

Helicopter parents out of control in 'A Kid Like Jake'

John Monaghan, Special to the Detroit Free Press 3:36 p.m. EDT September 30, 2015



(Photo: Megan Buckley-Ball)

We've seen her before: the single-minded mother who's obsessed with getting her genius child into the best possible New York City kindergarten program en route to the Ivy League. That character, usually played for laughs, is at the very serious center of Daniel Pearl's "A Kid Like Jake," a smart and provocative new play about the pitfalls of parenting that's being staged by the Matrix Theatre Company.

First produced in 2013, the play centers on the thoughtful but visibly stressed parents of 4-year-old Jake, whose standardized test scores and artistic ability are good résumé points for the dozen or so private schools that mother Alex (Kaitlyn Valor-Bourque) and father Greg (Patrick Hanley) are considering. As it opens, we find them searching for the perfect word to use in an application essay in which they're asked to explain what might make Jake stand out in a room filled with similarly high-achieving kids.

When the terms they choose sound a bit too generic, it is Judy (Krystle Futrell), the head of Jake's tony preschool, who pitches an idea. Jake, she has noticed, has a penchant for playing dress-up. He adores Cinderella. So why not play up the boy's refusal to adhere to traditional gender roles?

Greg likes the plan, but Alex isn't convinced. She thinks that this label, applied at such a young age, will stick with Jake and make him self-conscious and confused. (She has mommy issues of her own to back this claim up.) The idea that Jake see a therapist is ruled out of the question.

Expertly rendered by the rail-thin Valor-Bourque, Alex goes beyond being your typical helicopter parent. She is more like a military bomber blasting Wagner's "Ride of the Valkyries" as she strategizes each area of Jake's life, especially his education. Her obsession may be the reason why Jake acts out during his all-important interview sessions at top schools.

Though Jake is the only topic anyone here is able to talk about, the boy does not appear in the play, at least not directly. Director David Wolber includes some clever bits of business during the scene changes in which Allison Megroet, who plays a nurse in the play, pantomimes some of Jake's behaviors. These include clutching his mother's hand and playing with a favorite stuffed animal in a tent fashioned from dining chairs and a blanket.

The play's ending is a bit problematic, but Pearl has a good ear for capturing the way parents talk to each other and the way the educational system operates. There's some welcome humor, too. In one scene, Greg and Alex finally make time for a night out, but their restaurant conversation still revolves around Jake. When they make a pact to spend half an hour on other topics, neither can think of a thing to say.

The tiny black-box Matrix is an ideal spot to stage an intimate work like this. Pop and set designer Lisa Berg uses the theater's long stage area to create the family home, Judy's office and a doctor's office for a scene in which Alex announces early on that she is pregnant.

One of the many fine things about this production is the matter-of-fact way it deals with sexual identity. It also reveals that even a smart, outwardly liberal-minded parent like Alex can be frightened by stigma and react negatively to allowing a child to explore his sexual identity.

There are no heroes or villains in "A Kid Like Jake." We may laugh at the extremity of Greg and Alex's actions, but their genuine emotion and often-misguided focus will be eerily familiar to any parent struggling to raise a child in the tricky 21st Century.

'A Kid Like Jake'

Three stars

out of four stars

8 p.m. Fri.-Sat., 3 p.m. Sun. Through Oct. 11.

Matrix Theatre Company

2730 Bagley St., Detroit

313-967-0599. www.matrixtheatre.org.

\$20; \$15 students, seniors