

a e THEATER

The Bus — The Review



PHOTO: SEAN COOLEY

BY SHAHN D. DICKSON

With such heady issues as trust, religion, sexuality, love, community, betrayal, violence, healing - the one thing someone might expect to be absent from Jim Lantz's *The Bus* is humor. Yet he approaches them all with an insightful composure that I found calming. The laughs do not dominate this play; the themes and situations are heartbreaking and all too familiar and possible.

Lantz hasn't written a play before *The Bus* but I suspect he will again. It was a joy to watch this script come to life. The main characters - two teenage boys coming to terms with their sexuality, community and impending adulthood - are lively and absolutely convincing.

Dueling senses of invisibility and hyper-visibility are common "gay themes" in many stories, on the stage and elsewhere. Lantz bypasses these gracefully and focuses on the less-travelled by concentrating on the powerlessness of the queer teen, and the relationships queer teens have with family and an increasingly prevalent Christian ideal. Lantz also tackles the tug-of-war between the (perceived or real) promise of comfort in assimilation and the longing to express one's desires.

Ian (played by Ben Van Buren) and Jordan (played by Colin Cramer) are two teenage boys who rendezvous in an old yellow school bus. The bus is also a sign, with "this way to the Golden Rule" painted on the side. The Golden Rule is a local church that has been growing for years.

Ian's mother (Tracey Girdich), Harry's (Dennis McSorley) ex-wife, is the church secretary. She is convinced that his legal attempt to move the bus is motivated by bitterness toward his noncustodial father. Harry doesn't talk about specifics: he just wants that bus gone. In conversations with his lawyer, John Tier (Randy Pratt), Harry never says what specifically has changed in the past several years, citing only that the Golden Rule has gotten too powerful and he needs to take control back.

Control of what? Harry only tells us that it's about control of the gas station he owns. The bus sits on the gas station property as part of an agreement with the previous owner. Ian and Jordan talk about it almost every time they're in the bus together. Harry and Sarah have conversations about it, not mentioning their son much beyond elliptical references to their marriage.

Harry's best friend, Sloat (Walt Levering),

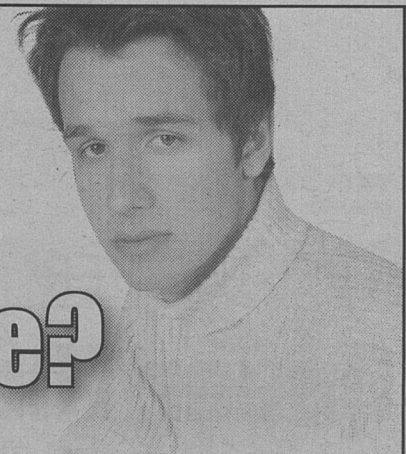
The Bus by James Lantz
Directed by Seth Jarvis
Presented by Starry Night Productions
Premiere: FlynnSpace
September 12-17, 2006
Benefits: Outright Vermont and Lake Champlain Land Trust

brings a little wit to the plot, and his gentle buffoonery is a relief amid the various tensions. He has a serious moment, just prior to the climax, in which he suspects that Harry will try to set the bus on fire to get rid of it. He attempts to sabotage what he thinks is Harry's plan. The bus blows up anyway, and the audience sees it, and sees who set the fire. So does Jordan, even though he tried to talk Ian out of this. Jordan watches the fire consume his love. Hours after the fire, we see Jordan wrapped in a blanket still crying. Sarah approaches while he's still asking Ian why he had to help his father this way. They talk, and Jordan tries to come out to Ian's mother, but gets too scared and instead offers her comfort; "He was teaching me to pray."

Later, Sarah finds a collection of gay pornography that Ian kept in his closet, confronts Harry about whether or not he knew, and lies to Harry about the boy she spoke with at the scene whom she had never met until that night. When Jordan returns to the bus with a memorial of flowers, he encounters Harry and discovers that Harry started demanding the bus be moved after he saw the boys there one night. Despite Harry's insistence that what they did in the bus was wrong according to "ancient laws," Harry lets Jordan place his flowers at the burned-out bus. They shake hands, and realize that hate or fear is not what they share, but a common love for one boy who died trying to heal his relationship with his father.

It is just this powerful blend of realization, homophobia, humor, grief, sorrow, and peace that leaves me waiting for the next play by Jim Lantz. I sure hope it's soon. ▼

→ Shahn D. Dickson recently returned to Vermont with his partner and children. Ze is the former Coordinator in Chief of The American Boyz, a former camper and counselor at Camp Hochelaga in South Hero, and is the editor of an online arts journal. Shahn lives in Winooski.

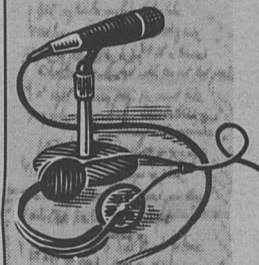


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