

# VUE WEEKLY

## EDMONTON'S 100% INDEPENDENT NEWS & ENTERTAINMENT WEEKLY

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### ARTS

## Buddy: I was born in a small town

### Buddy makes multimedia work

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The word multimedia gets tossed around pretty freely in theatre these days, applied to any show with a projected background or a momentary video segment or two. If you're lucky, there's some interaction between the actors and the media, but multimedia often tends to be dispensable, a quick trick that sometimes feels lazier than it does innovative—which is where Darrin Hagen's *Buddy* separates itself from the pack.

It's a "multimedia" production, yes, yet that term fails to sum up the innovative techno-wizardry that beats at its heart. Multimedium is a better fit: *Buddy* arms its actors with video cameras and has them train the lenses on each other to capture the recklessly emotional peaks and valleys of growing up in a small prairie town. It's a production carefully choreographed for maximum implementation, and a brilliantly inseparable fusion of live action and video.

The two titular buddies (played by Mark Jenkins and Jesse Gervais) are making a movie of their Grade 12 year, on the cusp of graduation and bigger and better things. "You don't know what's important until way later," one admits, so they try to capture it all: vandalism, fights with the "dickheads" at school, and even boredom, finding ways to fill the time. Video is the story here and its framing device, a strange and truly wondrous vision from Hagen, Paul Bezaire, and cinematographer Ian Jackson: the cameras (two in actor's hands or on movable stands, one mounted on lip of the stage) project, live, onto a large screen set up behind the action, allowing perspective and camera effects to add cinematic flare to the live action, through Bradley Moss's well-tuned direction.

By bringing the camera in close, lips and gritted teeth become another character; by toying with perspective, an arm gets painfully twisted. The screens often take more focus than the live action, and sometimes part of the impression it leaves comes from comparing what the actors are doing to how it looks via screen.



It's radically new, and thus there are a few flaws—a camera signal flickers here or there—but for the most part any limitations just get exploited for the better. A split-second delay that comes when the background screen appears in a camera lens, uses that hall-of-mirrors effect to make a psychedelic drug sequence, and you realize just how much careful thought and exploration of the technology happened to bring this onto a stage. Nothing seems like an afterthought.

Maybe it's for the best, then, that the script isn't particularly complicated, letting the technical work be the focus. The big picture comes into focus quickly enough in the end, with Hagen's pen focused more throughout on the collected moments of friendship, episodic adventures that colour these characters and their relationship. And colour he does: his writing can turn on the tiniest of dimes, going from tender to roaringly funny or vice versa in a moment's notice, scripting an immensely likeable pair of kids on the outside of cool.

Despite being pretty far from teenage, Jenkins and Gervais sell themselves with gusto. The former is a scrappy bundle of energy, his companion more reserved with adolescent uncertainty as they exist, a sort of odd-couple on the fringes of high school. Both are vibrant on stage and in complete control of the unusually technical aspects of these particular roles: in one moment they recount a fight scene, and on opening night they did a do-over so the camera (which then played it back for us, in slow motion) gets it perfect.

Even when they're going way into the past (meeting via alphabetical order back in Grade 3), camera angles positioned above the actors help sell that reality anyways. That's the thing, really: Buddy is a technical marvel that never abandons its human heart nor its teenage soul. Multimedia in the best sense of the word. **V**

*Until May 24*

### **Buddy**

*Written by Darrin Hagen*

*Directed by Bradley Moss*

*Starring Jesse Gervais and Mark Jenkins*

*Roxy Theatre (10708 - 124 St)*

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