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Distracted - A Reflection of a Community

By Sophie Braccini



Eleanor Mason Reinholdt (Mama) and Louis Kehoe (Jesse) Photo Stu Selland

The new play that will open at the end of the month at the Town Hall Theater (THT) in Lafayette is relevant to anyone who is attempting to raise children. Lisa Loomer's *Distracted* is a humorous drama that throws the spectator into the turmoil of a family trying to deal with a boisterous son, his possible ADHD condition, the surrounding pressures to get him to fit in, and the different view points of health care professionals. The play is about us, our culture of constant interruptions, and the need of parents to make sure their offspring are okay.

The action begins in the morning in a family kitchen, with Mama (Eleanor Mason Reinholdt) alternately delivering weary asides to the audience, trying to meditate, and trying to get her son Jesse -who is offstage for nearly all of the play but frequently makes his presence known-get dressed for school. Jesse is high-spirited, combative, uncooperative, and sometimes very defiant. A call from a teacher who wants to get the situation under control means the parents soon have to wrestle with the decision to medicate their son or not.

"The role of Mama is very relevant to this era," says Mason Reinholdt, "the way her decisions are seen by the

community, and how she gets pressure from all sides. Mama is trying very hard to make everyone happy, her husband, her son's teacher, her community, and her son himself, of course. Realizing that it does not work, she will finally decide that she has to do what she thinks is best, that there is no way to please everybody all the time."

As someone who is thinking about starting a family herself, the young actress finds the task of deciding what is best to be daunting, especially in communities with high expectations. "The play is written in a way that's very humorous," she adds, "with a lot of irony and also the laughter that comes from your identification with the characters, it's almost an empathic laughter." Mason Reinholdt is confident that the play will speak to Lamorinda. "Moms and dads will feel understood in a way that they might not feel in the rest of their lives," she says.

Working on the play was also a source of understanding for the two young actors who alternate playing Jesse. Nathan Correll and Louis Kehoe are both local 7th graders. They have been in different children's, and already some adult, productions at the theater. The play has given them a different view on parenting. "I saw the job of parents as an easy routine," says Kehoe, "When you look at this play, you understand what some parents have to go through; they have to be seriously determined to help their child. It makes you take a hard look at parenting."

"In the play the mom has an outside job, then she stops and has to work even harder to help Jesse," adds Correll, "the routine of parenting can go easy or hard, in this play it is hard for mom."

On stage, some of the actors have to play different roles. "The two doctors and the homeopath are played by the same actor, while another plays the school teacher, a nurse and a psychiatrist," says director Clive Worsley. "The immediate surroundings of the family are individual actors, but there is a bit of interchangeability in the authority figures the mother goes to in her desperate quest for answers. After a while, it feels a bit the same to her, at least in her relationship with them, in the way she feels as a parent when she encounters them."

The couple's relationship is likely to resonate with the audience as well as Mason Reinholdt and Chris Parnell-Hayes (who plays Dad) convey the increasing despair of their characters. Dad, who believes that 'boys will be boys' wants to let Jesse be Jesse, an approach that becomes increasingly indefensible once the system steps in. While Mama pursues every solution she can find, from homeopathy to pharmaceuticals, meeting with her husband's mounting skepticism.

Worsley, who is also THT's Artistic Director, chose the play because he felt the relevance of the topic. "The community at large is affected by the way we deal with these questions," he says, "we are responsible to act together or at least to dialogue together about how we deal with this kind of thing." He adds that THT welcomes children diagnosed with different types of mental conditions. "Some of them are geniuses," he says, "and we prepare our staff to deal with it. There is room for absolutely everybody in the theater."

Distracted runs from February 25 to March 17, with previews on February 23 and 24. It is rated PG13 (for adult language and content) and is about two hours long. After the matinee performance on March 4, Dr. Brian Blaisch, M.D. will lead a talk and Q&A regarding ADHD, autism, and other learning and behavioral problems. This post-show event will begin at about 4:00 p.m. and is free of charge and open to the public, regardless if they have attended the performance. For more information and tickets go to www.TownHallTheatre.com.

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