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“My Art Is Me And I Am My Art”

So says Darrin Hagen — but it would be inaccurate to call his new play *Buddy* autobiographical

Published May 7, 2009 by Jessica Earle in Theatre Preview

BUDDY

Directed by Bradley Moss. Written by Darrin Hagen. Starring Jesse Gervais and Mark Jenkins. The Roxy (10708-124 St). Tickets available through the Roxy box office (453-2440/www.attheroxy.com) or TIX on the Square (www.tixonthesquare.com).

I'm not two minutes into my interview with Darrin Hagen, and I can't help but think the 45-year-old playwright is the antidote to New Historical Criticism, the school of thought that insists on looking at art without considering the creator's biography. The prolific playwright, best known for his drag productions on the Fringe circuit, operates in a whirlwind where life, drama, and personal relationships unapologetically blur.

The pace of comedy and conversation in the foyer of The Roxy is quick, as Hagen turns every object into a prop and every interaction into a quip, mixing insights about his work with anecdotes about his past, punctuating every pause with roaring laughter. (Conversation only lets up during a side trip to a sushi restaurant, when Hagen pauses to savour the wasabi.) But fans of the (wo)man so infamously known as the Edmonton Queen might be surprised by his latest piece, the darker and more recondite *Buddy*.

The play follows the friendship of two adolescent males in rural Alberta making a video of their last year of high school. And the actors (Fringe sensations Jesse Gervais and Mark Jenkins) literally record themselves during the performance too, using an elaborate set of cameras and video projectors, delivering a show that's a hybrid of multimedia, performance art, filmmaking, and theatre.

Hagen says he hatched the concept three years ago during the Ten Days of Madness Playwriting Festival at the University of Alberta. He was one of the contestants in that year's 24-Hour Playwriting Contest, and emerged from the day-long competition with 40 pages of content. “It came out of the idea that two men were trapped by an installation,” Hagen says. “They agreed to be there and it was kind of an experiment to see how long they could put up with being on display.”

Since then, the project has evolved to incorporate a lapse in time into the storyline, as one character revisits the concrete images of the past to better understand his friend's death and to explore the tricky association between truth and memory.

While many postmodern themes get treated in the piece — how the second something is recorded, it's given artistic impetus, for instance, or how a lens puts certain elements into focus by cutting off everything outside its scope — Hagen says the work is still accessible because it's anchored by an affecting narrative that draws from his own life.

“My art is me and I am my art,” he says. “As much I try to step away from it and make it something more cerebral, it only comes together when I give a shit. And I only give a shit when it's about something that I need to learn.”

One of the lessons this time around deals with the effects of homophobia on straight men — specifically the set of friends who stuck with Hagen during his trying teen years in Rocky Mountain House as “a drag queen who didn't know he was a drag queen yet.” While Hagen is distressed by how articles about him have painted his hometown as one-dimensionally homophobic, he remembers how a group with a fear of anything gay impacted his support network.



Ian Jackson

Chum's The Word | Jesse Gervais and Mark Jenkins document their friendship live onstage in Darrin Hagen's *Buddy*.

DETAILS

Buddy

Roxy Theatre

Tuesday, May 5 - Sunday, May 24

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“Everyone talks about homophobia as if it’s this curse to gay people,” he says. “I think homophobia is holding men back. It inhibits their growth and makes life more challenging than it has to be. Some of those guys who went through it with me — I didn’t realize at the time what a toll it was taking on them. Ultimately they had to stay [in Rocky Mountain House], and they didn’t get to leave afterwards.”

Despite the tribute it pays to his youthful allies, Hagen says it would be reductive to call *Buddy* autobiographical because so many people have helped shape the final product. “This has been the most purely collaborative process I’ve ever been part of,” he says of working with director Bradley Moss, multimedia artist Ian Jackson, set designer Paul Bezaire, as well as actors Gervais and Jenkins.

“I’m definitely expanding out of the ‘There’s gotta be a guy in a dress onstage’ concept,” he says. “Life inspires me, and this project was born out of the idea that you never know in the moment what’s going to resonate 10 years down the road and become a piece of art.”

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