

Nuanced Buddy a tour de force from playwright Darrin Hagen

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Jesse Gervais and Mark Jenkins in Buddy

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Review: Buddy

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Darrin Hagen is a dab hand at creating flamboyant characters who "perform" their stories. Who play Exhibit A in their own lives. Who explain themselves with extravagant irony, as if they were somebody else ogling them. From Tranne of Green Gables to trailer-trash Dottie of Tornado Magnet, quite a few of them are blabbermouth girls played by a blabbermouth boy: Hagen himself in a dress.

Now there's Buddy, premiering at Theatre Network. Hagen has never written anything with fewer words in it -- or more heart. This rueful, funny, compelling coming-of-age play, Hagen's best yet, gives us a couple of small-town Prairie guys, pals on the border of manhood, reviewing their lives during their last summer out of high school. And his writing is so spare that it doesn't seem like writing at all.

The labyrinthine byways of girl friendships have long been spelunked on stage and screen. Girls talk (and talk); they parse the delicate nuances. Guys do stuff. And swear.

In Bradley Moss's production, two wonderful actors, armed with single-word male eloquence, bring the casual but complex overlapping rhythms of teenage boy communication to life, in every slouch, shove, pratfall and shrug.

It's a formative chemistry -- of contrasts. We have daredevil smartass A (Mark Jenkins), the exuberant one, an expert at "hey, let's recklessly endanger ourselves! hey, let's cut class and go to the pool hall," and his more anxious, cautious buddy B (Jesse Gervais). They are, respectively, the one who will stay, and the one who discovers that he can't wait to leave. As Gervais captures so movingly, the latter is increasingly ill-at-ease in a small-town world ruled by the stringent code of machismo and its menacing vigilantes, who slam the word "faggot" into every heterodoxy.

It's A's bright idea to make a movie of their last summer. So the buddies are horsing around onstage with cameras, reliving their boyhood highlights, re-enacting their triumphs and defeats for the camera, telling stories, sometimes just mugging, as we see in the ongoing live movie of the play. Since Gervais and Jenkins are armed with a daunting amount of custom-made film technology (by Ian Jackson, mixed live by designer Paul Bezaire), it makes their acting achievement -- to wit, the powerful illusion that they're not acting -- even more improbable, and striking.

Live theatre takes a big risk getting buddy-buddy onstage with live film. The buddy system, beloved of skiers and swimmers, traditionally hasn't worked so well when live actors co-habit the stage with their 2-D counterparts. The close-ups of the one and long-shots of the other tend to suck the energy out of each other. So you're bound to have your doubts, in advance. And the inauspicious opening moment of the production, B farbling around with a camera, then leaving the stage,

doesn't exactly buck up your confidence, in truth.

But then Buddy unrolls, and your predictions disappear in an exciting paradox. I wouldn't have predicted it, but the way Moss et al incorporate film technology into the storytelling actually enhances Buddy's crackling live theatricality on a bare stage. Curiously, delightfully, against the odds, it ups the dramatic physicality, the vigorous physical presence of the real, live actors, whose powers of concentration, and give-'er commitment to hurling themselves around the stage I hereby publicly salute.

The interplay between live film and live theatre has an unexpected playfulness about it, whether the lads are careening hellbent down a road with their truck lights dimmed, or riding the quease-making Octopus at the fair. Reliving a hockey game, complete with cheering fans, is a bravura scene. Kudos to Jackson, Bezaire and lighting designer Scott Peters.

Buddy needs its moments of stillness, of reassessment, of regret, when this virtuoso male busy-ness stops. And director Moss gives these their full weight. Gervais' character thinks he's making a clean break so his "real life" can start. The break turns out to be in his heart.

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