

Theatre preview: BUDDY

Hagen's Buddy, a film within a play, exposes masculine mythology

BY LIZ NICHOLLS, THE EDMONTON JOURNAL MAY 7, 2009 7:28 AM



Buddy at Theatre Network.

Photograph by: Ian Jackson, Edmonton Journal

BUDDY

Theatre: Theatre Network at the Roxy, 10708 124th St.

Written by: Darrin Hagen

Directed by: Bradley Moss

Starring: Jesse Gervais, Mark Jenkins

Running: Through May 24

Tickets: 780-453-2440

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The tattered term "multimedia" -- diluted by generations of gratuitous onstage murk on TV screens -- gets a bona fide boost of artistic joy in the innovative premiere happening tonight at Theatre Network.

Darrin Hagen's new play Buddy, he says, "actually makes and edits a live movie onstage in front of you ... in one take! The how-it's-done is part of the storytelling. The actors are in control of the media."

There's a compelling dramatic reason its characters, two small-town Prairie pals, are onstage with cameras in hand: they're making a movie of themselves in their last summer out of high school. The camera, says B, reviewing the last chapter of boyhood, "might not tell the whole truth -- but it can't lie about what it sees."

But it takes an entire team of collaborators, and a cluster of hidden cameras, to have B (Jesse Gervais) reliving seminal moments from his shared past with A (Mark Jenkins), onstage and also on big angled screens -- the actors, director Bradley Moss, media-artist Ian Jackson, designer Paul Bezaire who mixes footage live, lighting whiz Scott Peters.

Buddy started life during Hagen's tenure as Theatre Network playwright-in-residence, as Day 412, written fast for the annual 24-hour playwriting competition. "Two guys locked together in boy friendship; the mythology or misuses of masculinity; one guy gets out, one buys in," says Moss. "Then we brought in Ian Jackson." Day 412 got thrown out the window and Buddy began to emerge in all its multimedia complexity. When artists of this ilk brainstorm, there's no going back. It was the fateful leading question for a coming-of-age/memory play that wondered "what do you have left, a snap-shot?, when you move on, and lose somebody out of your life?" The "second leap," says Moss, was this: "what if the story itself were about two guys making a movie to recapture memory?"

The complications for Gervais and Jenkins are extreme. Not only are they busy refocusing cameras, setting up zoom shots and all that, live, their characters both "go back to Grade 3 and live in the moment." They address themselves both to us, at some distance in the house seats, and to the camera, with its penchant for the close-up. "The camera is much harder to fool," laughs Moss. "Are you watching a play or a movie? Both, really. Different generations will probably watch it differently."

Buddy is not the first time Moss has embraced media technology in his Theatre Network productions: Excavations, with its character cycling against a moving Prairie backdrop; the arty Japanese flick the characters see on a date in Mid-Life; the wild film imagery of Hedwig and the Angry Inch. "This is different; I don't think this has been done."

Hagen, who grew up gay "and skinny" in Rocky Mountain House, knew what it felt like to be different, as his drag-queen memoir *The Edmonton Queen* details. "The accordion did not help. Neither did the figure skating." He couldn't wait to leave after high school. "You focus on the bad stuff," he says. "But I forgot there were guys that stuck up for me."

"I was always fascinated by the codes of masculinity, the killing things, the bar fights." Hagen sighs. "There are so few models out there of what a man might be"... Buddy is "all about going past the world you see around you."

Look for "Liz Nicholls on Theatre" at www.edmontonjournal.com/entertainment.

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