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At times uncomfortable, Circle Players' 'Rabbit Hole' is worth the journey (Photos)

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RABBIT HOLE
WRITTEN BY DAVID LINDSAY-ABAIRE
DIRECTED BY WHITNEY VAUGHN | PRODUCED BY ERIN RICHARDSON



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Circle Players' 'Rabbit Hole' (Circle Players/Cindy Blanchard Ciann Photography)



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On August 16, Nashville's longest continuing local theatre company, Circle Players teamed with David Lipscomb University's Black Box Theatre to kick off their 64th season with the tense family drama, 'Rabbit Hole'. They've also enlisted the talents of recent Lipscomb graduate Whitney Vaughn as she ventures out on her own for a first-time professional directorial debut heading the Pulitzer Prize-winning drama as it continues its run this weekend and next.

Written by David Lindsay-Abaire, 'Rabbit Hole' made it's New York debut in 2006. That production not only won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama, it also garnered an impressive five Tony nominations. Among them, a Tony win for Best Actress Cynthia Nixon ('Sex and the City') as Becca, a wife, mother, daughter and sister facing one of life's most difficult events, the death of a beloved family member. Stepping into the role of Becca for Circle Players' presentation is Beth Henderson, who was recently seen in Lakewood Theatre's 'All The King's Women'.

A stripped-down description of the multi-layered character of Becca, as Henderson portrays her, can perhaps be summed up by lifting a line straight out of the play. In reference to a particular gift she chose for her slightly younger sister, Izzy (Emily Faith), Becca explains 'I was just trying to be practical'. Anyone who's dealt with the death of a family member (and who hasn't?) knows that practicality rarely has a place in grieving the loss of a loved one. Perhaps because the play is being presented in conjunction with Lipscomb's theatre department, Becca's questioning of faith in the face of the reality of an untimely death is particularly interesting.

To help, or is it hinder Beth in her grief process, first there's husband Howie, played by Mike Fernandez. Making his Circle Players debut, Fernandez just so happens to be Department Chair for Lipscomb University's Theatre Department. As Howie, Fernandez's approach to grief seems to take the more traditional approach. He attends meeting with others dealing with loss and turns to friends for comfort. Most revealing for Howie are two particularly telling scenes First, there's a night alone at home with his wife, during which he attempts to the mood for a much-needed romantic night, only to be accused of some misplaced perversion in trying to create a life to replace the one they've lost. Then there's a moment between Howie and his young sister-in-law who thinks she's caught him in a compromising position. Both scenes reiterate Howie's natural instinct to reach out for physical comfort in a time when emotional comfort is most needed.

Then there's Becca's overbearing and boisterous mother, Nat, blissfully played by Wesley Paine, one of Nashville's true theatre treasures. From her first louder than seemingly necessary line, Ms. Paine commands the stage. As Nat, she's the personification of a well-meaning, but meddling mother. Her scenes with her daughters ring very true. Her 'I know what you're going through' sympathies also tread familiar territory for anyone who's lost a loved one and had friends or relatives attempt to comfort by over-simplifying and unintentionally making it about themselves.

Rounding out the family members is the aforementioned Emily Faith as Izzy. Like her director, Vaughn, Faith is also a recent Lipscomb graduate. She's the perfect compliment to her on-stage mom and the perfect thorn-in-the-side of her on-stage big sis. As the play progresses, it's perhaps Izzy whose character is more in tune than anyone initially thinks. With just enough attitude to add some much needed humor to what could potentially be a very heavy evening of theatre, Faith is sure to enjoy a burgeoning career on the Nashville stage.

In a brief but pivotal appearance, Jonah Jackson is perfectly cast as Jason, the person who inadvertently changed the lives of everyone else in the show. He also provides the show with its otherwise ambiguous title and in doing so, introduced a bit of science into the mix.

Special mention must be made of Will Cummings. Vaughn's ability to draw the audience in to such an intimate story. From the uncomfortable proximity of the living room set to the audience to the genius casting of Jackson, who bears more than a striking resemblance to the unseen deceased member of the cast, Vaughn's direction is obviously thoughtful and full of purpose.

As always, a great play not only depends on skilled actors and precise direction, but a cohesive creative team and Vaughn struck gold with this one. Jim Manning's set design, in particular the use of a sheer scrim instead of an actual or imagined wall, is spectacular. The audience really gets the feel that they're peeking in on a family home. Said scrim also cleverly serves a dual purpose as it presents yet another glimpse into the family's life via very realistic home movies that unknowingly, eerily set the mood from the moment the audience walks into the perfectly intimate Black Box Theatre. These family movies also offer the audience's only view of young Danny. As the deceased family member, seen only in family movies, his presence is vital to the story. Also adding to the believability of a family is lots of technical wizardry and gorgeous lighting courtesy of Vaughn's other creative team members, headed by stage manager, Casey Edwards, lighting designer, Stephen Moss and projection designer, Jacob Street.

Offering a bit of insight to what is often a darkly tragic happening, Circle Players, in their partnership with Lipscomb University will be offering two special post-performance group discussions. Up first, on Friday, August 23, is John Mark Hicks, a Lipscomb theology professor, who'll speak on the mentions of faith within the context of the play. On Thursday, August 29, Alan Bradshaw, Associate Professor and Academic Chair with Lipscomb's physics department, will address the scientific themes present in the work.

Circle Player's '[Rabbit Hole](#)' continues this weekend and next with performances Thursday-Sunday, August 22-25 and August 29-31. Thursday-Saturday shows are at 7:30 p.m.. Sunday matinees are at 3 p.m. To purchase tickets, [CLICK HERE](#).

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