



**STUPID KID**



*Photo by Brian M. Cole*

## Road Theatre Company

Reviewed by Travis Michael Holder

Poor Chick Ford. The kid not only looks like he would hands-down be voted as the Person Least Likely to Succeed in any contest and against all odds imaginable, but after 14 years in prison for a murder he may or may not have committed, not only does he arrive home to his parents' shabby clapboard shack on the eastern plains of Colorado to discover his room has been rented out and his mother threw out his Frankenstein statue and Iron Maiden figurines, he is not even physically recognizable to them after all those years.

Of course, GiGi and Eddie Ford (Taylor Gilbert and Joe Hart) haven't seen their son (Ben Theobald) since, at age 14, he admitted in open court that he had killed his girlfriend and was sentenced to life in prison. DNA evidence, however, has recently surfaced that questions the verdict and so, playwright Sharr White's *Stupid Kid* hoists his garbage bag full of chewing gum and a few pair of tighty-whiteys over his shoulder and nervously treks back to the only place he has even called home.

For his pain pill-addicted father, who carries his meds in the pocket of his filthy bathrobe and pops 'em like Reece's Pieces, Chickie may just be a stranger "tryin' to get us to let our guard down so you can steal our stuff," though considering the condition and resale value of their stuff this would be highly unlikely. Seeing his abrasive mother for the first time isn't any better, her reaction, after asking how he got there, is to observe to her mate that's what's wrong with this country: "They let people like him ride buses."

GiGi's reaction comes from the fact that her son's conviction has made them pariahs in their small rural community, to the point where she lost her job at the local "Bird 'n Turd" fast food outlet and her husband screwed up his back lifting their Buick LeSabre off the railroad tracks in just the nick of time after discovering his despondent wife trying to end it all. Why, even their mentally-deficient neighbor Franny Hawker (Michelle Gillette) didn't speak to them for years, the breakthrough in their relationship beginning when she started flipping them off between the slats of her front window blinds.

There to offer advice is GiGi's brother Unclemike (Rob Nagle), the town's blustery former sheriff who engineered his nephew's original confession and is trying to cash in on the monetary compensation Chickie might be entitled to if they decide to sue the state for false imprisonment. Unclemike (not a typo; blame the playwright) rents a room in the Fords' home as a place he can bring his little chickadees in an effort to forget his wife is undergoing a sex change and would rather be called George than Georgette. This time out, Unclemike announces he's moving in his reluctant companion Hazel (Allison Blaize), whom he cheerfully treats as his personal sex slave after getting the court to award him custody when she's convicted for a drug offense.

Unclemike is oozing with a false charm that barely conceals his ominous power-hungry Trumpian streak of sadism and, as much as GiGi and Eddie want the guy out of their house, they're so impoverished they would have trouble surviving without his \$300 monthly rent payment, not to mention the bags of chips and junk foods and diarrhea-inducing cuts of frozen meats he barks at Hazel to bring in from his car with Simon Legree-style glee. Without him life would be nearly impossible, as GiGi's oven hasn't worked in six years and she feeds Eddie mostly dry cereal with powdered milk she gets from the local church's charity bank. "Eat up them lumps, Eddie," she snaps at her mate. "All the nutrition's in them lumps."

Gilbert, co-artistic director of the Road, has contributed some remarkable performances over the years but her GiGi rises directly to the top of the list, alternately as loud and shrewish as any sandpapery Jerry Springer guest and then suddenly soft and heartbreakingly touching, a severely broken woman whose treatment of her own son is obviously and tragically conflicted. Hart is a wonderful foil to Gilbert as the father who has all but given up and Theobald, though occasionally coming off a tad more Appalachian than Coloradan, wins us over as the lost kid who only wants to put his sordid past

behind him and regain his life and parents' love.

Blaize contributes some quietly arresting moments as the zombie-like and horribly abused Hazel, while Gillette, sitting nearby the action on a folding lawn chair greedily chompin' on her bag of Doritos and enjoying the family's dysfunction as though she's watching a reality show falling somewhere between *Duck Dynasty* and *Here Comes Honey Boo-Boo*, is pure comedy gold as the most annoying neighbor since Zac Efron moved in next to Seth Rogan.

As usual, Nagle is one of those actors it's hard to take one's eyes off of, if you'll excuse the intentionally bad but emphatic grammar. He steals the show in his every scene, his monstrous, oily, physically imposing Unclemike so goddam creepy I asked the actor after the show if he was having any trouble sleeping while playing this role. The fact that he said no with a wide Unclemike grin, relating that he's been sleeping like a baby these days, may make me a little more apprehensive when greeting the guy at any future point in time, even if he is madly in love with a beloved ancient pug named Roosevelt.

Sharr White is quickly becoming one of my personal favorite emerging playwrights, proving himself to be adept at creating outrageously inappropriate comedies that alternately make the audience roar with laughter and then, like the narrative rollercoaster ride they promise, send their cars careening off the side at a moment's notice. His *Annapurna*, in its debut starring Megan Mullaly and Nick Offerman at the Odyssey, was my TicketHolders Award Best Play of 2013 and *The Other Place*, also starring the amazing Gilbert at the Road, was one of my Top Ten Plays of 2015.

Now with *Stupid Kid*, White gets even more respect from me with this knockout world premiere which, under the masterful leadership of director Cameron Watson, is simply the best production so far opening in LA this season in a year overflowing with incredible new plays. There are a few holes in White's script which could easily be filled with a little dab of theatrical Spackle, but quite simply, it could never soar to these heights without Watson and his amazing cast of six brilliant actors at the top of their game.

**THROUGH NOV. 12: *The Road* at Magnolia, 10747 Magnolia Blvd., North Hollywood. 818.761.8838 or [www.roadtheatre.org](http://www.roadtheatre.org)**