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SEPTEMBER 23, 2026 DONALD H. SANBORN III

A Teenager Attempts to Reunite Her Estranged Parents in “Teen Dad”; Passage Theatre’s Season Opens with Adrienne Dawes’ Moving Comedy



"TEEN DAD": Performances are underway for "Teen Dad." Written by Adrienne Dawes, and directed by C. Ryanne Domingues and Richard Bradford, the play runs through October 11 at Passage Theatre. Above: Abby (Jade Cox, right) hopes to reunite her estranged parents — Tom (Zachary Valdez, front left) and Tanya (Morgan Charéce Hall, back right) — but must come to terms with her parents' new relationships, including her mother's healer and fiancé, John (Walter DeShields, back left). ***(Photo by Scott Miller)***

By Donald H. Sanborn III

Passage Theatre is successfully opening its 42nd season, titled "The Answer is Joy," with *Teen Dad*. Adrienne Dawes' compelling and moving comedy portrays a teenager who attempts to effect a reconciliation between her estranged parents, at least long enough for them to attend her high school graduation.

The premise echoes that of the film *The Parent Trap*. However, *Teen Dad* uses that concept as a point of departure for a deeper exploration of generational trauma, as well as the complicated nature of multiracial relationships. Passage's website describes the play as subverting "popular regional theatre 'kitchen-sink beach house dramedy' to share a heartfelt, comedic exploration of generational trauma and recovery in a mixed race Black and Latinx family."

Teen Dad has been developed at TheatreSquared (as part of the Arkansas New Play Festival); and in The Blank Theatre's Living Room Series. Passage's production is the play's world premiere.

C. Ryanne Domingues (Passage's former artistic director) and Richard Bradford co-direct, assisted by Ava Puentes (a senior theater major at Rider University). Domingues and Bradford's staging skillfully uses many split scenes, juxtaposing multiple sets of characters who either surreptitiously watch each other or have simultaneous (often heated) conversations.

Drawing on the "beach house dramedy" concept, Dirk Durossette's attractive set — featuring a cozy living room and kitchenette, which transparent doors separate from a deck that leads to the ocean — is lavishly decorated. Props Designer Melody Marshall painstakingly lines the walls with photographs, books, and sculptures, giving the space a distinctive visual aesthetic consistent with the script's request for a Southwestern style, and making it feel inhabited.

This elaborateness gives an artfully deceptive suggestion of stability and serenity.

Quinn Collins’ sound design, which further establishes the beach setting with (equally deceptive) soothing waves, enhances that concept.

Less calm is the entrance of 15-year-old Abby (portrayed by Jade Cox), whom the published script describes as a “mostly cheerful emo-punk goth”; Abby’s mother, Tanya (Morgan Charéce Hall); and Tanya’s healer and fiancé, John (Walter DeShields*)*. John struggles for several minutes to unlock the door to the house (which apparently belongs to an offstage character whom John identifies as “Skipp”). This conspicuously makes Tanya anxious; she voices concern about neighbors or Security seeing them.

Once the trio is inside the house, we start to get a sense of the already tense dynamics. Unbeknownst to either Tanya or Abby, John has invited the latter’s birth father, Tom (who, we gather, is a musician who plays in a band), to the beach house.

John claims that he did this because he perceived, from a song Abby posted to YouTube, that Abby wanted to see him. Abby denies this, and Tanya is completely opposed to the idea of seeing Tom.

Tanya bears heavy emotional weight from past events. This is clear both from an exchange of dialogue (both Abby and Tanya describe her as having an “emotional suitcase” in which she is “carrying a lot”); and from Hall’s performance. Hall’s vocal inflections, facial expressions, and carefully affected poise all suggest a character who is using much of her strength to control and mask a reservoir of pain.

Dawes builds our curiosity about Tom before bringing him onstage. In a line of dialogue that beautifully captures Tanya’s conflicted feelings about her past choices, and her family, she describes Tom as the “biggest, most humiliating mistake of my life,” who “gave me the most beautiful person I have ever known.”

Eventually we meet the bombastically jovial Tom (given an exuberant portrayal by Zachary Valdez, whose memorable performance compels us to enjoy the loutish character more than we perhaps feel we should). Costume Designer Ilycia Boatwright-Buffaloe outfits him in camo pants and a shirt with the word “rancid” printed on it. Clearly, he is a fighter who is unafraid of — perhaps even delights in — being associated with something unsavory.

Accommodating the script’s varying needs, Valdez easily alternates between smooth confidence and broad physical humor (Tom appears to injure himself by attempting to accomplish a task that

obviously shouldn’t be attempted by just one person, he sleeps in a silly-looking posture, and he and Alisha are seen in a misleading but awkward position).

The play’s title is connected with Tom. He and Tanya both were teenagers when Tanya was born. The difference is that Tanya has developed, while the outlandishly immature Tom remains a “teen dad,” at least on an emotional level. Abby is more mature than her father; indeed, a theme that is beautifully explored by the play is the eventual necessity of a child growing to become a parent-like custodian of their parents.

Tom immediately complicates the already tense situation by bringing with him another unexpected guest: his girlfriend, Alisha (Victoria Wallace), who makes a point of pronouncing her name “Aloosha.”

Like Hall’s Tanya, Wallace’s Alisha provides an apt foil to Tom’s antics (and Valdez’s tour-de-force performance). Wallace’s tense body language makes her character’s discomfort palpable; Alisha is clearly aware of her outsider status. Except for a few key moments (largely in the second act), at almost all times she reads the room with hypervigilance.

Dawes deftly juxtaposes exploration of serious themes against complex comical misunderstandings. John makes a point of being kind to Alisha, who develops a crush on him. The already considerable tension is not helped when Tanya and Tom see them alone.

Cox (who, like Puentes, is a senior at Rider University) delivers a fine performance as Abby. The portrayal successfully blends Abby’s typical teenage feistiness with a sense that she, like her mother, has learned to carefully mask her emotions — except for her instinctive dislike for Alisha. (In one scene, Boatwright-Buffaloe conspicuously outfits both characters in a pink shirt, suggesting the possibility that the two women have more in common than their early conflicts indicate.) Cox is wonderful in scenes she shares with, respectively, Wallace and Hall.

Late in the second act, there is a devastating but beautiful tableau in which Abby is given makeup that, in tandem with a single facial expression, illustrates the generational scars that she is inheriting. The moment is a wonderful example of the production’s balance of representational (“real”) and presentational (exaggerated or metaphoric) aesthetics.

Another example comes in a few of John’s scenes. DeShields plays the character as almost impossibly placid, the one who is able to absorb and anchor the more volatile characters’ emotions.

However, we catch hints that this trait has come at a cost, and that it is not infinite. Bless Rudisill's lighting; and Collins' sound design and dissonant incidental music, are used to illustrate unique facets of John's personality.

Part of what makes the script work so well is Dawes' effective use of a common device: placing characters with conflicting backgrounds, traits, and goals into a shared space, and letting their personalities collide. Tensions between the five characters steadily rise until they erupt at the end of the first act, resulting in some broken objects (and causing the stagehands to be busy with cleanup during intermission), and the arrival of the police at the end of the first act. (Rudisill lets blue and red lights continue flashing until the start of the second act.)

As is considered above, the first act's scenery is an expression of stability (and predictable, linear storytelling). For the second act, both are dismantled. Flashbacks reveal much about Tanya's character (especially her unrealized aspirations and crucial traumatic moments), and the origins of her relationship with Tom. Scenes at the precinct allow for development between various characters.

Perhaps like Abby herself, who must balance and manage traits she has inherited from her seemingly dissimilar parents, *Teen Dad* successfully juxtaposes and balances many elements. An elaborate set and linear storytelling give way to a more sparse stage, anguished flashbacks, and dream sequences. Introspective contemplation of deep themes is matched with broad comedy, dissonant music with soothing beach sounds. The production refreshingly pairs an acknowledgement of past trauma with the future promise of, as Passage promises in their season's title, joy.

"Teen Dad" will play at Passage Theatre in the Mill Hill Playhouse, 205 East Front Street in Trenton, through October 11. Content advisory: The printed program cautions that the production contains "flashing lights, loud sound effects, debris in the first few rows, dry ice, and depictions of police violence, domestic violence, and underage sexuality. Recommended for audiences age 14 and up." For tickets, show times, and further information call (609) 392-0766 or visit passagetheatre.org.

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