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Arts & Entertainment - Friday, August 3, 2007

## Drama behind bars

*Dragon's powerful 'Juvie' brings home the problems and crimes of at-risk youth*

by Elizabeth Obreja

Steel bars aren't the only barriers restraining the underage characters of Jerome McDonough's "Juvie." Even if the 12 youths being held at juvenile hall are released, parental negligence, addiction, mental illness, peer pressure and guilt will continue to erode any potential they have of breaking their "bad kid" images.

But the cast members of "Juvie," which takes place during one night in a holding cell, manage to break down all barriers between the actors and the audience.

The characters -- being held for infringements such as shoplifting, running away, murder and drug abuse -- fear revealing too much about themselves to their cellmates. They do, however, fully recount their crimes to the audience through monologues that indicate their desperation to find someone who understands them. The least remorseful monologues are some of the most saddening.

In one of the most moving scenes of Dragon Productions' latest offering, Andrew and Jean, two characters on opposite sides of the cell bars dividing the boys and girls, reach a mutual understanding that none of the other characters can manage. They briefly let down their guards and even become momentary friends. But they still save details of their crimes to confess to the audience.

McDonough's 1982 young-adult drama has been produced by professional, university and junior high theaters alike, giving audiences of all ages an opportunity to reflect on the problems facing at-risk youth today.

The play's set and direction also serve to break down actor-audience barriers. The Dragon Theatre's intimacy makes the audience's seating feel like a continuation of the stage's jail cell, which is established using only a rotating set of jail bars and a few benches.

The audience is frequently caught in the middle of conversations between the juvenile and the adult characters. An officer, a lawyer and a counselor who appear only in voice-of-God voiceovers make the youthful characters seem as small and helpless as they feel. These scenes implicitly ask the audience to take sides, even though neither party is completely guilty or completely innocent.

The "Juvie" script also relies on both the literal and the figurative. The poetic language reveals the sequential events of the characters' crimes while creating a composite reality of the juvenile-delinquent experience. In some scenes, the actors dance to the rhythm of the monologue being delivered.

The characters themselves are equally as figurative. An actor often confesses a character's crime in one scene and then plays a victim to another's crime in the next. The ineffectiveness of labels such as "criminal" and "victim" is at the crux of the play's theme.

Because the plot is a series of vignettes, the "Juvie" storyline has less momentum and resolution than a traditional drama. But the play's crimes and characters are diverse enough to keep audience members of most ages at the edge of their seat throughout the relatively short one-hour play. Tragic crimes and revealing confessions are powerful without being graphic or using profanities.

Dragon's cast makes juvenile delinquency a reality for Palo Altans. These young actors generally portray the complexities of their situations without being cliched.

For example, Jean's (Claire Martin) mannerisms convince the audience of her desperation for a drug fix. Sunny's (Keenan Rehlich) fear as a passenger in a getaway car is contagious. And the actors playing Skip (Joerelle Bennett), a teen who believes he's invincible, and Andrew (Jovan Bennett), a mentally challenged orphan with a gambling problem, are twin brothers in real life, but they couldn't be more distinct in their "Juvie" roles.

The play ends immediately after the characters' sentences are read in voiceover. The severity of some of the punishments left me just as incredulous as the characters. We wonder from both sides of the stage how denying a young person the opportunity to make the right choices could be just.

**What:** Jerome McDonough's "Juvie," presented by Dragon Productions

**Where:** Dragon Theatre, located at 535 Alma St. in Palo Alto

**When:** Thursday through Saturday at 8 p.m. and Sundays at 2 p.m. through Aug. 19

**Cost:** \$20 for general admission and \$13 for students and seniors

**Info:** Go to [www.dragonproductions.net](http://www.dragonproductions.net) or call 650-838-3006.

### Benefit performance

The "Juvie" cast is holding a special Wednesday performance of the play on Aug. 8 as a benefit for 17-year-old Brianna Kalina, who is battling cancer. All proceeds from the 8 p.m. show will go directly to a fund for Kalina, director Paul Sawyer said.

Tickets are \$25. E-mail [juviefbenefit@hotmail.com](mailto:juviefbenefit@hotmail.com) to reserve tickets, which will be held at Will Call.

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