

## CRITIC'S PICK

### **The Boys Next Door**

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By Travis Michael Holder

Being a caregiver can drain the vitality and idealism out of a person faster than anything: Feelings of ineffectuality creep up stealthily when dealing with people who can't function on their own. For Jack (Jeff Charlton), who supervises four mentally challenged men in a group home, it's time to find a new job or become the fifth roommate. "My life changes, my crises changes, but they stay the same," he says with increasing frustration. It's almost impossible to imagine that these guys and their keeper, who at any moment could run screaming from the scene, could be funny. They're not; they're hilarious. Tom Griffin creates such endearing, emotionally affecting characters and yet allows us to laugh at them, which can often make a production of this play a disaster. Credit director Nan McNamara and her uniformly exemplary cast, who deliver the lines with utmost sincerity and affection.

For Norman (Brian Habicht), who works at a donut shop and consumes all the wares, his 5-year-old mind and raging hormones get him in continuous trouble. The severely retarded Lucien (RC Ormond) must attend a hearing to face the bureaucrats who want to cut his funding and send him back to the streets, but he has his Spiderman tie to show them he means business. Arnold (Scott Ward) is an advanced neurotic who hopes, when he takes the train to Russia, he'll find rugs are more important than golf. Finally there's Barry (Robbie Winston), a bright young schizophrenic for whom an upcoming visit from the father who abandoned him (Jack Kandel) is an obstacle he might not survive.

There's not one flash of actor-y showcasing going on here; these people are telling the story of very real people who are as dysfunctional as the rest of us, just more obvious. As Lucien goes to face the State tribunal, Jack tells him to just be himself, but Lucien knows "Yourself ain't ready yet." Griffin's play came out of the ethos of the self-absorbed '80s, which makes this story even more poignant today, as so little has changed in the way society treats people in need. Although it's easy to leave the theatre charmed by this heartfelt production, if it doesn't stay with you and haunt your week, you'd have to be as ignorant of the fragility of human existence as the sweetly lost people whose life it celebrates and illuminates with such ferocious humor.