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ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

Good grief: Rabbit Hole astonishes

By Caroline Palermo, Staff Writer

Grief is difficult to explain, let alone show in two hours on stage. Despite the challenge, *Rabbit Hole*, last weekend's first Xavier Theatre production of the semester, displayed a genuine depiction of grief through its poignant script, brilliant set design and cast. *Rabbit Hole* follows homemaker Becca (Erin Bonham) and her patient husband Howie (Andrew Normington) after the loss of their four-year-old son Danny in a tragic car accident. She's surrounded by her irresponsible younger sister Izzy (Regan Utrup) and her overbearing but caring mother Nat (Anna Kahle). Jason (Parker Culp), the socially awkward teenager that accidentally hit Danny, makes an appearance. It's been eight months since their son died, and everyone around Becca seems to have moved on — even her husband. But not Becca. Everything reminds her of Danny.

One of the best parts about this play is how it explores grief through each of the characters. Becca is still strongly grieving and makes no effort to hide it. Howie goes to group therapy and puts on a brave face for everyone, even though he's still hurting deeply. Normington beautifully depicted this in the climatic ending of act one. Nat still mourns the loss of her son Arthur who committed suicide over 11 years ago.

Izzy, on the other hand, tries to maneuver through this grief-stricken group while dealing with her own issues — Utrup dazzled the audience with her comedic relief. It's a subtle, yet powerful way to show how grief doesn't look the same for everyone, as emphasized by Becca's insistence that comparing Arthur's death to Danny's is unfair.

Subtlety is where this production shone brightest, particularly in the set design. In its quieter aspects, it's through the children's artwork on the refrigerator and the scattered picture books on the table. The boldest feature of the set was the visibility and scale of Danny's bedroom, which overlooks the living room where majority of the scenes take place. It consisted of little animal chairs, toy robots and stuffed animals — constant reminders of Danny's presence.

The bedroom also doubles as a metaphor for grief, particularly how large and constant it is; it's always there, always visible and never out of sight. It allows the audience to better understand Becca's mindset and her need to subconsciously erase her son's presence.

While the cast was a joy to watch, their quiet, subtle reactionary scenes gave a punch to the gut. The emotional tension between Bonham and Normington cannot be understated; they managed to elevate the production's themes even when not speaking. The standout of the show was undoubtedly Kahle's Nat. Kahle's comedic timing is impeccable; she masterfully utilized her cadence and pacing to deliver these with ease. Kahle also knew when to tone down her performance to let her co-stars have their moments to shine, yet never dulled Nat's colorful persona in the process. Her lingering gazes are just as powerful as her verbal delivery.

Despite Culp's smaller role, his portrayal was one of the strongest in the production. The lingering guilt he feels from Danny's death is evident throughout all of his scenes. His gesticulations capture the essence of an awkward boy. Culp's delivery makes it impossible to imagine the lines delivered any other way.

Rabbit Hole was a stellar way to kick off the season. A beautiful, rich and emotional exploration of grief's effects on individuals and how they can bleed onto personal relationships, intentionally or not, is not an easy play to pull off. However, this production undoubtedly nailed it.