"Teen Dad": be careful what you wish for

By **Allen Neuner** - 10/03/2026



"Teen Dad" Walter DeShields, Morgan Charece Hall, Jade Cox (Photo by Scott Miller)

"Teen Dad" Morgan Charece Hall, Zachary Valdez (Photo by Scott Miller)

One would think that a young girl's high school graduation would be one time when estranged parents could put aside their mutual animosity and celebrate her achievement. In *Teen Dad*, now being presented by Trenton's Passage Theatre Company, you can see what a disastrously wrong expectation that could be.

Abby (Jade Cox) is the girl in question. Her birth mother, Tanya (Morgan Charéce Hall), and Tanya's partner John (Walter DeShields), a conflict counselor, arrive at a small beach house where the three of them will be staying prior to the graduation. But Abby wants her estranged biological father Tom (Zachary Valdez), a narcissistic, overaged rock musician, to attend, and has asked John if her dad can crash with them. The ever-conciliatory John has

agreed – but no one has thought to mention this to Tanya. When Tom arrives with his current girlfriend Alisha (Victoria Wallace) in tow, Tanya goes into full ballistic mode, setting the play in motion.

Tom has contributed little to nothing toward Abby's upkeep over the years. Abby was the product of a one night stand between high school senior Tanya and freshman Tom, and it appears to have been Tonya's choice not to have Tom involved in her or their child's life. In the present, past grudges are weaponized, with John trying to keep everyone calm while he absorbs the tensions in the house. A late-night conversion between Alisha and Abby finds the two disillusioned young women connecting through their past hurts. During a night in jail together, Tom prods John about his unbelievable sense of calm amongst the chaos. Tom's incessant verbal jibes finally cause John's hard-earned calm to crack and realize that his rage issues, long thought resolved, have merely been deeply suppressed.

Under the co-direction of C. Ryanne Domingues and Richard Bradford, Adrienne Dawes' script comes to realistic, messy life in the hands of the cast. Too many unresolved feelings between Hall's quick-tempered Tanya and Valdez' laissez-faire Tom, going back to high school, impel them to pick at the scabs of old wounds. Yet between them they have created a strong, savvy, and shrewd young woman in Cox' Abby. However, Abby's hard shell is not quite thick enough to contain years of disappointments at the hands of both parents, especially her father. Wallace's Alisha finds herself in the middle of a family dynamic for which she has had no preparation. In her discomfort, she tries to make herself inconspicuous and inoffensive.

"Teen Dad" Victoria Wallace, Walter DeShields, Morgan Charece Hall, Jade Cox, and Zachary Valdez (Photo by Scott Miller)

The most towering performance is DeShields' John. John has his hands full: Abby makes it clear she does not consider him a suitable father figure; Tanya's frequent outbursts are calmed by his efforts; Tom mocks John's serenity by comparing it to his own free-wheeling hedonism; and Alisha is playing the dangerously attractive wounded bird. His own talents go unappreciated, especially by Tanya and Abby, yet he represses expressing his own disappointments and frustrations to them. When his breakdown finally comes, you can see his struggle to maintain control rather than let his rageful past go unleashed. I admire playwright Adrienne Dawes' writing skill in choosing to let this moment come with only Tom, the least empathetic soul, present rather than have John unleash over everyone in this emotionally needy group, shaming them all.

All this is played out over a marvelously fluid beach house interior designed by Dirk Durosssette that manages to pull off being a bit too cramped yet just open enough. It's a visual metaphor for the messiness of the five lives encased within, as are the costumes designed by Ilycia Boatwright-Buffaloe.

"Teen Dad" Jade Cox, Morgan Charece Hall (Photo by Scott Miller)

Teen Dad is a sprawling, messy, and ultimately joyous celebration of family, no matter how unconventional it may be. It is brought to life by a talented cast under the direction of two skillful co-directors. It is full of life and the choices one makes — and the consequences thereof — in a world where parents still hope that their kids have it better than they did. I strongly recommend making the trip to Trenton's historic Mill Hill Playhouse before the show's limited engagement ends.

Teen Dad is presented by the Passage Theatre Company at the Mill Hill Playhouse in Trenton through October 11th. For more information, or to purchase tickets, go to passagetheatre.org.

Allen Neuner

Allen Neuner is Out In Jersey Media's lead theater reviewer, focusing on New Jersey's professional regional theaters, the Bucks County Playhouse in New Hope, Pennsylvania, and Broadway and off-Broadway shows in NYC. Jersey born and raised, Allen went to his first Broadway play in 1957 and has been deliriously in love with live theater ever since. Allen has been accepted into the American Theatre Critics/Journalists Association, a professional organization. He has been partnered to music reviewer Bill Realman Stella, with whom he is also deliriously in love, for over 25 years. They live in an over-cluttered house in Somerville.