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'The Boys Next Door' open wide

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(photo courtesy Some Theatre Company/CK2 Photography)

ORONO - The world can be a complicated place. Every one of us deals with occasional struggles, just trying to get by. For those dealt the hand of physical and/or mental challenges, those struggles can be magnified.

Orono's Some Theatre Company is using their latest production - "The Boy Next Door," written by Tom Griffin, directed by Elaine Bard and running through Sept. 3 at the Keith Anderson Community House in Orono - to give audiences a glimpse at how trying, how poignant, how difficult and yes, how funny those struggles can be.

The show centers around four men facing various challenges and the social worker assigned to help

them. We get to watch as they find their own ways of dealing with a world that isn't as accommodating as it might be, despite the fact that they simply want what we all want - happiness, love, purpose.

You've got Arnold (Shayne Bither), an engagingly abrasive talker with a bit of a persecution complex who proves to be easily manipulated; Norman (Daniel J. Legere), whose love for the doughnuts sold at his workplace is exceeded only by his love for his keys; Lucien (Jason Wilkes), a sweet innocent who understands much less than he believes he does; and Barry (Logan Bard), a brilliant schizophrenic who imagines himself to be a golf pro and is dealing with a difficult relationship with his father.

And trying to hold it all together is Jack (Corissa Bither), the social worker who cares deeply for all of them, despite the multitude of difficulties those relationships present.

These four men deal with their challenges in different ways and with different degrees of success. Arnold deals with a bully at work and is swept up by obsessions with minutiae. Norman starts to wonder if he might like girls - Sheila (Jenny Hancock) in particular - as much as doughnuts and keys. The childlike Lucien's well-being is threatened by a bureaucracy that lacks understanding. And Barry must deal with the complexities of his feelings about his father when an impending visit is announced.

Jack floats in the middle, striving desperately to help these men navigate their way through a world that can be cruel while also trying not to get overwhelmed by the sheer enormity of emotional exhaustion that comes with the job.

"The Boys Next Door" has a serious side, to be sure, but there are plenty of laughs to be had as well. Not mean-spirited laughs, though - we laugh not at these people, but with them. These are not men to be pitied; rather, we empathize with their struggles while still recognizing pieces of ourselves reflected in the people we're watching. Empathy without pity. Compassion. That's the feeling this play should elicit - and in director Bard's hands, that's the feeling you're left with when the metaphorical curtain falls at show's end.

The danger with portraying people with developmental difficulties is that the characters can become caricatures - almost cartoonish. Thankfully, this cast largely avoids venturing down that path. For the most part, these men are played with warmth and honesty, as genuine people. Shayne Bither's rapid-fire dialogue strikes the right manic notes, while Wilkes brings an endearing childlike quality to Lucien, imbuing him with blank innocence. Logan Bard's take on Barry shifts between moments of humor and hurt, driven by misguided notions and misplaced aggression. Legere as Norman is brimming with sweetness and sensitivity; his cheerful sincerity is a guiding beacon for the show's tone.

Meanwhile, Corissa Bither embraces the complexity of Jack; she puts up a façade of unwavering capability while also allowing glimpses of her creeping self-doubt. Her struggles are worn on her sleeve, her eyes occasionally displaying a wet, sad desperation. The rest of the ensemble - Hancock, Ryan Jackson as Barry's father, Conor Kenny and Tricia Owens Kenny in multiple roles - slots in nicely; each individual engages and embraces their role in the narrative.

"The Boys Next Door" has its flaws as a script. There are some odd narrative choices that one could argue undermine the overall message of the piece. And there's some dated terminology

We all have people in our lives who might be dealing with mental concerns of their own. However, sometimes it takes a piece like this - and a group like Some Theatre Company - to remind us that those folks might be living down the street, down the hall ... or right next door.

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