

# A play about homophobic bullying rings true for a theatregoer who's experienced it

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"I didn't know there were plays like this, telling the truth, basically."

That's 24-year-old Jessica Grey's response to *Outside*, Paul Dunn's play about the effects of homophobic bullying on one young man and his wider community. Grey and I attended a recent daytime performance at Buddies in Bad Times Theatre, in the company of a full house of 7th to 12th graders.

Roseneath Theatre's production of *Outside*, directed by the company's artistic director, Andrew Lamb, has toured Ontario schools on and off since 2015 and has been seen by over 35,000 young people. Along the way it earned two Dora nominations and, this weekend, will have two public evening performances at Buddies.

I was curious how someone with experience of the issues in the show might respond and, through Roseneath and Buddies, found Grey.

She identifies as bisexual, experienced bullying in school and has struggled with mental health issues. Through her current work as a youth intern at Central Toronto Youth Services, Grey is “using my own stories and my own experiences to help other people get through.”

But a play about this material is a new wrinkle for her. *Outside* is the story of 15-year-old Daniel (G. Kyle Shields), whose life is turned upside down when his schoolmates create a cruel game that revolves around calling him “faggot.” While those of us who are long out of high school might like to think this kind of homophobic abuse is a thing of the past, Grey says the premise rings true.

“It is real,” she says, “and it’s sad and it shouldn’t be that way, but it is a real thing still. It’s still a stigma that’s being broken down. People are still learning to catch themselves when they’re saying things. There are lots of micro-aggressions all the time.”

The play treats its material with considerable complexity and does not provide easy answers. Daniel comes out as gay to himself and others in the course of the play but doesn’t admit how difficult his situation at school is becoming. That “would be making it real, what was happening, and I didn’t want it to be real,” the character says.

This resonated strongly with Grey: “I know what that’s like, in the sense that you don’t want to talk about it with your family because you think they won’t understand; you don’t want to talk about it at school because it’s going to cause more of a problem. Realistically you’re the only one that’s dealing with it. No one understands what you are going through, and you get more and more used to keeping it to yourself.”

The action in the play moves between Daniel talking about his experience to the Gay-Straight Alliance in his new school; and the attempts of friends at his old school, Krystina (Mina James) and Jeremy (Giacomo Sellar), to set up a similar organization. In flashback scenes we learn about how the three became friends and about Daniel’s downward spiral, which involves depression and a suicide attempt.

I wonder why Daniel doesn’t reveal the depth of his personal struggle even to his closest allies. Grey says she gets it: “It’s easier to be, like, OK you’re my friend and you’re here, and we don’t need to be that deep and open because if you’re not OK with it then I have nobody.”

Grey balks at my suggestion that the play has to do with society needing to show more sensitivity to difference: “It’s not just about being sensitive. There’s something that irks me about that whole thing . . . we’re all just humans. It shouldn’t matter where we came from, how we identify, how we got here, whatever. It should just be that I’m a human, you’re a human and we co-exist together. We have to get to the place where it’s not about ‘accepting’ each other.”

Is there a risk, I wonder, in putting this play in front of young people for whom the subject

matter might be close to home?

“When we were leaving there was a girl — it kind of broke my heart a bit — but she said she was crying during the show,” Grey recounts. “She has tried to kill herself four times. Four times! The play was making her feel comfortable enough to say that. That’s one of the reasons why I’m doing the project I’m working on right now, getting the voice out there that these things happen with youth all the time and that you shouldn’t be afraid to talk about what you’re going through.”

Grey says that seeing this play has opened her eyes to the ways that theatre can make issues real for people. “You can ignore a poster or an ad on TV, but when you sit down to watch a play and you listen to the words coming through and the actions, like a short skit of real life, it gets under your skin.”

*Outside* plays at Buddies in Bad Times, 12 Alexander St., at 7 p.m. Nov. 17 and 18, [buddiesinbadtimes.com](http://buddiesinbadtimes.com) and 416-975-8555. Paul Dunn will sign copies of the play, published by Playwrights Canada Press, before the Friday night performance.

At the Theatre With . . . is an occasional series in which theatre critic Karen Fricker brings people with specialist perspectives to performances.