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"The Good Boy"

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Michael Bonnabel

Reviewed by JK Clarke

What makes an autobiography appealing is not necessarily that it's unique or particularly scintillating, but rather that it's a story well-told and deeply felt. Michael Bonnabel and director Darin Anthony have done more than that, compassionately allowing us to live his rather singular childhood and young adult life along with him in his masterful and touching one-man show *The Good Boy*.

Bonnabel invites us into his life as a young boy — singing a lonely song in a lovely voice — who has “fallen down a rabbit hole.” And what a rabbit hole it is . . . (Though how could he have known until he was very much grown up)? He introduces us to his parents, classic 1950s southern California teens, love struck on a beautiful sunny day at

the beach, as perfect and ordinary as can be. But with the notable exception that both are deaf. And thus are we introduced to Michael and his siblings' life as Children of Deaf Adults (CODA).

Michael, the fourth of eventually five children, guides us through his life as “Bonnabel family administrator,” a job unfairly (though probably appropriately, as he seems the most respectful of the family unit) thrust upon him at the age of six. His position allows us to see the family from an almost omniscient point of view. Through nuanced and loving characterizations of family members and outsiders, we learn what life is like as a CODA.

Anyone who has spent time with the hearing impaired knows that within their community there is a particular style of communication, “a hybrid language of real and made up signs, speech, lip reading, stomping and determination,” as Michael calls it. And he captures it perfectly on stage. From his father's go-to utterance, “Ahh, bullshit,” said with a sneer and a wave of the hand, to his mother's “Hope to,” or “Up to you,” (he knew not which) fallback sound, Bonnabel perfectly captures the sound and feel of his household, allowing us to feel as if we know each and every member of his family; and we experience his interactions with the outside world — visits to the bank to discuss late payments with the mortgage officer — as if we were there ourselves.

Since we become so intimately involved in his world and grow up alongside him, sitting in his 1960s living room (artfully captured by set designer John Burton) watching the glow of the black and white television reflected in his face, it is no surprise that we feel the inevitable dramatic turn of events so deeply in the pit of our stomach. It is rare to see a theater audience so emotionally shaken that dialog is interrupted by sobs; it is rarer still to see a performer so completely caught up in those feelings himself. How Bonnabel can put himself through such intense, raw emotions night after night is mind-boggling. No doubt he will be needing a long vacation after the final curtain.

The Good Boy. Through May 19 at the Dorothy Strelsin Theater, Abingdon Theatre Arts Complex, 312 West 36th Street, 1st Floor. <http://www.abingdontheatre.org>

*Photos: Kim T. Sharp