

Good Grief

River Cities Reader -- August 17, 2009 -- by Mike Schulz

Although its script is a great deal funnier than you might be expecting, the profound senses of heartbreak and loss that fuel David Lindsay-Abaire's *Rabbit Hole* tend to sneak up on you and hit like waves, knocking you off balance and leaving you somewhat shaken. Anyone attending the Richmond Hill Barn Theatre's current presentation of the playwright's family drama is advised to bring tissues. (Unless you go the route I did, and surreptitiously dry your cheeks during scene-change blackouts.) Yet there's something else you might also want to bring, something I hadn't anticipated through a mere reading of this Pulitzer Prize-winner: a bib.

Lindsay-Abaire's characters, here, are mourning the loss of a four-year-old boy, and one of *Rabbit Hole*'s smartest, most understated motifs finds them doing what people are *oftentimes* doing when they mourn - eating. Neither the playwright nor director Bryan Tank make a big, showy deal of it, but nearly every scene here features the copious consumption of drool-inducing sweets: crème caramel, cake, tortes, and other delicacies. And following Thursday's curtain call, several audience members seemed positively obsessed with the desserts on display, including the woman who exited alongside me, and said with a chuckle, "I want the recipe for those lemon squares."

She was, however, also dabbing away tears when she said it, and her reaction seemed to encapsulate Richmond Hill's *Rabbit Hole* to perfection; the show makes you cry, makes you laugh, and makes you hungry. I think Lindsay-Abaire himself would love that combined response, as I hope Tank would, because it underlines what the author's trenchant, haunting play is all about: our inspiring ability to cope with unspeakable anguish through humor and the pleasures of the mundane.

Time and again, characters here find (momentary) solace in the most minor of comforts - a home movie, an amusing reminiscence, a slice of zucchini bread - and it's that surface banality that allows Tank and his exemplary cast to pinpoint the characters' pain without overplaying the suffering. *Rabbit Hole* celebrates the life-sustaining joys of *simplicity*, and Richmond Hill's production is a thoughtful, honest, and hugely entertaining exploration of grief, performed with unflinching wit and frequently devastating emotional accuracy.

As Becca, the young mother who manages her agony through endless busywork and the gradual removal of her son's belongings, Jessica Nicol is outstanding, and the actress is so *frequently* outstanding at Richmond Hill that this might seem like old news. In *Rabbit Hole*, however, the directness and open-heartedness we generally associate with Nicol are tempered by a somewhat chilly inscrutability; Becca says what's on her mind, but the performer's guarded stare and tight-lipped smile tell you she's never saying *everything* that's on her mind. As she did in 2006's *Proof*, Nicol allows you to read dazzling layers of subtext here, and when Becca's bottled-up emotions occasionally spill out, they do so in unexpected bursts that appear to surprise the actress as much as the audience. It's a beauty of a performance - subtle yet wrenching, and at times richly comedic.

Nicol's co-stars, meanwhile, give *Rabbit Hole*'s lead all the support she could ask for and *then* some. Denise Yoder, delivering the latest in her blessedly lengthy list of superb 2009 portrayals, brings absolute focus and a spirited sense of fun to the proceedings, playing Becca's sister Izzy as a terminal screw-up now stuck in the unfamiliar role of mediator. In Yoder's inspiringly selfless turn, you seem to be watching the ne'er-do-well Izzy grow up right before your eyes, and she and Nicol share a sisterly camaraderie and biting competitiveness that's effortlessly truthful. (And, in more than a few scenes, hilarious.) Jonathan Grafft, as Becca's husband Howie, has a series of lovely, low-key moments in which his grief over the loss of his son dovetails with his fear of losing his wife, while Kevin Maynard is marvelously honest and unforced in the tricky role of Jason, the teen whose presence threatens to tear *Rabbit Hole*'s family apart.

As for Susan Perrin-Sallak, playing Becca's and Izzy's straight-talking mother Nat, I'm thrilled to report that the actress' extraordinary presence, bountiful talent, expressive voice, and unassailable timing are - *finally* - put in service of a role wholly deserving of her gifts. Over the past five years, Perrin-Sallak has always been fantastic, but until now, she's only had minor, frequently farcical roles in which to demonstrate that. Yet *Rabbit Hole* provides her with something else entirely: a meaty, beautifully written character in which she makes you weep with laughter one instant (Nat's take on Michael Kennedy's fatal

skiing accident - "*Idiot!*" - is a black-comedy riot) and weep with empathy the next. (Her wordless act of lifting a tiny pair of shoes is a supreme heart-melter.) Given Tank's generous, smartly paced helming and Jennifer Kingry's typically first-rate technical direction, Richmond Hill's latest is sensational, and yes, those desserts might make your tummy growl. Chances are, however, that you'll leave just as hungry, if not *more* so, for your next stage encounter with Susan Perrin-Sallak.

Richmond Hill's 'Rabbit' is powerful stuff

Quad-City Times - August 18, 2009 – by David Burke

The greatest strength in the Richmond Hill Players' "Rabbit Hole" is its simplicity.

The plot is elementary enough - checking in on a young couple (Jessica Nicol and Jonathan Grafft) eight months after their 4-year-old son has been killed in a traffic accident.

But what David-Lindsay Abaire's script and director Bryan Tank's cast thankfully lack is over-the-top theatrics.

There's no breast-beating, no "Why, God, why?!" emotional avalanches by the couple or her sister (Denise Yoder) and mother (Susan Perrin-Sallak).

Instead, there's a realism that makes a more powerful impact than pulling the audience's strings to manipulate them into an emotion.

The couple, Becca and Howie, are in various endstages of grief as we meet them. The kiddie clothes, the family dog, the child's untouched bedroom, the toys and even the house itself all are reminders of the past.

Becca's sister, irresponsible Izzie (Yoder), announces that she's pregnant and some of those reminders begin to surface.

Their flamboyant mother (Perrin-Sallak) weighs in not only on parenthood and loss - she, too, has had to bury a child - but also on various topics in stinging humorous monologues.

Yes, despite the subject matter, "Rabbit Hole" is full of gentle humor that doesn't dip into black comedy.

Nicol remains stoic throughout the production (the role won "Sex and the City" alumna Cynthia Nixon a Tony a few years ago), a beautiful performance that says more with reactions and eye motion than words from a script.

Grafft is excellent as well, watching as some of the last vestiges of his son are erased while trying to return to normal relations with his wife.

Yoder is quirky and effective as Izzie, who matures through the play, growing to confront Grafft's Howie in a plot route that thankfully wasn't taken.

Perrin-Sallak shines as the grand dame of the family, a pure natural with the dialogue.

Rounding out the cast is Kevin Maynard as Jason, the teenager who caused the accidental death. His scenes with Nicol are wrought with discomfort, neither character wanting to say the wrong words.

Tank holds a steady pace with his directing and keeps the proceedings very real. Between his direction and Abaire's words, it's almost as though we're eavesdropping on someone else's lives, not watching actors performing as characters in a play.

Notice the slow, slow fadeout that technical director Jennifer Kingry gives the lights at the end of the drama as the couple slowly begins to talk and relate again.

It's a moment to realize that life will indeed go on, and "Rabbit Hole" will remind you of that.

Strong, believable characters take you down the 'Rabbit Hole'

Argus-Dispatch – August, 19, 2009 – by Julie Jensen

Characters you can identify with and feel for are the strength of the Richmond Hill Players' production of "Rabbit Hole" at the Barn Theater in Geneseo.

The drama by David Lindsay-Abaire and directed by Bryan Tank is about a couple trying to come to terms with the accidental death of their 4-year-old son, Danny. It's eight months after the child's tragic death, and healing is nowhere in sight.

Becca, the mother, played by Jessica Nicol, wears mourning like a close-fitting garment. Jonathon Grafft is Howie, the father, who tries to get on with his life but can't forget what is missing from it -- a well-loved son.

Susan Perrin-Sallak is amusing in the role of Nat, the mother of Becca and her sister, Izzy. But Nat has her own tragedy -- the death of a son.

Denise Yoder is Izzy, Becca's ditzy sister, who announces that she is pregnant in the first scene, while Becca is folding small garments that belonged to her son.

The cast is rounded out by Kevin Maynard, who plays Jason, the young driver who hit Danny. There's just one reference to the title of the play. Jason is talking about parallel universes, and Becca thinks of going down a rabbit hole to somewhere else, where her family lives on, unharmed.

The play follows the couple as they move through the minefield of good-natured people who want to help, and the small things and occasions that bring the pain of Danny's death to the forefront again and again. Is there comfort for the bereaved parents anywhere? In the last scene, there may be an answer.

One thing you learn from this play is to be careful in choosing words of comfort. "I know just how you feel" doesn't cut it.