


The Good Boy

Michael Bonnabel's solo show about growing up with two deaf parents is a real tearjerker.

By Zachary Stewart  • May 5, 2013 • New York City

Walking into the [Dorothy Strelsin Theatre](#) is a bit like stepping into a psychologist's office. With a comfy armchair and oversized credenza taking up a huge portion of the limited stage real estate, little space is left between the audience and the sweating nebbish who inhabits the set. That would be Michael Bonnabel, author and star of the autobiographical solo show *The Good Boy*, now receiving its New York premiere from the Abingdon Theatre Company. As it turns out, this is a particularly intense therapy session. The content of this play is extremely personal and very real, so only attend if you are prepared to have a good cry.

Bonnabel is a CODA — that's a child of deaf adults. Both his mother and father were deaf. Lest you think the only implication of this is growing up with a fluent knowledge of American Sign Language, Bonnabel quickly acquaints his audience with the more unpleasant aspects of his childhood. Being a CODA means an early introduction to your parents' most intimate financial and medical affairs. In a world in which most adults do not sign, it is incumbent upon the CODA to translate, leading to some very awkward and uncomfortable situations.

Dressed like an accountant with dark grey slacks, a matching tie, and thick-rimmed glasses, Bonnabel recounts translating between his parents and a bank manager at a very young age, as they negotiated the terms of their mortgage. There was also the time he had to describe his mother's bloody stool to a doctor over the phone for her. These are the most illuminating passages of the show. Bonnabel deftly presents a world that is foreign to most hearing folk: He explains how his father usually kept the television muted, figuring that if he didn't need to hear Soupy Sales to enjoy his show, neither did his hearing children. (Some older deaf people are of the opinion that closed captioning has actually made watching television a less rewarding experience.)

Joseph Slawinski's dynamic sound design helps greatly to crack open this world. At times muffled, vibrating, and blaring, his audio choices give listeners the sensation of being a deaf person surrounded by the hearing at one moment and then a hearing person surrounded by the deaf the next. Ultimately, the awkwardness of living in a world that was not designed for you is the heart of this play.

And while his physicality does convey a lot of awkwardness, Bonnabel proves that looks can be deceiving. First



Michael Bonnabel in *The Good Boy*.
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appearing stiff and guarded, he goes on to deliver a brave and emotionally exposed performance. Not only does he offer some very personal details from his life, he also sings three songs a cappella. He makes the bold choice to mimic his deaf parents' speaking voices, which could easily become offensive in the hands of a less sensitive performer. Bonnabel makes it work, though, signing his parents' lines as he speaks them.

There are a few unexpected twists and turns, which will not be spoiled here, beyond saying that it is wise of Bonnabel to carry a handkerchief to wipe away the tears from his eyes, which he does several times in the final third of this 80-minute affair.

He certainly was not alone. While this reviewer did not cry, he was odd man out in an audience with nary a dry eye in sight. Bonnabel has managed to take his very specific story, the details of which are probably alien for the vast majority of the people who see his show, and make it emotionally relevant. As a writer and performer, you can't ask for much more than that.