

THEATER REVIEW November 25, 2005

## Critic's Choice

# 'The Boys Next Door' from Actors Co-op

Portrayals of the mentally challenged in "The Boys Next Door" refuse to exploit.

**By David C. Nichols, Special to The Times**

"I am here to remind the species of the species," says one of "The Boys Next Door" at the transformative climax of playwright Tom Griffin's regional staple. This beautifully handled Actors Co-op revival of the 1986 dramedy about four mentally challenged men and their burned out supervisor reminds us of the pull of populist theater at its best.

Set in a New England group residence (well realized by Tim Farmer's bipolar design), "Boys" pits trait-based comedy against painful realities, sporadically narrated by social worker Jack (Jeff Charlton). That Griffin's wholehearted scenario — Neil Simon aping Peter Nichols in "Joe Egg" mode — registers without mockery signals his intent and the Co-op's assurance.

Director Nan McNamara knowingly avoids schmaltz, quietly exploiting the thrust configurations of the newly modular Crossley Theatre. Barring inert act endings, technology is typically top-notch. Bill Kickbush's lighting, A. Laura Brody's costumes, Nick Omana's sound, Lori Berg's props and Diane Martinous' hairstyles converge in unassuming verisimilitude.

The outstanding cast embraces the contrasting aspects with honest élan. Charlton's caregiver, his goodwill and frustration at consistent odds, is ideal. As bureaucratic casualty Lucien, R.C. Ormond plays childlike to his fingertips, with profound results. Robbie Winston inhabits schizophrenic Barry, reaching unbearable pathos at the reunion with his father (David Atkinson, in for Jack Kandel). Scott Ward's frenetic, depressive Arnold and the amorous, doughnut-tossing Norman of Brian Habicht bring character largess to potent life. Christi Marsico scores as Norman's key-covetous crush. Greg Baldwin and Kelly Keaton expertly fill multiple roles.

Credit this engaging troupe for making us howl with laughter as we fight back tears of recognition; credit Griffin for locating "The Boys Next Door" in us all.