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## Some Buddy To Love

Darrin Hagen's inventive new play trains an unblinking camera lens upon male friendship

Published May 14, 2009 by Jessica Earle in Theatre Review

**BUDDY**

Directed by Bradley Moss. Written by Darrin Hagen. Starring Jesse Gervais and Mark Jenkins. Roxy Theatre (10708-124 St). To May 24. Tickets available through the Roxy box office (453-2400).

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In a key moment in Darrin Hagen's new play *Buddy*, a videocamera doubles as a gun — poignantly revealing the aggressive act of “shooting” a target. The lens offers the stripped visuals that make up two lives and one death, with no explanation attached. Like a bullet, the images are there and then gone in a flash, leaving viewers dumbfounded, trying to make sense of the impact.

The multimedia play follows two teenagers — one gay, one straight — using camcorders to record themselves during their final year of high school. Captured in the footage is their friendship, mixed with the experience of homophobic violence in a rural town.

The concept smacks of modernism (read: Ezra Pound's “show and don't tell” model), and it's done well: from beginning to end, the production is visually stunning. From closeups of lips that utter damaging words to a seemingly wasted shot of the sole of a sneaker and a clenched fist when the actors talk about “fill time,” there's not a single point in *Buddy* where Hagen's dialogue is not married in some way to a visual counterpart.

But what's new and exciting about this play (and what would no doubt make Pound roll over in his grave) is that it manages to humanize the cold eye of the lens, if ever so slightly.

On the one hand, yes, for much of the performance it's more interesting to follow the simulacrum projected behind stars Jesse Gervais and Mark Jenkins onto a giant split-screen, which in turn reduces the actors to little more than props or installation art. But at the same time, the lens gives a transfixing purposefulness to each episode. As the play tells us, the camera is there to lend agency to both the viewer and the subject, and this digital mountain of footage, caught fleetingly on the fly, allows the surviving character to mine truth from captured moments long after they were experienced in the flesh.

Despite treating headily self-reflexive and po-mo themes (like the overt meditation on what makes a good story or the concept of how reproducing images of self can fragment one's identity), Gervais and Jenkins are vivacious enough to keep you engaged, stealing your attention away from that giant screen and forcing you to check in with them in person. While they successfully commit to the play's dark moments, both actors have an effortless, boyish charm and easily break the tense beats with amusing, down-to-earth comedy.

Of course, it wouldn't be a Darrin Hagen play without a wicked sense of humour. Hagen proves his versatility in *Buddy* by telling the story of these two young men's relationship without ever losing sight of the undercurrent of homophobic oppression that is inherent to the rural setting, or letting the audience stop caring about his characters.

The only minor criticism I heard from a few people after the show were the occasional lulls in the action as actors worked to coordinate the next shot. But I'm willing to forgive that because I believe in what this production is trying to accomplish: it has its protagonist revisit the raw, static images of the past to try to understand how disparate moments of boredom-love-pain-beauty-fear-comedy turn into puzzling and amorphous memories.

My advice? Step into the sightline of this play and take the bullet — you'll be amazed by what rips through you.



Ian Jackson

**I Shot Jesse Gervais** | The actor creates some psychedelic live video effects during a scene from *Buddy*.

**DETAILS****Buddy**

Roxy Theatre  
Tuesday, May 5 - Sunday, May 24

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