

Los Angeles Times

Review In Sharr White's 'Stupid Kid,' a family grapples with the past, the audience with disappointment



A son's homecoming turns explosive in "Stupid Kid," with, from left, Joe Hart, Taylor Gilbert, Rob Nagle, Allison Blaize and Ben Theobald. (Brian Cole)



By **Daryl H. Miller**

SEPTEMBER 29, 2017, 7:55 AM

Sharr White has a gift for writing offbeat comedies that flip into sobering dramas and back again, keeping audiences lurching, uncertain when the next change in course is coming.

Acclaimed in New York and Los Angeles for such plays as "[The Other Place](#)," "[Annapurna](#)" and

"[The Snow Geese](#)," White returns with "Stupid Kid," being given its premiere in North Hollywood. The Road Theatre Company delivers a perceptive staging and brave performances, which makes it all the more disappointing that after a number of thrilling, hairpin turns White fumbles the story in its big moment and sends the audience out the door scratching its head.

Viewers are thrown off balance from the start. "Who?" a father says to the son at the door who's been away for 14 years. Mom's first reaction: "Goddamn it."

The parents' bickering delivers some explosive laughs, but the gravity of the situation quickly reveals itself. Son Chick (Ben Theobald), just 14 at the time he went away, has been in prison for a murder. Released after examination of new DNA evidence, he has returned home a day earlier than expected.

The parents struggle to find equilibrium and to remember what binds them as a family. Dad (Joe Hart) is trapped behind a pain-pill haze, and Mom (Taylor Gilbert) is worried about a return of protesters and news cameras. Both have lost work and are universally shunned. Their home in Colorado bears testament to hard times; everything in it is threadbare or stained with age.

But Chick, despite his snarky surface, is the one with whom we most readily empathize. He professes innocence, and we're inclined to believe him because he's the only one who insists on calling the murder victim by her name. Heartbroken that his parents aren't making a fuss over him — and may well toss him onto the street — he fleetingly reverts to his 14-year-old self: lost, scared and alone.

To this already potent mix, White adds a menacing uncle (Rob Nagle), Mom's brother and the town's former sheriff, and a shell-shocked young woman (Allison Blaize) whose probation he is overseeing. All good-ol'-boy friendliness on the outside, he is chillingly sadistic just underneath.

Setting up camp in the living room, a dim-bulb neighbor (Michelle Gillette) watches all of this, Doritos bag in hand, as though it's the best daytime TV she's ever seen.

Director Cameron Watson deftly handles the play's split-second mood flips and proves especially masterful at knowing when to let the heated voices go suddenly quiet. Kate Bergh's costumes and Jeff McLaughlin's set are densely detailed, with the set lending its own wonderful surprise to all of the others.

Tears sneak in amid the laughs, but logic gaps yawn open. For a while the action's sheer momentum shoots across them, but as the story reaches its big revelation — triggering a truly white-knuckle response — it leaves a key character's motivations underexplained. The audience's happy daze of overstimulation instantly shifts to a fog of confusion.

A good show that lets you down can be more frustrating than one that's mediocre from the start.

♦♦♦♦♦♦♦♦♦♦

Where: The Road at NoHo Senior Arts Colony, 10747 Magnolia Blvd., North Hollywood

When: 8 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays, 2 p.m. Sundays; ends Nov. 12

Tickets: \$34

Info: (818) 761-8838, www.RoadTheatre.org

Running time: 2 hours, 25 minutes

daryl.miller@latimes.com