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Buddy a touching tale of self-discovery

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There are few times in our lives quite as wrenching as the year we graduate high school - with nostalgia, anxiety, sadness and excitement, tugging us in all directions.

That year is always the stuff of drama - from American Graffiti to A Chorus Line ("And now life really begins").

Buddy, the Theatre Network production of Darrin Hagen's new play makes ingenious use of multi-media, staging and electric performances to give a fresh take on an old tale.

I often approach dramatic multimedia productions with unease. Too often enthusiastic directors pile on the visuals, obliterating performers and overcoming subtlety.

In Buddy, director Bradley Moss gets it right. Sure, there's a big screen in back and actors play directly into cameras with their images blown up huge. But instead of overpowering you with oversized imagery, Moss uses the camera to probe that most expressive of tools for communication, the human face.

Jesse Gervais and Mark Jenkins both play characters called "Buddy." Jenkins is an alpha-male rascal, always getting into trouble. He's the one who wants to torch a highway sign, skips school and regularly gets beaten up by the local toughs. Gervais is his closest friend and ally. He's sensitive and different, discovering that his sexuality doesn't fit in with the macho males around him.

At the beginning of their last year in high school, the two decide to video record everything that happens to them. This gives Hagen the chance to push a camera into their lives and for two excellent actors to give intimate performances that are blown up with every change and subtlety on the big screens behind them.

There is nowhere here for an actor to hide.

At first, the duo's adventures are mundane. They speed down country roads with the car lights out, commit mindless vandalism just for something to do or mount a petty scam selling fake marijuana - the serious and silly things adolescent boys do when first discovering themselves.

But, like a jigsaw puzzle, Hagen carefully places the pieces in order and the details of two lives on the brink of massive change emerge.

This is a theme in much of Hagen's writings - that of the small town boy who is different and becomes empowered by coming to realize the possibilities of the world beyond. Seldom, however, has he told his story with such passion and power.

Buddy doesn't push the gay angle - there is no physical relationship between the two boys - although it is always there for one of them.

Their time together will end soon, but the intense experiences will go on to become the kind of memories that sustain them their whole lives.

Ian Jackson's visuals range from extreme, garish close-ups to a god's eye overview, often working with forced perspectives, lighting changes by designer Scott Peters, multiple imagery, freeze frames and cranking up the chroma for a comic book look.

Fours Suns out of Five

Buddy runs at the Roxy Theatre through May 24.

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