

Theater Review: *Gidion's Knot*

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Anthony Masters Photography

The Bottom Line

Two-hander wields the anger of a grieving mom to hash out a provocative confrontation of attitudes and ideas.

Venue

*Pasadena Playhouse
(runs through Nov. 24)*

Cast

*Vonessa Martin, Paula
Cale Lisbe*

Playwright

Johnna Adams

Director

Darin Anthony

The Pasadena Playhouse stages an emotionally wrenching parent/teacher conference about a child's tragic circumstances.

The Pasadena Playhouse's resident company, The Furious, was collateral damage to the venue's recent bankruptcy era. The company spent the last few years wandering in the wilderness without a home base, while continuing infrequently its reliably challenging work at refuges like Inside the Ford Theatre and the Boston Court. *Gidion's Knot* by **Johnna Adams** ends the diaspora with a welcome return to the Carrie Hamilton space, picking up the beat with such alacrity that it's as if they never left.

RECOMMENDED

The audience sits in Puritan-pew uncomfortable school desks on either side of the 5th grade classroom set. It's after hours, and melancholy teacher Heather Clark (**Paula Cale Lisbe**) sits listlessly in solitude until an unexpected visitor arrives, looking for the location of her scheduled parent-teacher conference. Ms. Clark with her tight, insincere smile keeps shooing her to the office for directions, but she keeps coming back. Ms. Clark is thunderstruck when the lost mother informs her that she has an appointment about her son Gidion's suspension that she insists on keeping. For Gidion had, in fact, shot himself dead after coming home with the notice requiring the meeting. Mom Corryn Fell (**Vonessa Martin**) is as hell-bent on discovering what happened as Ms. Clark is reluctant to engage her at all.

Articulate, implacable and insinuatingly snarky, Corryn resorts to one rhetorical strategy after another to pierce the silence and forced courtesy of the abashed Heather, desperate for the truth but also for the emotional revenge of securely fixing blame, fearless of whether it is hers or the school's.

The action unfolds, not coincidentally, according to classical verities in real time, while Heather stalls and evades, stalling until her principal arrives, who has no intention of showing up. The women argue over values, aesthetics, the vulnerabilities of developing children, the snap assumptions people make about one another, the nature of courage and of responsibility. Though the intensity starts at a high boil, it escalates inexorably throughout, as the actors confront the audience as much as one another with their characters' pain, prevarication and degrees of guilt and regret.

For all its sustained visceral impact, *Gidion's Knot* most fundamentally is a play of argument, of ideas advanced and tested, and while they are complex, there is almost always the awareness that the dramatic setup somewhat artificially exists to advance the issues under consideration, compounded by the concept that the audience is part of the classroom while actually no one is witnessing these private and personal events. This does not detract either from the intelligence of the discourse nor from the emotional engagement in the dramatic fireworks, yet they are hardly convincingly unified.

Satisfying and trenchant references to the qualities of medieval and earlier poetry lend a fascinating tang to the social criticism that ironically makes some of the more conventional complaints about educational conformity more modern and bestows a warrior dimension to the combat between the two women, who ultimately find, as opposing fighters do, some common ground, even if it is only the inevitable anguish of loss and grief. In the end, Adams invokes an updated take on John Donne that strides athwart the obvious and the ineffably moving.

Nothing would work in this perilously tricky play without the utter commitment and attentive shading brought to the roles by these two contrastingly arresting performers. Cale Lisbe (five seasons as Joanie Hansen on *Providence*) and Martin (a founding member of *The Furious*) are riveting, supplying utmost conviction even when the character development may be more arbitrary than credible. Director **Darin Anthony** skillfully navigates the many hairpin turns, especially in the sticky false starts of the opening, finding the rhythm required to extract meaning even from the empty places.

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