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<http://delcoculturevultures.com/sensitive-guys-a-world-premiere-at-interact-theatre-feels-hauntingly-real/>

Sensitive Guys feels hauntingly real

By Margaret Darby

Not only was the set made up of three walls of bookshelves – the college campus library complete with founder’s portrait, but the poised, elegant, and unfeeling Admissions Officer played superbly by Maggie Johnson was a haunting portrait of the all-too-familiar public relations/principal/dean we have all encountered too many times: polite, impeccably neat, and disturbingly heartless. MJ Kaufman’s *Sensitive Guys* provides a sometimes comical and sometimes tragic view of how, in spite of their best efforts, the various parties involved in preventing and reporting sexual abuse and harassment are given a choice between hurting themselves and their school or hurting the victims.

Kaufman specifically states that all the characters must be played by women or gender non-conforming actors because they (Kaufman’s preferred pronoun) feel that masculinity becomes more visible when the people performing it are not men. Kaufman was certainly right for this cast. The male college students were palpably male – ranging from kindly big brother to hardened victim of paternal abuse – all of them intricately woven characters who just want to graduate into the real world. They founded their own male peer education group and meet to talk about how to be more sensitive to women. Having women and gender non-conforming actors portray aggressive male behavior makes the message abundantly clear: this toxic behavior is learned. Pete (Bi Jean Ngo) is fidgety and has difficulty suppressing his tendency to interrupt and explode when he hears women say anything disparaging about male behavior. Jordan (Lexie Braverman) is so determined to be sensitive that he just might punch you out if you hadn’t noticed, Will (Maggie Johnson) is a shy freshman from a wealthy family who is quiet and soft-spoken, Tyler (Brett Ashley Robinson) is the pacifying big brother, and Danny (Emily Lyon) is the quiet type who is determined to be different from his abusive father.

But this same cast also portrays the female students who form a women’s survivor support group – all of them have suffered in some way, but Leslie (Maggie Johnson) was so palpably like a person I know it was hard not to confuse the play with reality. Every gesture seemed natural and nothing was exaggerated. Director Evren Odcikin really mined MJ Kaufman’s script and Maggie Johnson’s talent, creating a frighteningly realistic story. When Leslie asks for help from the Dean (Bi Jean Ngo), the Dean’s cold reaction makes it clear that she is more wary of the victim than the perpetrator. Not only did the cast switch easily between genders, but the scenes in which they played together as opposite genders was convincing – because each actor conveyed their gender without undue artifice, which begs the question: what is gender? Does our society force us to act in gender-specific ways?

There are many occasions for laughter, but there is no way to leave this play feeling that sexual aggression can be eliminated. Kaufman is perspicacious in their presentation and brilliant in their writing of dialogue, which is delivered with uncanny timing. Be prepared for the truth – because rape does happen here, yet if anything can undo rape culture it might be plays like *Sensitive Guys*.