

'Late Company' confronts causes of teen suicide

Arts Scene

by Heather Solomon

Helena Levitt and Dale Hayes have spent the past two months around a dining room table rehearsing a dramatic confrontation about suicide. Hayes is directing Levitt and four other actors in Ottawa-born playwright Jordan Tannahill's affecting and internationally successful play *Late Company*.

Tannahill wrote it in 2013 at the age of 23, not long after graduating from Montreal's National Theatre School. The playwright's youth is remarkable given the maturity and polish of the script and, in hindsight, it makes sense that he quickly went on to win the Governor General's Award for Drama and a Dora Award for Outstanding New Play with his very next efforts.

But it is this drama that has lodged in the international conscience.

Late Company makes its Montreal debut Nov. 8-19, mounted by Hayes's d2 Productions, at Mainline Theatre, 3997 St-Laurent Blvd., after other companies staged it with acclaim in Toronto, Vancouver, Winnipeg, Chicago, Los Angeles and, this past August, in London, England's West End.

Audiences at every viewing were left with new insight on how important it is to monitor teens' activity on the Internet and to stay in touch with their child's emotional states.



Dale Hayes, left, and Helena Levitt bring *Late Company* to life at Mainline Theatre Nov. 8-19.

HEATHER SOLOMON PHOTO

"I play the mother of a gay teenage boy who loses her son to suicide after he is bullied. I have a son the same age, so there is a lot of personal emotion to draw upon. I can go through the imagination process and, God forbid, the 'what if,'" says Levitt.

This is not her first attempt at a role connected with the topic of suicide, so it has bitten deeply into her actor's psyche.

She recently performed solo in and toured *Aftermath* as feminist Andrea Dworkin, who contemplated suicide after being drugged and raped. She's even tackled it from a comedic angle as a

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depressed wife who repeatedly tries to off herself in Alan Ayckbourn's *Absurd Person Singular*.

Tannahill based his plot on the Jamie Hubble tragedy. The 15-year-old boy, teased and terrorized for being the only openly gay teen at A.Y. Jackson Secondary School in Kanata, Ont., killed himself in 2011.

The playwright centres his dramatic dinner on the premise of the dead boy's mother convening the bully and his parents for a social reckoning that will give her and her husband closure.

She's set a place at the table for her dead son to evoke his presence and will learn that the ignorance of the other parents had a hand in what came to pass.

Levitt can understand the situation from all angles, having practised as a social worker for a number of years. She graduated from Dawson College's professional theatre program, started her stage career in Toronto, but returned to Montreal for a drama in education degree from Concordia University and studied social work at McGill University, leading to a career that sidetracked her from theatre until she returned to the stage seven years ago.

"My passion has always been live theatre. There's nothing I'd rather do more," she says, while appreciating the life experience her other vocation afforded her.

The actor who is playing the other mother also has social work experience and the two have been corresponding by email, in character, like the real-life mothers did, to get into the mindset of their roles.

"You start out believing the bereaved parents are absolutely right for feeling the way they do, but it's not so clear-cut," says Levitt. A family therapist will be conducting a talkback after one of the performances.

"The play is so topical and relevant right now," says Hayes. "Theatre can be very powerful if you can go home and talk to your teen. I'm hoping people will leave the theatre with the ability to start a conversation." ■

Tickets can be purchased at 514-849-3378 or mainlinetheatre.ca.

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