who has barely made the transition from marketing professional to classroom, and the mother, a college poetry professor whose aggressive, analytical nature may or may not mirror her dead son's outlook on life, sets her in immediate opposition to a teacher whose instincts are sound, but whose experience may not allow her to deal with a student as tortured and perverse as a Gidion.

As Corryn, the mother, Valerie Remillard is fierce yet stately, driving the play's forward motion, even during the pregnant pauses that define the first movement of the play, as the two women struggle to establish a dialogue. She captures a resigned fatalism imbued with a simple need – to find out why her son was suspended from school and to what extent that event contributed to his suicide. Victoria Ezikovich's portrayal of Heather, the teacher, is appropriately haunted and fragmented as she transitions from a defensive posture, warding off Corryn's verbal attacks and eventually (and quite literally) dropping the bombshell concerning Gidion's actions despite her legal requirements to keep quiet.

Hawkridge's direction balances between traditional staging and a devised surrealism that heightens the emotional stakes, drawing the audience into something more than the voyeuristic, passive receiver of information that would normally be the case. Instead of characters leaving the space (as each woman is required to do in the script at certain points), Hawkridge blocks her characters to walk in circles around and through the audience, making us privy to their soundless inner monologues. Even the playing space is circular in nature, with a circle of chairs surrounding a round patch of tiled classroom floor floating in an otherwise murky blackness. With a script that often repeats itself and revolves around seemingly mundane details again and again, Hawkridge's approach mirrors what could be a flaw in the writing and elevates it into a comment on how unanswerable the situation is and will always be. Instead of traditional props, she has her actors use small plastic balls, like the ones found in children's play pits, inviting the audience to attach their own weight to their meanings. A crumpled note that Corryn grasps is symbolized by a white ball while Heather clings to a blue ball that we later realize is her cellphone, agonizingly silent while she waits for a call from her vet concerning her dying cat. At show open, we see Heather gathering and organizing colored balls into categories, a vain attempt to create order out of chaos. When Heather is forced to reveal the contents of a murder-rape fantasy that Gidion has written and distributed among his classmates, instead of pulling out sheets of paper, she dumps a duffel bag of white balls into the playing space, filling the room with thoughts and emotions that she desperately tries to gather and hold as she narrates Gidion's obscene, yet awfully compelling, fiction.

The device has its own internal logic, even if it may not land with all audience members in the way it was intended. "I consistently enjoy substituting a specific element for traditional props," says Hawkridge. "I find it opens the door for actors and audience alike to purely focus on the character's emotional relationship with the object rather than focusing on the object itself. It also provides an opportunity to physicalize that emotional relationship in an expansive way, creating a wider landscape to translate these often intangible aspects into a dynamic that can be quite literally wrestled with."

Asked if the device is unique to this production, she reveals that it's not the first time she's attempted this approach. "This isn't my first decision to use ball-pit balls in a piece dealing with grief and loss. I find that they provide a feeling of nonlinear and unpredictable movement that engages with these topics in an effective way. The characters, particularly within *Gidion's Knot*, want desperately to be able to understand, to hold them all at once or sort them into a sequence that is under their control. But there are too many to grasp at once and they are difficult to manipulate. You have to wade through them and once they have all been spilt their ripple effect seems endless."

In a play that can often get bogged down in rhetoric and semantics, the humanity is where Hawkridge seems to be driving her characters. Corryn is actually a bit of a bully as well, attacking with words and sarcasm, leaving us somewhat unsurprised when she defends Gidion's fiction. Not only a mother defending her child, she sees a dark beauty in the writing, challenging Heather, whom she continuously attempts to pigeonhole as simple, to accept a direct comparison to the Marquis de Sade's work and see

the profane short story as an attempt to out the “real” bully who she believes must have driven Gidion to his demise. Heather is actually a simpler character, but we find her at a distressing crossroads, grappling with the recent atrocities in her classroom as well as the impending death of her beloved pet. Heather’s entire demeanor screams, “I don’t have the time or energy for any of this!” while she patiently allows Corryn to process her feelings the only way she knows how — with words.

In the end, *Gidion’s Knot* is about the language and the intractable nature of grief. Heather could easily walk away from Corryn, but she remains in the classroom with her, perhaps out of guilt or a faltering sense of responsibility, but her defense of punishing Gidion for his short story never wavers and we often feel that she wants Corryn to simply accept it and move on. The actual truth surrounding the circumstances is messy and unforgiving, as is most of real life. Corryn has every right to be upset at the bureaucracy surrounding the death of her complicated, darkly poetic child, but she too stays, almost mothering Heather in her grief. In a situation as horrific and ultimately unsolvable as a child’s suicide, sometimes the answers can be found by reverting to the simplest aspects of our humanity. *Gidion’s Knot*, indeed.

Counter-Productions Theatre Company presents Johnna Adams’ Gidion’s Knot through May 26 at the AS220 Blackbox 95 Empire Street, PVD. Tickets can be found via Facebook events: facebook.com/events/2145436755577232 or by visiting: brownpapertickets.com/event/4242656?fbclid=IwAR19eOq-JA-mQc7JieZvutAg-KIEG6VWfFdHgNGN1DVEkLsNBr6x9XOQYI8